



# **Distinction but not Separation:**

## **Edward Abbey's Conceptualization of Nature**

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## Sammendrag

Edward Abbey (1927-1989) har blitt en av de mest kjente og kontroversielle amerikanske forfattere i feltet "nature writing." Han blir ansett som en del av den radikale miljøbevegelsen i USA, og det blir ofte hevdet at naturbegrepet hans er basert på Arne Næss sin "dypøkologi" som er et program for å re-integrere mennesket i naturen. I en analyse av Abbeys arbeid derimot viser det seg at det mest fremtredende element i hans forfatterskap er distinksjon—individets eller menneskets distinksjon som erfares gjennom en sterkt fysisk nærhet til naturen. Dette naturkonseptet har, i Abbeys tilfelle, sitt opphav i en kalvinistisk naturforståelse som har utviklet seg til en slags natureksistensialisme og som viser fellestrekk med den norske forfatteren og filosofen Peter Wessel Zapffe. Abbey ser naturen hovedsakelig som et "heterotopia", et rom innenfor en kultursammenheng, men med avvikende regler. Naturen blir ikke til et alternativ til kulturen, men naturen er et rom hvor kulturelle erfaringer kan bli gjort. Abbey har et ambivalent forhold til det moderne samfunnet, på den ene siden beskriver og forsvaret han former for naturbruk som er kompatible med et moderne samfunn, og på den andre siden advarer han mot destruktive tendenser i det samme moderne samfunnet. Videre har Abbey et ambivalent forhold til miljøbevegelsen: Han støtter de praktiske målene deres, men er kritisk til dens dypøkologiske fundamentet og også til dens fokusering på middelklassen. I en del av Abbeys verker er sosial klasse et hovedtema. Naturbegrepet har alltid vært et problematisk begrep, og denne analysen er basert på en posisjon mellom konstruktivisme og realisme; natur blir betraktet som en ekstern virkelighet som blander seg opp i den kulturelle konstruksjonen av virkeligheten uten å bestemme den. Abbey beskriver hvordan naturrom blir brukt og appropriert på en temporær måte uten at det kan brukes som grunnlag for kulturelle meninger.

## Biographical Sketch of Edward Abbey

Edward Abbey was born in Indiana, Pennsylvania in 1927 and grew up on a small farm in the neighboring village Home, Pennsylvania in the Appalachian Mountains. In 1944 he traveled to the West to see his country before he was drafted into the army. He served as a military policeman in Italy from 1945 until 1948 and later studied philosophy at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and for one year at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. During his year in Europe he traveled extensively, to Scandinavia, Spain, Austria, and other countries and started writing his first novel (*Jonathan Troy*). After his studies he worked as a seasonal park ranger in the Southwest and in several part-time jobs, among others as a welfare case worker in New York. After the publication of *Desert Solitaire* in 1968 he could support himself as a writer. He was married four times (one of his wives died), and fathered four children. Abbey died in Tucson, Arizona in 1989.<sup>1</sup>

### Important works:

#### Novels:

- *Jonathan Troy* (1954)
- *The Brave Cowboy* (1956)
- *Black Sun* (1971)
- *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975)
- *Good News* (1980)
- *The Fool's Progress* (1988)
- *Hayduke Lives!* (1989)

#### Essay collections:

- *Desert Solitaire* (1968)
- *The Journey Home* (1977)
- *Abbey's Road* (1979)
- *Down the River* (1982)

Excerpts from his journal: *Confessions of a Barbarian* (1994)

Abbey wrote the introduction to the environmental sabotage manual *Ecodefense* (1985).

In addition Abbey has published a number of coffee table books such as *Appalachian Wilderness* (1970), *Slickrock* (1971), and *Cactus Country* (1973) and wrote contributions for a number of others.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources: <http://www.abbeyweb.net/bibliography.html>, <http://www.ecotopia.org/ehof/abbey/bio.html>

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Aims

Edward Abbey, whom Larry McMurtry calls the “Thoreau of the American West,” is usually characterized as a nature writer and a radical environmental activist who is influenced by the philosophy of Deep Ecology. The branch of nature writing that has been influenced by Deep Ecology and its central idea of biocentrism has seen a revival of a pastoral conceptualization of nature, often coupled with an activist attitude. I assess the idea of nature in Abbey’s texts and in biographical information on the author, and my central claim is that Abbey’s conceptualization of nature is not based on a biocentric version of pastoralism. Abbey does not seek reconciliation with nature or try to re-integrate humanity into an ecosystem. To the contrary: his conceptualization of nature is based on the idea of distinction and is not derived from pastoralism but is rooted in a Calvinist tradition that has evolved into a form of existentialism. Abbey’s nature existentialism has a parallel in the Norwegian writer Peter Wessel Zapffe. The work in which this existentialism is most visible is Abbey’s novel *Black Sun*, but in his popular *Desert Solitaire* the human-nature relationship is also conceptualized in a way that could be described using Calvin’s phrase “distinct but not separate.”

Abbey participated in the radical environmental movement and although he shared its practical aim of protecting natural spaces, he did not share its ideology of biocentrism. In the novels *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Hayduke Lives!* he describes and advocates environmental sabotage (which has since then become known as “monkeywrenching”). The two books are popular, although not in the same way as *Desert Solitaire*. Whereas excerpts from *Desert Solitaire* can be found in many anthologies of nature writing, the two novels receive very little attention from the academic world but are popular among non-academic readers. Particularly in *Hayduke Lives!* Abbey, who himself has a working class background, aims at a blue-collar readership. What is relevant about these novels is not so much their advocacy of sabotage but that Abbey introduces the topic of social class in a humorous way into a literature and movement that is often seen as being dominated by



middle class values. It is my aim to show the aspects of social class in these works and how social class interferes with the perception of natural spaces in the novels.

Abbey's writing is relevant today not so much because he is a spokesman for environmentalism (or for "nature"—which Abbey would see as absurd) but because he challenges fashionable concepts of nature. The natural spaces that he describes are not spaces outside of culture but are what can be called "heterotopian" spaces. These spaces are social spaces, and they are not pastoral alternatives to the industrial world but spaces that exist inside a modern social order. In many respects Abbey is more of a modern writer than he is a pastoral anti-modernist, and his modern attitude can be seen in his advocacy of science and his mistrust of religion and spirituality. My aim is to problematize Abbey's relationship to environmental thought and to present him as a writer who is also relevant outside of environmental literature.

## 1.2 Categorizing Abbey's texts

The texts of Abbey can be and have been described within the framework of genres such as nature writing, environmental literature, pastoralism, and romanticism and are seen as promoting radical environmentalist stances. In this sub-chapter I will define some of these terms and map Abbey's relation to the genres and movements.

### 1.2.1 Romanticism and nature writing

The comparison to Thoreau shows that Abbey is seen as a nature writer influenced by romanticism. The question whether Abbey is a romantic writer is not easy to answer because the term "romanticism" has a wide scope with sometimes contradictory meanings. The meaning of the term furthermore varies, depending whether it is applied to the literary period in the US that ended with the Civil War, the literary period of other countries, or to contemporary themes found, for example, in nature writing. Despite the vagueness of the term, it is nevertheless possible to define Abbey's relationship to the romantic heritage. The literary period of romanticism is a reaction against neo-classicism and entails a liberation of the individual from social constraints and control. It represents a recovery of the private

self that is seen as jeopardized both by industrialization and neo-classical order. In this tradition nature represents a space that is marked by an absence of social control (like Walden Pond) or a space where the individual pursues his or her self-realization, often in a desperate quest. In this liberating and individualistic sense Abbey can be labeled a romantic writer. It is important to note that nature in the sense of an individualistic romanticism is not an alternative to society since it does not provide a new context for integration (into nature rather than into society)—to the contrary, it marks a rejection of contexts marked by constraints and control and facilitates individual independence. The nature of Walden Pond, for example, certainly provides a context for Thoreau, but this context is chosen by the self, temporary, and, in contrast to society, not perceived as an individual constraint. The essence of this strain of romanticism recovering the private self could be labeled de-contextualization.

The liberation of the individual through de-contextualization, however, is only one strain of romanticism, and in the romantic period in the US diverse and sometimes contradictory ideas emerge. On the one hand one finds an extreme form of individualism in Emerson's "Self-Reliance," on the other there are experiments with new forms of collective living on Brooks Farm and Fruitlands. New experiments with collective living appear in the countercultural revival of romanticism in the 1960s. Transcendentalism is a romantic movement with the primary aim to liberate the individual from the dogmatic constraints of organized religion. Nevertheless, it provides the ground for a later re-contextualization of the individual not into the social sphere but into a spiritual nature, seen in the contemporary veneration of nature. Romanticism contains contradictory impulses: on the one hand it decontextualizes the individual from social constraints; on the other it provides the basis for a later re-contextualization.

One tendency that is often described as romantic is the idea originating in Rousseau that, stated bluntly, society is bad and nature is good, termed the Noble Savage myth. This myth forms the basis for both a strain of romantic individualism and for transcendentalism. The point of this myth is to delegitimize the view that social coercion is needed to control the sinful side of the human being. This strain of romanticism could be labeled optimistic romanticism, optimistic because it assumes that the basis for the liberation of the individual already exists in nature. However, the idea of an inherently good nature contains the seed for a later creation of new ethical systems, today realized in bio- or ecocentrism.

Romanticism encompasses individualism and collectivism, a liberation from organized religion and the basis for a new spirituality, as well as a rejection of social control and the basis for an ethical system. The Civil War ends romanticism as the dominant literary mode in the United States. Romantic themes, however, can still be found; individualism and the search for identity remain at the thematic center of literary production, other romantic themes such as the primacy of emotions over intellect have degenerated into the pacifying rather than liberating genre of popular romance. Romantic themes and with them the interest in nature and spirituality resurface in the romantic awakening of the countercultural movement of the 1960s.

The countercultural movement of the 1960s has revived an optimistic strain of romantic thought that is based on the Noble Savage myth, linking it to environmental concerns about massive alterations of existing natural spaces. However, the revival of romanticism through the countercultural movement has been selective as not all strains of romanticism have shared this optimism. Particularly 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century German romanticism appropriates Nordic and medieval mythology and sees humanity in a struggle with nature, assuming a contradiction between nature and culture. This struggle, not nature itself, is seen as good. Ironically winning the struggle is bad because there would be no more struggles, and it is the struggle that defines humanity. Examples of this strain of romanticism is Richard Wagner with his appropriation of Nordic mythology, Goethe's *The Sufferings of Young Werther*, where an external world fails to correspond to the internal world of intense feelings, or the argument of the Schlegel brothers that romanticism is a revival of the culture of the Middle Ages, a culture dominated by the dichotomy of good and dark forces, of heavenly perfection and human sin. The German strain of romanticism has a markedly pessimist character because it sees struggle, not goodness, as the essence of nature. As its American counterpart, it de-contextualizes the individual, and both movements establish a cult of the free and unconventional artist.

In this pessimistic sense of romanticism Abbey could be labeled a romantic, as human distinction from both society and nature is the most notable feature in his work. I choose not to label this form of German romanticism as "romanticism" in this thesis since I do not see Abbey as strongly influenced by German romantic thought. Nevertheless, in the United States there are writers who belong to a related tradition and who assume a dichotomy of humanity and nature and the necessity of struggle. Rather than reviving the mythology of

the Middle Ages, these writers employ existentialist themes that are rooted in Calvinism. This argument is illustrated with some literary examples (including Abbey) in the chapter on Calvinism. What is interesting in Abbey is that he modifies the idea of the necessity of human struggle *with* nature to a struggle *in* nature, thus providing a different kind of environmental rationale, one that is discussed as the necessity for heterotopian spaces.

### 1.2.2 Nature writing

Although it has been influenced by romanticism, nature writing is a genre older than romanticism. The simplest definition of the genre is a text where nature is a main theme or the object of description. In this broad sense the genre goes back to the Renaissance, to Petrarch, to Goethe's romantic travel writing, Humboldt's scientific writing, exploration reports, and early amateur naturalists. Common to these forms of nature writing is that nature is the object of writing and is treated with respect. This form of nature writing is fully compatible with science and empiricism and sometimes sees itself as part of the scientific exploration of the world. Another form of nature writing, more aptly called Nature Writing, originates in the preservationist John Muir. What is seen here is that respect for nature is heightened to a veneration of nature, a nature that provides the ground for a spiritual re-contextualization of humanity. Particularly with the emergence of the countercultural romantic awakening, some nature writing developed from a genre of objective and subjective description to a form of spiritual-ethical engagement with nature. Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* is an example of this transition from nature writing to Nature Writing: he ends his scientifically minded description of the land with the idea of a land ethic in the last chapter. Nature Writing often sees the scientific attitude of nature writing as one-dimensional because it lacks spirituality.

Although nature writing is a highly diverse genre today, there is a trend towards Nature Writing, towards re-contextualization rather than de-contextualization of humanity. Whereas Nature Writers appear to believe that their experience of appropriation of natural spaces, of walking in the wilderness, provide not only a rationale for the recovery or preservation of these spaces but for re-imagining culture or even a social order, nature writers see natural spaces as supplementing social spaces. As discussed above, both strains fit the definition of romanticism but represent different aspects of it. Today there is a trend

towards holistic preconceptions and spiritual aspirations in Nature Writing. The latter ranges from the moderate mystical tone of Barry Lopez' *Arctic Dreams* to the Deep Ecology inspired poems of Gary Snyder. The preponderance of re-contextualization in contemporary Nature Writing can be seen in the fact that its canonical core is formed by writers such as John Muir and Gary Snyder and not, for example, Jack London and Robinson Jeffers.

One aspect of Nature Writing is that nature is often equated with life, a considerable narrowing of a term that principally encompasses all existence. The reason is that there are elements of vitalism in Nature Writing, and the assumption of an all-pervasive life-force leads to a focus on spiritualized life rather than existence. In Nature Writing, nature becomes an ethical ground, leading to an often apocalyptic tone in the genre. What furthermore can be seen is that ideas such as "ecology" assume a fundamentally different meaning in Nature Writing and in nature writing (see a discussion of the term ecology in the chapter on science). Nature Writing and nature writing differ fundamentally in terms of respect for versus veneration of nature, of de-contextualization versus re-contextualization, of being descriptive versus being apocalyptic, and in terms of different definitions of key concepts such as nature and ecology. However, sometimes there are influences from both strains to be found in the genre; here I will use the term "nature writing" both in contrast to "Nature Writing and as an unmarked superordinate term for texts that deal with nature and reserve the marked term "Nature Writing" for texts that demonstrate a veneration of nature.

Abbey can be labeled a nature writer in the lower-cased variety and, with some qualifications, a romantic. He is inspired by an older romanticism with its predominance of individualistic de-contextualization, as found in Emerson and Thoreau. In Abbey the human-nature distinction and the quest for meaning in an indifferent nature are central themes. Even though these themes have parallels to German romanticism, they originate in a Calvinistic tradition in American literature. Abbey is opposed to the tendencies towards re-contextualization that can be found in modern versions of romantic thought and in Nature Writing. In particular he is opposed to the spiritualization of nature that originates in a re-contextualizing reading of transcendentalism (Abbey even defines Thoreau as not being a transcendentalist). If romanticism is seen as a reaction against an established order and against classical harmony and balance, then Abbey is a romantic. However, he opposes the re-introduction of order through the back door of a re-contextualizing ecology. In

Abbey the individualist and anti-social impulse of romanticism is retained, visible not at least in his inability to construct credible characters in his novels apart from autobiographically inspired ones and, despite his activist attitude, his weakness in proposing solutions to environmental problems that demand social solutions.

### 1.2.3 Pastoralism

Like nature writing, pastoralism has been associated with romanticism but has classical origins; in its literal sense it depicts the daily working life of shepherds. Pastoralism creates an idealized image of life in the country and imagines a pre-lapsarian world. The shepherd's or farmer's life is marked by harmony and tranquility. Pastoralism is a decidedly re-contextualizing mode, assuming various de-contextualizing falls such as civilized life in the cities or industrialism. Its re-contextualizing quality corresponds to similar strains in romanticism. Both pastoralism and the re-contextualizing strain of romanticism are marked by nostalgia for a pre-lapsarian past, long for lost harmony with nature, and stress the importance of a simple life<sup>2</sup> away from the city. David Oates sees that longing for a lost Eden at the thematic center of nature writing and argues that "the drama of Paradise," which defines our present mythological basis, is "not some cultural museum-piece [but] an emotional force that is still shaping our experience" (2003, 40). Oates analyzes the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins and comes to the conclusion that his poetry expresses the idea that "we live in a sin-world that comes after Eden" and claims: "Like us, Hopkins sees nature itself as the Eden we are exiled from. That makes Hopkins a modern nature poet. For that is the bedrock of so much—maybe most—modern nature writing" (2003, 41). It could be argued that the longing for Eden is the central theme of pastoralism, and therefore much nature writing is pastoral.

Since Nature Writing is a genre that stresses re-contextualizing, and since the countercultural and environmental movements of the 1960s have revived a re-contextualizing strain of romanticism, the three terms, romanticism, Nature Writing, and

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<sup>2</sup> Also Thoreau stresses the importance of simplicity, but for him it is a prerequisite for maintaining individual independence in a world governed by material needs, it is not an aim in itself. Furthermore, as also Abbey points out, Thoreau's life on Walden pond was an extension of city life, not an alternative to it (Thoreau had frequent visitors, lived in walking distance from Concord, was not a farmer, and regarded his stay in Walden as an experiment, not an alternative lifestyle).

pastoralism are closely connected and sometimes used interchangeably. This is particularly true in Nature Writing that has been informed by Deep Ecology or radical environmentalism. See my later discussion of Don Scheese's claim of the compatibility between romanticism and Nature Writing. The close association of the terms is only possible if one tones down, excuses, or excludes both the de-contextualizing strains of romanticism and also nature writing from the definition of the terms.

#### 1.2.4 Abbey and pastoral Nature Writing

Pastoralism, Nature Writing, and a re-contextualizing strain of romanticism form an influential part of contemporary literature that has nature as its main theme. In a paraphrase of Leo Marx, Don Scheese defines pastoralism as a "preference for the apparently 'simple' world of 'nature' (traditionally understood as the nonhuman realm) over the complicated life of 'civilization'" (1996b, 4). Scheese sees a strong link between pastoralism and nature writing, as both emerge as responses to the industrial revolution. Nature writing, according to Scheese, focuses on the non-human and is typically a "first person, nonfiction account" (1996b, 6) derived from and related to other genres such as natural history, scientific writing, spiritual autobiography, and travel writing (1996b, 6). Scheese defines pastoralism as a form of romanticism, and nature writing as a non-fictional expression of romantic ideas. Dana Phillips defines the purpose of nature writing as the establishment of "an intensely felt emotional connection with the natural world" (2003, 185). What Scheese and Phillips define is more Nature Writing than nature writing because they closely associate the genre with pastoralism.

Scheese distinguishes between two forms of pastoralism, "hard" and "soft" pastoralism, and places Abbey into the category of hard pastoralism. Whereas soft pastoralism deals with cultivated landscapes, hard pastoralism has wilderness settings (1996b, 5). Scheese sees both forms of pastoralism as re-contextualizing, as a "return to a simpler, more harmonious form of life" (1996b, 6) and claims that nature writers such as Abbey, even though they describe the collision of "polar forces," in nature, "attempt to reconcile them in epiphanic prose" (1996b, 11). Scheese's central argument is that nature writing attempts to reach a state of harmony between wilderness and civilization and re-contextualize humanity into nature, no matter how harsh the depicted nature is. The aim of this harmony

is oneness with nature. Scheese claims that Emerson aims at “the possibility of attaining oneness with the nonhuman other, which he calls the ‘Oversoul’” (1996b, 22). Nature Writers take this pastoral conceptualization of nature for granted and “seek to recoup a ‘oneness’ with the nonhuman world that harks back in certain ways to the mind-set of primitive cultures” (1996b, 38). Abbey reads Emerson in a similar way (see discussion on “distinction” below), but rejects the implied notion of “oneness” for himself.

The pastoral tradition of Nature Writing tends to idealize non-Western cultures, as Scheese illustrates: “there was a time when people felt no need to retreat to a pastoral haven because where they lived was where they wanted to be—they were at home in nature and felt no separation from it” (1996b, 37-38). Scheese is right in stressing the pastoral impulse of Nature Writing, an impulse seeking spiritual re-connection with nature and a flight from the complexities of civilization. Dana Phillips points out that one characteristic of the pastoral is its ability “to colonize the territory” (2003, 18), meaning that it perceives natural landscapes as being much simpler places than cities, which is highly questionable. In Scheese this colonizing is extended also to the inhabitants of these supposedly simple landscapes, the Native Americans, an argument with reactionary undertones. According to James Aton, the “Indians lived the kind of primal relationship with nature [to] which Abbey aspires” (1981, 62). Abbey, however, neither idealizes nature, nor does he praise the Indians for their original relationship to the land. He is the “Thoreau of the American West” only if Thoreau is read, as Abbey did, as belonging to the de-contextualizing strain of romanticism. According to Abbey, Thoreau “outgrew transcendentalism rather early in his career” (1991b, 20), and by this he means not transcendentalism’s rejection of the dogmatism of organized religion but the re-contextualizing idea of the Oversoul. Also Phillips claims that “Thoreau discovered something resembling the innate depravity of existence” (2003, 202). These statements are indications that Thoreau may share, to some degree, Abbey’s fate of sometimes being misread as a Nature Writer.

The problem with the pastoral conceptualization of nature is that it, despite its re-contextualizing impulse, paradoxically overstates the distinction between nature and civilization, a distinction which is engrained in our culture, as Ludwig Wittgenstein observes:



It is very *remarkable* that we should be inclined to think of civilization—houses, trees, cars, etc.—as separating man from his origins, from what is lofty and eternal, etc. Our civilized environment, along with its trees and plants, strikes us then as though it were cheaply wrapped in cellophane and isolated from everything great, from God, as it were. This is a remarkable picture that intrudes on us. (Wittgenstein, quoted in Phillips 2003, 38, emphasis Wittgenstein's)

Rather than problematizing the nature-culture dichotomy, some ecocritics see it as their task to reconcile humanity and nature. This is a paradoxical move cementing the dichotomy rather than overcoming it. Abbey sees natural spaces not as harmonious places removed from civilization but as spaces that are marked by a relative absence of social control and by openness of signification. He does not construct a contrast between a harmonious nature and a chaotic civilization but sees nature as a social space whose openness is threatened by social forces.

Leo Marx points out that our age is influenced by a re-contextualizing strain of romanticism and its sharp division between nature and culture. In pre-romantic literature, however, this distinction was less pronounced: “The identification of visual nature with the celestial ‘machine’ is difficult to grasp because of our own feeling, learned from the romantics, that ‘organic’ nature is the opposite of things ‘mechanical’” (Marx 2000, 162). Robinson Jeffers, who is one of the most important literary influences on Abbey, illustrates that the distinction between nature and culture is not always clear. In his poem “Calm and Full the Ocean” he describes pastoral nature only to question it in the last lines:

Sane and intact the seasons pursue their course, autumn  
slopes to December, the rains will fall  
And the grass flourish with flowers in it: as if man's  
world were perfectly separate from nature's, private  
and mad.  
But that's not true; even the P-38s and the Flying  
Fortresses are as natural as horse flies; (1965, 84)

The organic and the mechanical, the natural and the cultural, and beauty and terror are much more interwoven than pastoralism, with its idea of a good and peaceful nature, suggests.

Scheese sees Jeffers' poetry as an example of Nature Writing in the pastoral tradition of re-contextualization: “Nature writing, the pastoral tradition, is typically about the confluence of a place and a writer, the physical and the metaphysical, where—in the solitude of retreat

from modernity—imagination and fact, the word and the world, merge” (1996b, 134). Scheese does not really say how the natural world is translated into the world of words but relies on a mystical tone as an explanation. Interesting here is the insistence on place. Nature Writing or environmental literature is not so much about nature in general as it is about a specific place, as Scheese explains: “The continuing popularity of nature writing belies the assertion that we now inhabit a geography of nowhere. Countless writers and readers have reaffirmed the power of place” (1996b, 135). This insistence on place is a new form of anti-modernism which does not see industrialization as its main enemy; it attacks not the smokestacks but the airports, not plastic but the internet. Its targets are forms of modern global communication that create cultural hybrids and complex identities. In a discussion of Arran Gare, Peter Quigley discusses the dangers of a sense of place. If it is assumed that a “special discourse [...] percolates out of a particular region,” then “[t]he humans of that region become, as a result of a kind of listening, stewards of that region” (1999, 189). This privileged access to a region can develop what Quigley sees as “new nationalism;” he quotes Gare for illustration of his point: “Nationalism can then be redefined as the commitment by a regional community, through the stories by which it defines itself, to justice within the region where justice is understood as the appropriate” (Gare quoted in Quigley 1999, 188). In *Abbey* there is a strange ambivalence in terms of place. On the one hand he describes specific places in detail and in all material quality, on the other these places are embedded in mythical places such as the “West” and are experienced by protagonists who are restless and placeless—exactly because they are distinct from the places they encounter themselves in. The placelessness of the protagonists is part of a larger placelessness of humanity in the world. A theoretical model that accounts for both the material and mythical quality of a place, avoiding both the pitfalls of naïve correspondence (“merging”) and of a constructivism unable to account for the material reality of places will be presented in subchapter 1.5.

#### 1.2.5. Definitions: Deep Ecology and biocentrism

Deep Ecology is a holistic philosophy created by the Norwegian ecophilosopher Arne Naess in the 1970s and has been influential both in Norway and the USA. Deep Ecology provides the ideological basis for radical environmentalism and has had considerable influence on both Nature Writing and ecocriticism. Deep Ecology’s main objective is to

foster self-realization; the “self” in self-realization, however, is not the self of individualism but is understood in terms of re-contextualizing the individual into the ecosystem. The fully self-realized individual lives in harmony with his or her environment. Due to its holistic anti-individualism Deep Ecology has a problematic relationship to the Western heritage, and some critics (e.g. Luc Ferry) see it as being prone to authoritarian ideology. Whether authoritarian or not, Deep Ecology provides a moral guideline for politics as well as a justification for environmentalist activism, stating in its principles that those who subscribe to it “have an obligation to try, directly or indirectly, to implement the necessary changes.”

Deep Ecology sees its ideological aim in overcoming the anthropocentrism of Western civilization and replacing it with biocentrism. Biocentrism means that not only human beings can find their self-realization as part of an ecosystem, but that all biological entities and also ecosystems have intrinsic and equal rights to realize themselves. The notion of intrinsic rights is discussed at the example of Roderick Frazier Nash’s model in chapter two. There are two problems connected to the idea of intrinsic and equal rights, one is that it is ahistorical (it treats rights as something that has to be discovered rather than being fought for), the other is that it is impossible to live up to it entirely. Even treating a bacterial infection with an antibiotic would be morally questionable. Out of the idea of species equality developed the idea of speciecism, in analogy to other “isms” with intention of liberation. As there are moderate and extreme forms of anthropocentrism (a moderate form would be to see all human perception as unavoidably anthropocentric, an extreme form as seeing humanity as created in the image of God), there are moderate and extreme forms of biocentrism. A moderate form is advocated by the Australian philosopher Peter Singer who sees sentience as basis for a non-anthropocentric ethics and thus grades the idea of rights, and more extremely egalitarian forms are to be found in the militant vegan movement, with some of its adherent seeing it as morally justified to kill butchers.

In the context of analyzing Abbey’s work, several aspects have to be pointed out: Deep Ecology is a holistic ideology that has the aim to re-contextualize the individual into a system, something the individualist Abbey does not approve of. Furthermore the brand of distinction that is the basis of Abbey’s conceptualization of nature is seen as politically incorrect in circles influenced by Deep Ecology, which ironically often see Abbey as one of their own. Deep Ecology is furthermore associated with a tendency to re-infuse spirituality

into nature (Deep Ecology sees itself not as a religion but as a trans-religious platform) and anti-modernism, tendencies that Abbey opposes. Nevertheless, Abbey never attacks Deep Ecology directly, mainly because of its function as the ideology behind a resistance movement whose practical aims, particularly in regard to preserving the American West, he supports.

#### 1.2.6 Abbey in the context of environmental literature

In the recent decades there has been an increased interest in the environment, and in the literary field this has spawned a new interest for nature writing. In many nature writers the genre has evolved from a literature that describes nature (or venerates it as in the case of Nature Writing) to one that sees itself as a part of the environmental movement to defend nature; this genre is often called environmental literature. A further offspring of the environmental movement is the critical practice of ecocriticism. According to Peter Barry, the precursor of ecocriticism was “the study of nature writing” (2002, 249). Ecocriticism, however, is not a neutral method for literary analysis but sees itself in the tradition of romanticism: “Ecocriticism, as it now exists in the USA, takes its literary beginnings from [...] Emerson, [...] Fuller [...] and Thoreau” (Barry 2002, 249). Due to the different strains of romanticism, the reference to romantic writers is ambivalent, but what is meant here is the re-contextualizing strain of the genre.

Michael P. Cohen also sees this connection of romanticism and ecocriticism when he states that ecocriticism has initially focused on authors in the tradition of American romanticism and lists authors such as Thoreau, John Muir, Gary Snyder, and Edward Abbey (2004, 31). Abbey has always been part of the ecocritical canon and is included in most collections of nature writing and environmental literature, for example the *Norton Book of Nature Writing*. This is not surprising since nature in its various conceptualizations plays a significant role in Abbey’s work. Ralph W. Black sees Abbey (together with Thoreau, Silko, and Cooper) at the heart of environmental literature, of books “that have trees in them” (Black 1994). Gregory McNamee refers to a survey conducted by ASLE (American Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment) which identifies Aldo Leopold as the writer who appears most often in nature writing syllabi, followed closely by Mary Austin, Terry Tempest Williams, and Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* (McNamee

1994). Abbey, whom McNamee calls a “modern giant,” is a writer at the center of American environmental literature.

Scheese sees Abbey as “the main figure responsible for the radicalizations of nature writing” (1996b, 35), mentioning Abbey’s pulling up of surveyors’ stakes and fantasizing about the destruction of Glen Canyon dam. At the time of his death Abbey was “the leading figure in radical environmentalism” (1996b, 119). Scheese claims that “Abbey and other radical environmentalists have taken biocentrism to an extreme by insisting on the parity of all species” (1996b, 35). According to Scheese, Abbey’s writing is informed by radical environmentalism: “The tensions of his life and times may well have been so great that they could be resolved only in a version of the pastoral based on radical environmentalism as a viable solution” (1996b, 107). In a similar vein, Daniel Philippon claims that “by linking environmental activism with the philosophy of biocentrism, Abbey encouraged the use of illegal tactics to protest practices many environmentalists considered illegitimate (2004, 221). The problem with the argument Scheese and Philippon employ is that they conflate Abbey’s advocacy of radical (=illegal) methods with the assumption that he shares the ideas of radical (=biocentric) environmentalism.

Abbey clearly stated that he did not see himself as a nature writer: “I never wanted to be an environmental crusader, an environmental journalist. I wanted to be a fiction writer, a novelist” (Abbey, quoted in Rothman 1998, 47). Nevertheless, critics such as Scheese see it as their role to “save the tale from the artist who created it” and that the “truth of the matter is that Abbey for all his disclaimers to the contrary, *is* a ‘nature writer’” (1996b, 107, emphasis Scheese’s). Although Scheese is right in principle not to grant too much authority to the author, Abbey is correct about his own classification. As Scheese, Philippon claims that “no nature writer has more vigorously resisted the ‘nature writer’ label than Abbey” (2004, 221) and states that “his adoption of a deliberately provocative persona and his conflation of fictional and nonfictional characters and events in support of environmental protection place him squarely in the ranks of those modern nature writers—such as Annie Dillard, Barry Lopez, and Terry Tempest Williams—working at the boundaries of the genre” (2004, 221). David Rothman explains that “[m]ost critics have [...] underestimated Abbey’s literary aspirations, preferring to see him primarily as an activist prophet of the environmental movement” (1998, 47). Abbey’s literary aspirations, however, cannot be seen in isolation from his environmentalism as his conceptualization of nature breaks with

central environmentalist ideas. It could furthermore be argued that Abbey did not so much resist the label “nature writer” as he resisted being a Nature Writer, an association that would have been made easily due to his connections to the radical environmental movement.

### 1.2.7 Fiction and nature writing

Ecocriticism, environmental literature, and environmental politics are interconnected fields, as David Mazel (1996, 137) points out. Many ecocritics see themselves as part of the radical environmental movement and subscribe to its central ideology, biocentrism or anti-anthropocentrism. According to Sue Ellen Campbell, both literary “theorists and ecologists [...] stand in opposition to traditional authority” (1996, 127), and the “most important challenge to traditional hierarchies in ecology is the concept of biocentrism” (1996, 128). The result of the anti-anthropocentric outlook is that “human beings are no longer the centre of value and meaning” (1996, 133). Joseph Meeker (1996) describes the impact of humanity on nature: “We have generally acted the role of the pioneer species, dedicating ourselves to survival through the destruction of all our competitors and to achieving effective dominance over other forms of life” (162). Meeker’s “we” expresses an important element in ecocriticism and environmental literature, namely the conflation of human interests into the single interest of the species; accordingly Lawrence Buell calls nature an “oppressed and silent class” (1996, 20). Although Abbey appears to be a typical representative of radical environmentalism as his novels *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Hayduke Lives!*—as well as many of his essays—promote activism, these works are not biocentric. Abbey falls into the category of nature writing but is not a Nature Writer.

Thomas Lyon provides a definition of traditional nature writing: “First and most fundamentally, the literature of nature has three main dimensions to it: natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature” (2001, 20). The problem with this interpretation is that it excludes fiction and treats nature as a coherent entity “out there” that can be described by a human observer. Lyon sees a need to adapt the genre of nature writing to modern times. He claims that his definition of earlier nature writing is also valid for modern nature writing but adds a number of components. First of all, nature writing contains an ethical element, answering the question

“How shall we live” (2001, 99). Second, there are no more white spots on the map today, and it is “a brute fact [...] that urban industrialism is now pervasive and totally dominant” (2001, 100). Third, Lyon argues that modern nature writers have “recognized their own membership in the dominant modern pattern” (2001, 101). Fourth, he claims that modern nature writers “moved from the traditional, dualistic outlook on the world to an ecological view” (2001, 102) and defines this ecological view in Aldo Leopold’s dictum that “[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (Leopold quoted in Lyon 2001, 104). In this last statement Lyon defines the ecological view as essentially biocentric. What Lyon in fact claims is that modern forms of nature writing have evolved into Nature Writing, a claim that marginalizes writers who stick to a more traditional view of the genre.

Lyon’s definition of nature writing excludes fiction and links an ethic to the description of nature. The ecological perspective excludes works that do not promote an ethical stance or describe the indifference of nature. It is not true that the “dualistic outlook” has been overcome; what happens is that writers who conceptualize an existential nature are seen as obsolete, counter-productive, or simply as not belonging to the genre of nature writing. Even though Lyon argues taxonomically and tries to map existing nature writing rather than prescribe a form, his definition nevertheless both excludes fiction and marginalizes an existential outlook on nature. Lyon exemplifies the evolution of nature writing with Joseph Krutch who, in his earlier years saw humanism and nature as “fundamentally antithetical” (Krutch quoted in Lyon 2001, 105) and a later Krutch who “affirmed the possibility of a healing, spiritual allegiance to the wild” (Lyon 2001, 106). It is by no means clear why the development of Krutch signifies an evolution (in more than a temporal sense) and not, for example, a sentimental regression. Lyon’s example shows that even the most careful taxonomic definition of nature writing is potentially exclusive and leaves open the problem of defining writing that deals with nature but not in an ecological or descriptive mode. I think that most of Abbey’s work falls into this category of renegade nature writing. In Lyon’s vast 134-page bibliography of nature writing in *This Incomparable Land*, Abbey is represented with eight titles, none of them fictional, and in the short discussions of the works there is no mention of any existential theme in Abbey.

Abbey’s focus on entertainment and his use of the form of the novel are unusual in the field of nature writing. David Gessner criticizes the “Sunday school” feel of the genre and its

“awed, hushed, [and] reverential” tone, calls it boring (2004, 1), and asks: “Why not let farce occasionally bully its way into the nature essay? Or tragedy? Or sex? How about more writing that spills and splashes over the seawall between fiction and nonfiction?” (2004, 2). Abbey’s *The Monkeywrench Gang* fulfils Gessner’s wish, it is “fun and entertaining” according to Tim Sandlin, and it “politicized, polarized, and outraged readers, and that was, after all, the purpose” (1994, 12). Gessner’s observation is shared by Phillips who claims: “Many readers, especially those who have some resistance to so-called fine writing, who suspect that it is only sentiment propped up by sturdy syntax and vivid adjectives, find nature writing boring” (2003, 210). Also Philippon notes that fiction is usually excluded from the definition of nature writing and demands an inclusion of fiction into the genre, mentioning *The Monkey Wrench Gang* as a prime example (2004, 11).

Entertainment and fiction are often seen as antithetical to environmental literature. In the journal ISLE (*Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*) - the publication of ASLE - there are sections for scholarly articles, for nonfiction, and for poetry, but not for fiction. In an article in ISLE Gary Snyder states that “over the last forty years a body of fresh creative (but not fictional) work has been written that remakes the field” (2004, 3). In the introduction of the *Norton Book of Nature Writing* John Elder and Robert Finch claim that nonfiction is “the most vital form of current American literature” and that “the natural context of fiction has been attenuated” (quoted in Phillips 2003, 234) due to its self-reflexivity and constructedness. The underlying reason for the exclusion of fiction is that literary environmentalism is informed by the non-anthropocentrism of radical environmentalism and the idea that anthropocentrism has caused a grave environmental crisis that cannot be solved from within the Western humanist tradition. According to Phillips, the “scandal that alarms ecocritics of the realist stripe only arises if one assumes that the fictional dimension of literature—of all literature, even the nonfictional, paradoxical as this may seem—is somehow the source of its faults” (2003, 16).

Fiction, with its focus on plot and human imagination, places the human being at the center and treats nature as a stage and is therefore seen as alien to the genre of environmental literature. Lawrence Buell argues in a similar way:

The aesthetic of relinquishment in the long run fits environmental non-fiction better than lyric poetry and prose fiction. Insofar as such work takes as its starting point the decision to focus on the nonhuman, it tends to deny itself some of the most basic



aesthetic pleasures of homocentrism: plot, characterization, lyric pathos, dialogue, intersocial events, and so on. (1996, 168)

Buell devises a system to classify environmental literature, and it is not surprising that the “clearest cases are so-called nonfictional works” (1996, 8). The resulting literature, however, too often falls into the category that Joyce Carol Oates complains about. According to Oates, nature “inspires a painfully limited sense of responses in ‘nature writers’—REVERENCE, AWE, PIETY, MYSTICAL ONENESS” (1986, 236); Oates points out that nature itself does not have a “sense of humor: in its beauty, as in its ugliness, or its neutrality, there is no laughter” (1986, 236). Oates here points at the fact that elements such as entertainment and humor are human responses, and that the attempt to edit out humanity from nature writing ends in a predictable style.

There are two major genres of environmental literature, what Snyder calls “our kind of literature” (2004, 9). One is non-fiction which focuses on “the magic of sheer fact” (2004, 4), the other is nature poetry that is a meditation on life mimicking natural forms. Snyder furthermore points out that nature not only prescribes literary forms but is also “the ultimate source of order” that provides hope in the current situation of “the new world disorder” (2004, 6). Nature writing is a pathway towards a natural order:

In our field of Literature and the Environment, we are permitted to return to this meadow, this forest, this desert, as a given property of the deeply natural human mind. Here are the bounds that—in ways too complex for us to grasp—hold against chaos. Remembering that chaos is a human invention. (2004, 4)

Snyder’s conceptualization is essentialist and reactionary because it imagines a pre-modern order as a way out of the chaos of modern life. Abbey, however, does not see nature as an extra-human entity, neither as an oppressed class nor as a source of authority but as a contested space. As the nature writer Annie Dillard mentions, the form of the novel can be associated with the city, which is “the novelist’s world, not the poet’s” (quoted in Phillips 2003, 191). In the chapter on modernism I will show that Abbey depicts nature as an essentially urban space, and therefore his preference for the form of the novel is not surprising.

Abbey discusses the political implications of the form of the novel in his early journals:

Any connection between the novel and democracy? Why has literature been relatively successful in relatively democratic America, music and painting comparative failures? Almost everyone thinks he could write a novel if he really wanted to, and almost everyone is right. The other arts require far more time, training, materials—in other words, money. Anyone can buy a book; few can buy paintings, few can afford concert-going, etc. [...] No doubt, the novel, child of the printing press, is the typical and essential art of democracy. (1994, 121)

The fact that Abbey favors the novel as an art form does not mean that he does not like other art. Abbey admired such classical music as “[t]he scherzo from Beethoven’s F Major Quartet: What a clean clear fresh and celestial piece of music that is—completely inhuman; an ideal world of logic and number and crystalline radiance” (1994, 109). But Abbey saw himself as a novelist, and the purpose of his writing was entertainment: “Me a ‘conservation writer’? Read my books and you’ll discover that only about ten percent of my words are concerned with conservation issues. The rest is play. Entertainment” (1994, 264). Human focus and democratic appeal are central for Abbey’s image as a writer. The factor of entertainment is important for Abbey’s working class appeal and will be exemplified with his novel *Hayduke Lives!*.

Philippon agrees with Wendell Berry who sees Abbey not as an environmentalist but as an autobiographer who defends the nature that he sees as his home (2004, 222). Philippon further argues that Abbey and Berry underestimate the “expansiveness of the genre nature writing to ‘contain multitudes’ as Walt Whitman put it” (2004, 222-223). It is certainly true that the genre of nature writing contains a variety of styles, one of them Nature Writing. It may be the reverential style of Nature Writing that Abbey reacts to when he claims that he is not an environmental writer. In this latter form there exists an uneasiness with the human focus as found in the novel. As Abbey is not a Nature Writer, he does not fit the category of traditional nature writing easily either because of his fiction and his very imaginative use of the nature in his texts. Ann Ronald (who published the first book-length study of Abbey) describes the difference between Abbey and traditional nature writing. She quotes Abbey describing his method for writing his non-fictional *Desert Solitaire*: “Since you cannot get the desert into a book any more than a fisherman can haul up the sea with his nets, I have tried to create a world of words in which the desert figures more as medium than as material. Not imitation but evocation has been the goal” (Abbey, quoted in Ronald 1988, 72). Ronald states that Abbey’s “endeavor differs from the conventional nonfiction nature or ecology book, [and] is similar to the evocative process undertaken by the creator of a

romance who quickly spins from reality into a fully imagined ambience” (1988, 72). Abbey’s human focus is visible also in his non-fictional works, and this makes it easier for him to depict conflicting human interests in nature. Abbey can be seen as a nature writer only insofar as that natural settings and environmental concerns play a major role in his writing. A more narrow definition of nature writing, particularly as Nature Writing, does not fit Abbey’s writing.

#### 1.2.8. Abbey and the environmental movement

Since Abbey is seen as a part of the environmental movement and has inspired the formation of environmental organizations such as Earth First!, it is assumed that he shares the ideological base of that movement. During the last decades different strands of environmentalist thought have evolved, and it is necessary to define the strands of the movement further. A common distinction is that between radical and moderate stances, what Arne Naess calls “deep” and “shallow” ecology. Naess summarizes the “shallow ecology” movement: “Fight against pollution and resource depletion. Central objective: the health and affluence of people in the developed countries” (1973, 95). This description is demagogical because it denounces all the democratic movements that do not share the aims of Deep Ecology as selfish. Deep Ecologists identify a deficit in democracy, namely that it does not give a voice to non-human entities. Thomas Lyon takes up this biocentric reasoning and applies it to politics: “[p]olitics, properly understood, is not simply human affairs; it involves the standing of each and every element making up the one world, the biosphere we partake of. Democracy properly understood gives the vote to trees” (2001, 121). In the United States, Bill Devall and George Sessions have popularized Deep Ecology, and the movement has had considerable influence on environmental thought, especially through David Rothenberg’s books<sup>3</sup> (Cohen 2004, 49). Whereas moderate strands of environmentalism attempt to solve environmental problems from within existing paradigms of democracy and humanism, radical environmentalism sees this as anthropocentric and favors a holistic and biocentric approach. Radical environmentalists often sneer at the lack of revolutionary zeal that marks “shallow” environmentalists. Luc

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<sup>3</sup> One of his books is *Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology* (1993) where he traces Deep Ecological thought back to Arne Naess and other Norwegian philosophers. In what only can be described as a misinterpretation he also sees Peter Wessel Zapffe as a precursor for Deep Ecology. His misinterpretation parallels the misinterpretation of Abbey as a Nature Writer.

Ferry argues that “the reason for the error of those who still mourn the fall of the revolutionary ideal and associate reformism with a lukewarm, colorless, and tasteless brew having failed to understand that, in a secular democracy, politics had to leave the bosom of religion” (1995, 137). Indeed, radical environmentalism has frequently been described in terms of a religious movement; Abbey, however, with his skeptical attitude, distances himself from such religious aspirations.

Phillips defines “radical environmentalism” as marked by a holistic view of nature (2003, 114). Due to its holism, radical environmentalism is skeptical towards what it sees as the objectification of nature in science. Radical environmentalists identify dualistic thought as a problem, for example the Cartesian mind-matter dualism or the Platonic distinction between ideas and the material world, which has been taken up by Christianity. Accordingly, radical environmentalists demand a spiritual re-orientation towards animism or vitalism. Here I will use the term “radical” in the sense of an environmentalism that sees the anthropocentrism of the Western tradition as the cause for an environmental crisis and demands a radically new orientation towards biocentrism and the acceptance of intrinsic value, including moral value, in nature; an example of this line of thought would be Deep Ecology.<sup>4</sup> The ideas of radical environmentalism have left a mark on nature writing, and Daniel J. Philippon argues that nature writing has evolved from a genre that describes a pastoral retreat to nature towards social involvement: “the genre has developed with and helped to define the environmental movement, and it has had as much to say about culture as it has had to say about ‘nature’” (2004, 25). Furthermore Philippon claims that Deep Ecology is “a contemporary restatement of the ecocentrism earlier articulated in the writings of John Muir and Aldo Leopold” (2004, 252). Philippon makes contradictory statements regarding whether nature writing precedes an environmental social involvement (including Deep Ecology) or the other way round: what is clear, however, is that literary and political involvement with nature are seen as symbiotic.

Several critics have noted Abbey’s uneasiness at being seen primarily as an environmental writer. Abbey’s sister remarked that her brother “saw himself as a writer first, and

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<sup>4</sup> The idea that different species cooperate in an ecological web has found its most extreme form in the Gaia hypothesis that defines the entire planet as a caring organism. It should be noted that biologists do not generally share Deep Ecology’s biological assumptions. The biologist Richard Dawkins states that the elements of an ecological system interact but do not cooperate: “A network of relationships there may be, but it is made up of small, self-interested components.” (1983, 237)

environmentalist second, if at all” (Temple 1993). Tim Sandlin points at Abbey’s position in between activism and literature:

Try to imagine the bizarre position Abbey found himself in during the last few years of his life: he was the revered leader of a worldwide crusade with legions of followers, but his deepest desire was to be loved by the literati. It was as if Jesus had died bitter because He wasn’t recognized as a wonderful carpenter. (1994, 12)

Was Edward Abbey a radical environmentalist? The answer to this question depends on whether one focuses on Abbey’s methods or on his conceptual ground. Abbey advocated and engaged in illegal activities, promoted environmental causes, and his novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* inspired the foundation of the radical environmentalist group Earth First!.<sup>5</sup> Even readers who dislike Abbey’s writing concede that one quality of his writing is his strong personal engagement. Although Abbey’s methods are radical in the sense that they encourage illegal activities, I argue that he should not be labeled a radical environmentalist. The reason is that Abbey does not share the conceptual ground of radical environmentalism. I will use the term “radical” referring not to Abbey’s methods but to his conceptual ground. The conceptualization of nature in Abbey is not marked by pastoralism or biocentrism and the wish to reconcile humanity and nature; to the contrary: Abbey’s experience of nature is marked by distinction, and this notion developed into a form of nature existentialism in his writing.

Abbey had a symbiotic relationship with the environmental movement. He advocated many of its aims, and his popularity as a writer rests on his environmentalist fame. However important environmental concerns are for Abbey, his writing cannot be reduced to environmental issues. It could be said that Abbey and radical environmentalism saw each other as doing the right things for the wrong reasons. The main focus in Abbey’s work is not nature, as his sister remarked: “It wasn’t about nature or the environment, it was about Ed” (Temple 1993). Abbey’s writing is highly autobiographical (weaving together aphorism, essay, autobiography, and fiction), and this is the reason why non-autobiographical characters (particularly his female characters) are often one-dimensional types. In Abbey’s case it is difficult to distinguish between the author, the narrator, and characters. In a review of Abbey’s journals Tim Sandlin states that “[t]o review a book by Edward Abbey is to review Edward Abbey himself” (1994, 11). Abbey’s writing is

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<sup>5</sup> Acts of ecosabotage are not harmless pranks. In the climate of post 9/11, illegal ecosabotage actions are labeled as domestic terrorism and are treated accordingly by the authorities.

autobiographical with individualistic and sometimes egocentric traits. Much of nature writing is autobiographical too, but in contrast to Nature Writing, that sees the individual as moving towards self-realization in the sense of Deep Ecology, Abbey's brand of individualistic autobiography is de-contextualizing, and he defines himself through his distinction from and conflicts with and within nature.

The difference between notions of reconciliation and oneness versus distinction and conflict is based on different understandings of culture. Leo Marx paraphrases and quotes Lionel Trilling: "The 'very essence' of a culture [...] resides in its central conflicts or contradictions, and its great artists are likely to be those who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, 'their meaning and power lying in their contradictions'" (2000, 342). For writers such as Edward Abbey and Robinson Jeffers, distinction and conflict are the basis for both culture, nature, and the relationship between the two. In his poem "Birthday" Jeffers expresses the spirit of conflict: "Time to despise / Peace: that's under the prow: peace is an ocean / To conquer and traverse, and at last drown in" (2000, n.p.). The ship and the ocean are not separated, but they are distinct, and even though their relationship can appear to be harmonious at times, a belief in a peaceful ocean can be a deadly illusion. So far the notions of distinction and a dialectics of cultural conflict are seen as antithetical by environmentalism, and writers who conceptualize a conflicted nature-culture relationship are not seen as environmental writers. However, Abbey shows that such conceptualizations of nature have an environmentalist potential that so far has not been recognized.

### 1.3 The notion of distinction

Abbey's writing is not marked by recapturing a sense of oneness with the natural world but by notions of distinction and conflict. In his essay on Emerson, it becomes clear that Abbey objects to a transcendental sense of correspondence:

Like the German idealists, Emerson could not abide the dichotomies of life—those troublesome divisions between reality and illusion, mind and nature, religion and science, moral law and physical law, the temporal and the eternal, the spiritual ideal and the mundane actual. His version of philosophic idealism, which he called Transcendentalism—borrowing the term from Kant—was an effort to override or *transcend* these dualisms through the identification of Mind (always capitalized) with

Spirit (likewise), and the equation of both with Absolute Spirit which in turn become another terms for—the World, the Universe, the All-in-One. That equation is *correspondence*: the human soul, said Emerson, corresponds to (is potentially identical with) everything that exists. Everything. (1988, 211-212, emphasis Abbey's)

Abbey goes on to discuss the consequences of Emerson's transcendentalism. According to Abbey, it is Emerson's main aim to overcome "the apparent division between the one and the many, the self and the other, as only a form of mischief created by *Maya*, the power of illusion" (1988, 212). This project, however, is riddled by the problem of evil: "How explain slavery, the suffering of children, the atrocities of war, in a panspiritualistic universe based on Pre-established Harmony?" (1988, 212). Abbey sees no solution for this problem and sneers: "Never mind the screams of the suffering: it is only *Maya*. This tortured and torturous metaphysical hallucination forms the basis of Emerson's lifelong optimism" (1988, 212). In the discussion of Emerson Abbey's own realism becomes apparent: "Emerson appeals not to experience, logic, sense or common sense, but to our innate idealism, our instinctive need for harmony and meaningfulness, a need which grows greater when the world grows more desperate" (1988, 213).

The discussion of Emerson is implicitly also a discussion of Abbey's own philosophical position. Abbey's main dictum is to accept the dualisms, paradoxes, and distinctions of life and with them the ensuing conflicts. These dualisms and distinctions are enhanced through the experience of nature, not diminished. Abbey marks himself as a realist who bases his world-view on experience. Furthermore he sees the wish for meaning and harmony as an innate human quality and its occurrence as a sign of crisis. In his preference for truth over consolation Abbey echoes Jeffers who writes in his poem "Curb Science?:" "To seek truth is better than good works, better than survival / Holier than innocence and higher than love" (Jeffers 2000, Vol. 3). For Abbey the wish for correspondence conflicts with what he sees as truth, and this is the key to understanding his aesthetic sense: As a realist he focuses on the physical experience of the world; this material reality, however, enhances his sense of distinction because it is impossible to escape the human drive to search for meaning beyond that reality. As correspondence in the sense of a re-contextualization of the human and natural spheres is impossible, correspondence in a literal sense is an equally impossible task. Every representation or perception of the world is not identical with the world itself and confirms the notion of human distinction rather than overcoming it. Therefore Abbey calls his *Desert Solitaire* a "world of words."

Abbey's sense of distinction is not fueled by the nature-culture dichotomy. Abbey perceives in the world a number of dichotomies that always leave some mark of distinction on human experience. There are distinctions between living and inanimate nature, geological and biological nature, human and animal natures, and between the human attempt to find meaning in the world and an existential nature that does not provide that meaning. There is a constant shifting of these dichotomies in Abbey, and the protagonists often find themselves at the crossroads of different natures. The differences between natures are often overlooked and mixed in the attempt to create "oneness." James Aton provides an example of the problematic mixing of different meanings of nature in his discussion of Thoreau's *Walden*:

Only by aligning himself with the rhythms of the natural world could he discover his own true nature and establish an original relation to the universe. Nature then afforded him the necessary solitude to do so. Moreover, in the process of his solitary excursions into nature, that world revealed to him many valuable lessons that he could apply to civilized life. (1981, 4)

Aton uses the term 'nature' to refer in abstract terms to the non-human external world, human nature, and the totality of all things (i.e. the universe), as well as in a more concrete sense of a space, where all the above-mentioned natures are experienced in solitude. Furthermore there is a preconception that human nature and external nature are in disharmony but should be in harmony. To reach this harmony is to open oneself to the moral lessons of nature. Abbey would not see one "true nature" and would argue that the nature of the universe is in conflict with the other natures, be they geological, biological, animal, or the human tendency to seek meaning ("valuable lessons") in the world.

#### 1.4 Theoretical considerations 1: Ecocriticism

Since nature is a main theme in Abbey, ecocriticism, the academic offspring of environmentalism, seems to be best suited to analyze Abbey's texts. There are, however, some conceptual preconceptions in ecocriticism that limit its usefulness. Ursula Heise categorizes the different forms of ecocriticism. As in environmentalism, there are moderate and radical strains. Some ecocritics analyze the role of the environment for the cultural imagination, the various definitions of "nature," or the relationship between humans and



nature in literary works (1997). This form of ecocriticism could be labeled moderate ecocriticism and is compatible with other schools of critical thought since it defines itself mainly through the focus of study, not the method. Cheryl Glotfelty paraphrases this vein of ecocriticism such: “Simply defined, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, quoted in Barry 2002, 248). Heise points at another, more radical, form of ecocriticism that advocates “direct intervention in current social, political, and economic debates” (1997). This form of ecocriticism sees itself as a branch of the environmental movement and demands personal involvement. Here I will use the term ecocriticism for its radical versions since its moderate forms mainly consist in a thematic focus on nature employed by other critical approaches.

Nature has become a major concern for literary scholars since the beginning of the 1990s, and Michael Branch (1994) describes the frustration of scholars with the marginal role that nature had played in the humanities in the US. In 1992, the Association of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) was formed to bring nature into the mainstream of literary theory. Thomas Lyon calls the founding of ASLE in 1992 somewhat boldly “one of the principal events of the decade” (2001, 124-125). From the beginning, ASLE attempted to not only bring nature into thematic focus but to establish a new and ecological form of criticism, so-called ecocriticism. A 1994 discussion forum (“Defining Ecocritical Theory and Practice” (Branch 1994)) is the first attempt to find a coherent voice for this new form of criticism. The discussion papers are found today on the ASLE web page under the link “Intro to ecocriticism.” I would regard the principles that are outlined in this introduction as still being valid for the contemporary definition of ecocriticism and will present some of the elements of the new critical practice that are shared by a majority of the discussion participants. The main elements of ecocriticism, according to the 1994 debate, are realism, activism, and biocentrism.

One of the main reasons for defining a new ecocritical practice is the frustration with postmodern forms of criticism that treat nature and the real world as cultural constructions, as Harry Crockett expresses it: “We reject the assumption that reality is socially constructed” (in Branch 1994). Christopher Cokinos demands “a shift away from approaches that strictly privilege language” and proposed an ecologically oriented poststructuralism, what he calls “compoststructuralism” (in Branch 1994). Thomas K. Dean claims that “eco-criticism seeks to reattach scholars to each other and scholarship to the

real concerns of the world,” and Kent Ryden states that ecocriticism “removes literary scholarship from the realm of rarified word games” (in Branch 1994). Scott Slovic demands that “[w]e must not reduce our scholarship to an arid, hyper-intellectual game, devoid of smells and tastes, devoid of actual experience” (in Branch 1994). Karen J. Winkler (1994) observes that ecocriticism is often reluctant to use modern literary theory because theory is supposed to negate the importance, even the existence, of the natural world. There seems to exist a standoff between scholars who favor a mimetic or realist approach to the world and constructivists who cry foundationalism at each mentioning of a reality that is not socially constructed. The problem of a realist approach is apparent in Roland Barthes’ statement: “A tree is a tree. Yes, of course. But a tree expressed by Minou Drouet is no longer quite a tree, it is a tree which is decorated, adapted to a certain type of consumption, laden with literary self-indulgence, revolt, images, in short with a type of social usage which is added to pure matter” (1993, 109). One does not have to be a naïve realist to feel a certain frustration with Barthes’ statement: on the one hand he is right to state that a representation of a tree is a social construction; on the other hand he does not account for the possibility of an interference of the material world of trees with the act of constructing. It is no surprise that the branch of literature that has the material world as its topic feels a certain frustration with constructivism. What is needed is a type of middle-ground constructivism that accepts that a tree is no longer quite a tree without forgetting its material reality. In the following sub-chapter I will present a possible solution of the problem of realism vs. postmodern constructivism, a model that distinguishes between constructions of reality and external reality.

An important aim for ecocritics is to find an alternative to dominating postmodern critical practices. In some critics there is a hostility towards theory that betrays a form of anti-intellectualism, exemplified in the ironic characterization of ecocritics as “scholars who would rather be hiking” (Cohen 14).<sup>6</sup> Ecocritics find themselves in the tradition of Emerson for whom “[b]ooks are for the scholar’s idle times. When he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men’s transcripts of their readings” (Emerson

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<sup>6</sup> Cohen notes that the anti-intellectualism of ASLE can also be found in the critical attitude of its publication, *ISLE*: “A perusal of the book reviews in *ISLE* reveals no negative review of any book. Why? A central question might be whether ecocriticism is capable of creating its own critique of environmental literature, or whether it is only capable of praising certain modes of it” (2004, 71). The reason for the lack of internal criticism stems from ASLE’s self-definition as being, at least in part, an environmentalist organization. Cohen describes the summer camp atmosphere of the conferences and links its informality to the “idea borrowed from environmental organizations [...] that informality fosters community.” The aim of informality is group harmony that can “result in preaching to the chorus” (Cohen 2004, 27).

1998). Also Michael Cohen warns: “A great danger awaits the student readings: he may be too good a student, too well-read” (Cohen quoted in Scheese 1996b, 10). The intellectual foundation of environmental thought is grounded in naïve realism, as William Cronon explains. In naïve realism it is assumed that “we can pretty easily recognize nature when we see it and thereby make uncomplicated choices between natural things, which are good, and unnatural things, which are bad” (Cronon, quoted in Phillips 2003, xii). Scheese ecocritical position regards the “nonhuman environment [as] a dominant character in the worlds both inside and outside the text,” which leads to a “paradigmatic shift in the consciousness of the protagonist from an ego-centered (anthropocentric) view of the world to an eco-centered (biocentric) perspective” (1996b, 8-9). Scheese conflates three elements here. First he rightly points at the problem that literature should account for the existence of an external world. Second, more problematically, he insists on “the primacy of a physical world that forms the basis for the construct” (1996, 9). Third, he commits the naturalistic fallacy and ascribes values to a shift of perspective on the world.

How could ecocritics incorporate the external world into their discourse without falling into the obvious traps of naïve realism or the naturalistic fallacy? Stan Tag argues that “[l]anguage is not inherently separate from the natural world, as some theories may suggest, but is evolving out of the same evolutionary processes as the earth itself” (in Branch 1994). Cheryl Glotfelty sees it as the fundamental premise of ecocriticism that “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” and that literature “plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact” (in Branch 1994, emphasis Glotfelty’s). I agree with Glotfelty about the shortcomings of postmodern criticism’s attempts to account for external reality and the need to incorporate it into a critical method. On the other hand, there is the danger of naïve realism, of the idea that language is an unmediated reflection of the world—or that such an unmediated access is possible. Abbey’s texts often describe this external world, its physicality, and how it interacts with the human creation of meaning. On the other hand Abbey is aware of the fact that you “cannot get the desert into a book.”

Some of the ASLE discussion participants express an uneasiness with realist ecocriticism and propose to see ecocriticism not so much as a method as a thematic focus. Nancy Cook proposes a thematic approach, asking questions such as: “What do we mean by ‘nature’? [...] How do we interact with the non-human world? How is that interaction mediated by

such factors such as historical period, regional location, race, gender, class” (in Branch 1994). Stephanie Sarver prefers to see ecocriticism as a thematic focus rather than a method. She claims that the term “ecocriticism” is unfortunate “because it suggests a new kind of critical theory” and claims the field is “united not by a theory but a focus: the environment” (in Branch 1994). Ian Marshall suggests that the critics who have dealt with the concepts of pastoralism, romanticism, the frontier, or transcendentalism were dealing with the same field as ecocritics and asks: “weren’t they all exploring the relationship between humanity and the natural world?” (in Branch 1994). On the one hand I believe that Marshall is right to see ecocriticism as a continuation of the study of the human imagination of nature and agree with Sarver and Cook that ecocriticism should be defined thematically. The idea of ecocriticism as a critical method apart from other critical discourses is problematic for the reasons I will explain below. On the other hand ecocritics have a point in demanding a reevaluation of the premises of postmodern critical theories, but this is a problem of literary theory in general not of ecocriticism in particular. It may, however, be argued that the limitations of a purely postmodern constructivist view of the world are most visible in texts that have external reality as their main theme. Although ecocriticism may not be a new theory, it has shown the need to reevaluate existing paradigms. Edward Abbey can only be properly understood if one deals with the interaction of external and internal realities.<sup>7</sup>

One aspect of the attempt to make ecocritical theory more realistic is its interdisciplinary approach. Harry Crockett bluntly states that “[w]e’re informed by ‘hard’ science” (in Branch 1994). I would regard this statement as wishful thinking. For a critical approach that values realism, scientific insight would indeed be helpful, but science is seldom seen in ecocriticism. The reason is that the “ecology” of ecocriticism and “ecology” as a sub-discipline of biology are two different things. According to Stephanie Sarver, ecocriticism “is better described as a form of environmentalism than the practice of ecology” (in Branch 1994). Sarver is right about this, but its proximity to environmentalism brings a new set of problems to ecocriticism.

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<sup>7</sup> Abbey is also an example of where texts show resistance to critical concepts such as Roland Barthes’ “death of the author.” Although one must be careful not to grant authority to the author in regard to the interpretation of the texts, in highly autobiographical texts such as Abbey’s, the life of the author cannot be ignored.

Besides its discomfort with postmodern criticism, another factor defining ecocriticism is its activist attitude. Many ecocritics see ecocriticism as a branch of environmentalism. Harry Crockett states that ecocritics “want to have an impact beyond the academy about those matters in the world most dear to us” (in Branch 1994). Also Scheese sees ecocriticism as “inherently political” and quotes Barry Lopez who hopes that nature writing “will someday provide the foundation for a reorganization of American political thought” (in Branch 1994). Environmentalism aims at more than to protect nature but to reorganize society according to ecological principles (Phillips 2003, 63), and Phillips states that for environmentalism “the thought that political, cultural, and social life might be amenable to redemption, if only its fidelity to nature can be assured, is central” (2003, 237).

Scott Slovic states that he agrees with Glen Love’s claim that “the most important function of literature today is to redirect human consciousness to a full consideration of its place in a threatened natural world” (Love quoted in Slovic, Branch 1994). In an article Simon C. Estok discusses the importance of activism, the “commitment to the natural world,” as an integral component of ecocriticism and sees “substantial agreement on key issues [such as that] ecocriticism is committed to changing things” (2001). He quotes Michel Branch who states that ecocriticism “implies a move toward a more biocentric world view [and] an extension of ethics” (Branch, quoted in Estok 2001), Michael Cohen who asserts that “by definition ecological literary criticism must be engaged” (Cohen, quoted in Estok 2001), and Cheryl Glotfelty who sees ecocriticism as “theoretical, activist-oriented AND thematic” (Glotfelty, quoted in Estok 2001). Estok is so convinced about the importance of activism that he is surprised that the matter was discussed at all in a panel at the 2001 ASLE conference in Flagstaff, Arizona:

In [...] the ASLE-Overseas panel, the discussion grew into a debate about whether or not ecocriticism has to be based on personal commitment to environmental matters. The debate was inconclusive. *What is surprising was that there even was a debate.* It is difficult to imagine an ecocriticism that lacks personal and political [...] commitment. (2001, my emphasis).

I took part in that debate and remember that there were several European participants (including myself) who felt uncomfortable with the activist stance. Estok’s surprised reaction shows that activism is seen by many as an ideological prerequisite.

Not all ecocritics agree with the activist attitude. Nancy Cook states that she is uncomfortable with the term “ecocriticism” because it “comes associated with a particular set of political and social agendas, ones although I may often share, predispose an audience to make value judgments. Thus the term ‘ecocriticism’ assumes what at the ASLE conference in Montana disparagers call a ‘granola’ mentality” (in Branch 1994). If an activist attitude is seen as a prerequisite for being an ecocritic, important voices such as Leo Marx would not be defined as ecocritics. I regard the activist attitude of ecocriticism and the proximity to environmentalism as a major problem for the interpretation of Abbey’s texts. Ecocritical engagement with nature presupposes that nature is threatened by humanity and that nature is inherently good. The problem of ecocriticism, in other words, is that a pastoral preconception of nature is hardwired into criticism. This pastoral attitude leads to hostility towards opposing conceptualizations of nature. This can be seen in the fact that some texts that have nature as their central theme are nonetheless rarely discussed in ecocritical circles; Herman Melville or Robinson Jeffers are examples. Other writers such as Abbey are partially sanitized, their “dark side” ignored or explained away. Scott Slovic, for example, acknowledges that there are textual tensions in Abbey. He ascribes them to the conflict between thematic elements, the “moral stratum” of the text, and aesthetic elements such as word play (1992, 90-91). I would argue that conflicts in Abbey’s texts mainly exist on the conceptual and thematic level and have aesthetic effects. Conflict between different conceptualizations of nature and human distinction from nature lie at the center of Abbey’s writing.

Cheryl Glotfelty states that “ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (in Branch 1994). The ideological basis for ecocriticism is a pastoral conceptualization of nature; what is often heard is a wish to reconcile humanity and nature and to strengthen the notion of interconnectedness with nature. This worldview is based on the biocentric philosophy of Deep Ecology which, according to Cohen “is widely supported by ecocritics” (2004, 96). When Barry notes “a tendency for the American [ecocritical] writing to be ‘celebratory’ in tone” (2002, 251), the reason for this is the desire for reconciliation with nature. Thomas K. Dean discusses the ideological basis of ecocriticism: “As a response to felt needs and real crises, and as an inherently wholistic [sic] practice, eco-criticism also has an inherent ideological if not moral component. A wholistic view of the universe is a value-centered one that honors the interconnectedness of things” (in Branch 1994). When a critical position presupposes a notion of holism, interconnectedness,

or even earth-centeredness, it will have difficulties in dealing with what I see as the most important aspect of Abbey's writing, namely the notion of distinction. Despite all the physical proximity to the external world in Abbey, he maintains a sense of distinction, often developing into alienation. Abbey would agree with Joyce Carol Oates who describes her "chronic uneasiness with Nature-mysticism" thus: "Nature has no instructions for mankind except that our poor beleaguered humanist-democratic way of life, our fantasies of the individual's high worth, our sense of the weak, no less than the strong, have a right to survive, are absurd" (1986, 238-239). Abbey argues in a similar way arguing that words are neither a representation of the world, nor is the world a representation of an inherent morality: "I stare long at the beautiful, dimming lights in the sky but can find there no meaning other than the lights' intrinsic beauty. As far as I perceive, the planets signify nothing but themselves" (1991b, 19-20).

Seeing an activist attitude and holism as prerequisites for environmental literature tends to create a system of center and margin. An example for this is Gabriel Navarre's early definition of eco-fiction. In "Toward a Definition of Environmental Fiction" Navarre defines a genre of "false ecofiction." He claims that works such as *Moby Dick* "emphasize our separateness from nature, our vulnerability to the great and morally blank factors of the universe," involving "a tragic and analytic view," (1980, 218) whereas true ecofiction is "based on an integrative view of reality [and is] emotionally oriented toward creating a whole world" (1980,219). The consequence of this system of inclusion and exclusion is that certain works such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky*, which have nature as a main theme, are not seen as ecofiction.

Another problem of biocentrism or anti-anthropocentrism in critical practice is that it is inherently self-contradictory because, as Cohen points out, since "literature is about human expression, all theories of representation must be about human strategies and therefore 'anthropocentric.' Ecocritics constitute an interpretative community whose work focuses primarily on literature, not 'nature'" (2004, 86). Even the most naïve realist must understand that a tree in a book is a human representation, not the real thing (except for the fact that paper is made of trees). Anti-anthropocentrism is marred by the fact that it is a meaningful position only in its toned-down or commonsensical varieties. If taken literally, it is self-contradictory as every human perspective is inherently anthropocentric. Trying to live up to an anti-anthropocentric ideal is coupled with a feeling of inadequacy. This

problem is more acute in a human practice that deals with an abstraction of human reflection, namely literary criticism. Here the scholars are doubly removed from nature and firmly entrenched in a human perspective. This could be the reason why ecocritics sometimes feel a frustration with their work and would “rather be hiking.” Ecocriticism, with its prerequisite of anti-anthropocentrism is not well suited for an interpretation of Abbey’s work because the aesthetic quality of his work stems from his very unwillingness to give up his human perspective. Abbey’s “dark side” of anthropocentrism would either have to be ignored or explained away. What is needed instead is a position that both accepts the necessarily anthropocentric and constructed character of human representation and a position that somehow acknowledges the interference of an external world with that representation, in other words, a theoretical middle ground.

### 1.5 Theoretical considerations 2: Constructivism and realism

For an interpretation of Abbey’s work, it is crucial to analyze his conceptualizations of nature. Today there are two common critical approaches to nature writing, one is ecocriticism, the other is postmodern constructivism in its various forms, such as poststructuralism; here these forms will be subsumed under “postmodern criticism.” Postmodern criticism sees nature as a cultural construct. This approach has a limited use for the interpretation of Abbey’s work because Abbey’s main theme is the clash between individual and cultural constructs on the one hand and a material reality outside of language on the other. At environmental literature conferences one can observe postmodern critics clashing with the realist “just look out of the window” argument from ecocritics who claim that “you cannot construct nature” (Naess 1995). Ecocriticism, on the other hand, is born out of a realistic perception of nature; this approach is troubled by the fact that nature is partially culturally constructed. For example, the starkly different descriptions of New England nature in Henry David Thoreau and Mary Rowlandson are based on cultural differences, not natural ones. Postmodern critics find the realist position of ecocriticism naïve, especially since ecocritics do not perceive the authoritarian pitfalls in an assumed natural order. Some critics (e.g. Campbell 1996) have tried to identify a middle ground between postmodern constructivism and ecocritical realism.



Both approaches have limitations for an analysis of Abbey's work. The holistic approach of ecocriticism leans towards a preconception of a benevolent nature. An ecocritical analysis of Abbey would show to which degree the author follows these preconceptions and to which degree his work helps to integrate humanity and nature. Whereas some authors such as Gary Snyder fall within the conceptual framework of ecocriticism, other authors who see nature as indifferent and who stress human distinction (such as Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky*) are ignored. Abbey's writing, despite his personal involvement in the environmental movement, is closer to Bowles' than to Snyder's. Postmodern criticism is better suited for an interpretation of Abbey's texts since it grasps the playful, anarchic, and often contradictory mode of Abbey's writing; it misses, however, the main aspect of his texts. The main theme in Abbey's writing is distinction, which includes the distinction between the individual and the external world. A critical method that treats external reality as a construction and does not allow any distinction between external reality and cultural/individual construction of meaning is ill suited for an analysis of Abbey's texts. Both postmodern criticism and ecocriticism have difficulties describing this distinction. Postmodern criticism is overtly monistic because it subsumes external reality under language. Ecocriticism is marked by a paradox. On the one hand its holism and aim to reintegrate humanity into nature speaks of a monist aim; on the other hand, as Dana Phillips points out, it operates with an exaggerated dualism of humanity and nature, seeing human culture as antithetical to nature.

An alternative to the monist forms of criticism may be found in the systemic models of the sociologists Norbert Elias and Dean MacCannell. In his article "Über die Natur" Elias develops a model where he distinguishes between external reality, knowledge, and the subject. He explains that knowledge, since it has been part of the survival strategy of the human species, has to be "reality congruent" to some degree.<sup>8</sup> Gaps in knowledge are filled in with myths and fantasies. The idea of reality congruence is not a postmodern position because external reality is not constructed and knowledge has to correspond to external reality to some degree. Many postmodernist thinkers seem to be caught in a skeptical

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Rorty defines a similar connection between humanity's biological heritage and reality congruence: "From a Darwinian point of view, there is simply no way to give sense to the idea of our minds or our language as systematically out of phase with what lies beyond our skins" (quoted in Phillips 2003, 145). Phillips claims that for many nature writers "the verbs *to be* and *to write* are reconciled" (2003, 136). However, the attempt to have unmediated access to nature is constantly undermined, not only by the inescapably cultural quality of writing but also by "the constraints imposed upon us, ironically enough, by our relation to nature and by our own natures as one sort of animal among myriad others" (Phillips 2003, 219).

either-or-thinking; Phillips defines such a skeptic: “he confuses the absence of complete certainty with the presence of complete uncertainty” (2003, 93). Elias’ idea of reality congruence, however, shows that it is possible to combine a constructivist position with a degree of epistemological stability.

Elias’ model is not realist because reality congruence is not the same as representation. In regard to reality congruence Elias does not speak about “truth” but about different degrees of reality congruence, which he also calls “object adequacy.” Reality congruence is the basis for knowledge and also for science. Crucial for this model is a subject-object relationship: “In cognition theories, the subject-object relationship forms an invariable universal [whereas] reality congruence is variable” (1986, 469, my translation). Elias’ position could be called dualist in the sense of an epistemological dualism. The advantage of this position is that it is able to combine both external reality and cultural construction without having to find a middle ground between the two. For an analysis of Abbey’s texts this epistemological dualism is important for understanding the theme of distinction. The distinction between a subjective and an objective reality is seen as counterproductive by ecocriticism and is underestimated as mere play of signifiers by postmodern criticism.

Knowledge about the external world (both reality-congruent and mythical knowledge) is synthesized into larger complexes. The highest degree of synthesis is represented through the idea of “nature.” Postmodern criticism is right to see nature as culturally constructed, but it does not acknowledge the historical perspective of a nature formed through a reality-congruent interaction with an external reality. A model that distinguishes between external reality and nature (=knowledge) is able to explain an apparent paradox in Abbey’s texts. Whereas Abbey describes the external world as a bedrock of reality, notions of nature are highly variable and depend on individual interests. Not only culturally pre-defined or scientific knowledge goes into the process of synthesis, also more variable individual factors define the knowledge of a subject.

Elias points at the phenomenon that in developed cultures the share of reality congruence in knowledge is growing at the expense of myth and fantasy. At the same time, however, a cultural amnesia occurs in “the common view that it is easy to experience the world as ‘nature.’” Elias states that “it appears to be simply ‘reasonable’ to combine stars and mountains, earthquakes, apple trees and roses, as well as fish and flies and many other

things that are all very different with the help of one superordinate term, nature, and to perceive them accordingly” (1986, 472, my translation). The term cultural amnesia means that the synthesizing of the term nature is forgotten, and the knowledge that goes into it is not seen anymore. Elias furthermore claims that terms with a high degree of synthesis have the tendency to be perceived as static rather than dynamic. In language, this reduction can be seen in the difference between the terms “nature” and “universe.” Whereas the universe is perceived as dynamic and changing, nature is seen as ordered and static (Elias 1986, 478). Whereas the universe is associated with entropy, nature is a source of negentropy. One aspect of Abbey’s texts is that he tries to bring the dynamics of the universe back into nature.

According to Elias there is a duality in the concept of nature. On the one hand the term is an expression for synthesized knowledge with a high degree of reality congruence. On the other hand, however, the term expresses personal human wishes and needs and is a “symbol of an affective engagement” (1986, 473, my translation). A problem can arise when engagement and affection invade the cognitive functions of the term (Elias 1986, 479). The difference between the biological discipline of ecology and the philosophy of Deep Ecology is an example of the difference between an affective and a cognitive function of the same term. Abbey’s writing is marked by shifting between an affectively engaged and a cognitive concept of nature.

Elias defines nature as knowledge about an external reality. In Abbey’s work it can be seen that different forms of knowledge, affective or cognitive, influence the perception of nature. However, nature in Abbey is more than a form of knowledge about the external world. The interaction between the subject and external reality, which is the basis for the construction of knowledge, is enacted in real spaces. Here too the monistic nature versus culture debate is fruitless. On the one hand natural spaces are different from civilized spaces, on the other they are cultural in the sense that they form a stage where different interests intersect (what David Mazel calls “intersection and interlocking of discourses” (2000, 21)), and where distinction and conflict—that between interests but also that between subjects and an external reality—can be experienced. For Abbey questions of social control versus individualism are important for his conceptualization of space. Abbey’s concept of natural space is best described with Michel Foucault’s term “heterotopia” (1986) which is defined as a space inside culture, but with different rules, for

example a psychiatric ward. Also, Abbey calls wilderness a “psychiatric refuge” (1976, 60) and thus confirms its cultural quality. The concept of “heterotopia” is discussed in the following sub-chapter.

When nature is referred to as a heterotopian space, this means that it contains elements of both external reality and knowledge. The perception of space being outside civilization, its role in a political discourse, and the idea of wilderness are examples of synthetic knowledge (cognitive and affective) of a heterotopian natural space. The question is not whether natural spaces have cultural signification or not (they have), the question is what they signify, and particularly to which degree this signification is pre-determined. It should be noted that in an application of Elias’s model the term “natural space” gains a counter-intuitive meaning. What is natural about a space is actually cultural, namely knowledge. “Space,” on the other hand, refers to an interaction with unstructured external reality. For an analysis of Abbey’s texts, the distinction between the natural (i.e. cultural) aspect of a natural space and its unstructured aspect of external reality is crucial. The unstructuredness of space can be culturally translated into an openness of signification. The question of how open (or heterotopian) a space is is not determined by its distance from a city, its history of human use, or the health of its ecosystem. Instead it is the lack of control and the lesser degree of structuredness that are important (an example of a thoroughly structured and controlled space would be Disneyland). The advantage in using Foucault’s idea of heterotopia lies in the fact that it allows us to distinguish between different degrees of control and structure.

For a critical stance that is inspired by Elias, non-identity between a subject and the external world is vital. The categories external world, knowledge, and subject influence each other constantly as knowledge is modified both through subjective interests and through its congruence with an external reality. Subjects are not just observers of an external reality, they are changed through it; on the other hand also the external world is changed through subjective interests, mediated by knowledge. This change of external reality is the main concern of environmentalism. Elias’s model operates within the category of an external reality that both modifies human knowledge through reality congruence and is modified by it. The sharp distinction between nature and culture, that Wittgenstein observes, becomes blurred. Abbey often describes the interaction of a subject with external reality as a learning process and sees himself as an educator. Furthermore, external reality

can be modified through individual interests and knowledge. This implies that both development and preservation of land are modifications of an external reality.

Dean MacCannell presents a structuralist model for analyzing the experience of tourists that shares its structure with Elias's model and can be adapted for the analysis of nature. MacCannell distinguishes three parts in the process of signification of a tourist attraction, that of the subject (the tourist), the sight (the physical object or attraction), and the marker (the individual and cultural information about the sight, for example as found in a travel guide or also the name of a sight). A sight is never experienced without a marker. An example of MacCannell's model would be a subject (tourist) who travels to Paris, a sight in the terminology of MacCannell. Before the trip he or she already has a mental image of the city and of the attractions such as the Eiffel tower. This knowledge is called marker, and it is both cultural (as in the travel guide) and individual (as the image of the tourist). When the tourist actually sees the city and the tower, the marker is compared to the sight, and reactions to that comparison may range from disappointment to exhilaration. A new individual marker is formed that now contains both the previously gained knowledge and the personal experience; in the words of MacCannell, [s]ightseers have the capacity to recognize sights by transforming them into one of their markers" (1999, 123). Even though the sights, specific objects such as the Eiffel tower or whole countries such as Switzerland, are parts of an external reality and thus relatively static, markers are dynamic and are formed both culturally and individually through an interaction with the material reality of a sight. Nevertheless it is possible that markers have influence on the material reality of a sight through a process called sight transformation. MacCannell defines an extreme case of sight transformation as sight obliteration, when a touristic sight is destroyed or fundamentally altered through touristic activity.

Abbey's books can function as markers. When I read *Desert Solitaire* for the first time fifteen years ago studying in the for me largely unknown Southwest, I marked the pages with "L" or "T," which referred to Abbey's information about literature and touristic sights that I found interesting; in other words, I read the book as a travel and literary guide. Apart from finding pre-defined sights, the book is furthermore a guide to finding one's own sights. Abbey educates his readers both through the markers in his books and through the invitation to explore and create individual markers and sights. Abbey's essay "Rocks" is such a marker; in the essay he first lists the different rocks one can find in the desert "[i]f

you look hard enough and long enough” (1992a, 60-61), then provides the location, “the dismal clay hills along Salt Creek,” and information about how to find the rocks and gems: “You may find a geode: a lump of sandstone the size and shape of an ostrich egg [...] slice it through with a diamond wheel and you will find inside a glittering treasure trove of crystals,” and also how to behave in the natural space: “you are welcome to look, to pick up and examine but not to remove” (1992a, 61). Abbey’s concern is the openness of signification that allows these individual acts of creation of markers. Although markers pre-structure tourist experiences, they do not determine it: the creation and transformation of markers is a dynamic process, and Abbey both describes his own marking and invites his readers to take an active role in it.

Elias and MacCannell’s models have room for both external reality and cultural construction. The elements do not exist independently but transform each other. Without marker/knowledge there is no experience, just unstructured external reality. However, external reality can interact with the subject, and this interaction creates knowledge. Abbey’s texts follow this pattern of knowledge construction. During his excursions he both exposes his previous knowledge to external reality and sees that reality as an opportunity to gain new knowledge. This new knowledge (affective and conceptual) is transformed into new markers for his readers. Abbey’s main point as a writer is to educate his readers, i.e. to both educate them through the creation of markers/knowledge and to instruct them to create sights (to appropriate external reality) of their own rather than following pre-defined commercial tourist tracks. One of Abbey’s collections of essays is consequently called *Abbey’s Road: Take the Other*. In his texts the reader witnesses a dynamic creation of nature, not a description of static nature.

The realistic idea that nature can be experienced without previous knowledge is naïve. On the other hand, the idea that nature is a construct of language is deterministic. It has no room for the possibility that new meanings are created in a congruent way through contact with external reality. Sometimes external reality interacts in a direct and drastic way with constructions of it, as in Jack London’s short story “To Build a Fire.” The nameless character is traveling in the extreme cold of the Alaskan winter, gets his feet wet, and fails to build a fire. His remaining hope of staying warm by running clashes with reality: “His theory of running until he reached camp and the boys had one flaw in it: he lacked the endurance” (London in Burrell and Cerf 1953, Vol. II, 31). Elias’s and MacCannell’s

models are helpful because they allow an interaction between the individual and an external reality (or sight) and because they distinguish between external reality and knowledge. Nature is the result of knowledge synthesis. In a more particular sense nature is perceived as a space or a sight where different interests intersect. These models with their subject-object distinction are helpful to understand the seeming paradox between the notion of a stable external world and the dramatically shifting perceptions of nature in Abbey. The text where he most clearly links affective knowledge to his description of natural space is the novel *Black Sun*.

The three elements of the models (in the respective terminologies of Elias and MacCannell), external reality/sight, knowledge/marker and subject influence each other. The experience of external reality or a sight creates knowledge, and knowledge/markers are needed for experience. External reality is transformed through subjects with the help of reality-congruent knowledge. Abbey's desert can be described with this model: he experiences external reality through previous knowledge but also exposes himself to a partially unstructured reality. This exposure creates new knowledge, which, in the form of published texts, forms new markers. The new markers are positioned in a struggle of how to modify (develop or preserve) external reality.

Peter Quigley holds what I would see as a moderate postmodern view of nature: "nature, and the world that is ours every day, is linguistic, and, in addition, limited to that language. This situation does not make the world immaterial; it does not make it so plural that one cannot function; it is not nihilism. Further, it does not prevent the experience of change, astonishment and wonder" (1999, 196). Quigley is aware of the problem that postmodern discourse often seems to negate the existence of a material world. On the one hand, there is no unmediated access to an external reality, on the other, there must be a space for that reality to interact with language. William Cronon also sees the need to account for both cultural construction and external reality. He states that, on the one hand, environmentalists have to be convinced about the constructedness of nature, and "[o]n the other hand, we need no less to persuade humanists and postmodernists that although ideas of nature may be projected ideas of men and women, the world onto which we project those ideas is by no means entirely of our own making: there is more to the world than just words" (1996, 458). I agree with Quigley and Cronon about the impossibility of unmediated access to an external reality. However, I think that just accepting the existence of an external reality is

not enough; one must somehow account for an interaction between that reality and words, otherwise the acceptance of that reality is just lip service.

N. Katherine Hayles argues that one form of interaction between external reality and knowledge is the biological basis of the human brain. She refers to the neurobiologist Humberto Maturana for whom “perception is not fundamentally representational” because the external world only has “a triggering role in the release of the internally-determined activity of the nervous system” (1996, 414). The biologist Richard Dawkins makes a similar case when he states that animals live in a virtual world, a constructed reality: “Our constructed models of rocks and of trees are a part of the environment in which we animals live, no less than the real rocks and trees that they represent” (1998, 284). The virtual reality is also a shared reality, of interaction between organisms in a constructed world: “In the case of highly social animals like ourselves and our ancestors, our virtual worlds are, at least in part, group constructions. Especially since the invention of language and the rise of artifact and technology, our genes have had to survive in complex and changing worlds for which the most economical description is shared virtual reality” (Dawkins 1998, 285). These notions of an internal virtual reality go along well with moderate forms of postmodern constructivism although some may see them as biological determinism. On the other hand, it is ironic that some forms of biocentric realism are based on a sharp distinction between culture and nature that seems to have forgotten the biological roots of brain and culture.

Whereas one way of accounting for an external reality is to accept its role in the creation of the biological basis of perception and culture, another one is to account for the processes that shape knowledge through exposure to external reality. The models of Elias and MacCannell are able to account for the interaction between the constructed internal virtual reality or knowledge and an external reality. On the one hand there is no way to find a shortcut to an external reality that precedes knowledge. Some nature writers seem to believe in this shortcut, if only knowledge is switched off or dimmed temporarily. On the other hand, and this is where postmodernists may not agree, the exposure of knowledge to external reality will privilege some constructions of reality and negate others. This is what Elias means with reality congruence; it is not the case that external reality is *represented* in knowledge, but it will, when exposed to knowledge, react in congruent and predictable ways. External reality never constructs a model of itself in the sphere of knowledge, but it



interacts with knowledge, it affirms, negates, surprises, and challenges knowledge. External reality is not a firm ground, it is, what Quigley calls a “dangerous space.”

External reality is dangerous because knowledge is constantly exposed. This happens constantly in daily life, in an organized form in science, and, as MacCannell shows, in tourism. It is the very essence of the touristic experience to expose one’s knowledge about a place to its material external reality. Two aspects of the touristic exposure of knowledge (marker) to external reality (sight) are relevant for the discussion of the status of nature in Abbey. First, Abbey does more than expose the marker to the sight: he describes his own making of markers and educates readers to create their own markers. Abbey’s literary creativity is geared towards an appropriation of sights. This is the reason why he prefers relatively unmarked spaces and sees his writing as a crusade to maintain the openness of signification of his described sights. Second, exposure of markers to sights, the creation of one’s own markers, or the experience of openness in signification are enacted in real spaces. These spaces exist inside a culture but in a creative tension to other cultural spaces.

### 1.6 The concept of heterotopia

When discussing the status of nature in modern society, MacCannell encounters a dilemma:

We like to think of nature and other societies as being outside of historical time and beyond the boundaries of our own cultural experience. In this way, we can draw upon them as endless resources for social change and development. But this exteriority of nature is mainly fictional as modernity expands and draws every group, class, nation and nature itself into a single framework of relations. (1999, 77)

MacCannell defines modernity as relying both on the incorporation of originally alien elements and on the maintenance of their otherness. This otherness, as he claims, is staged and is a “single design of modern making” (1999, 84). However, the delegation of nature’s otherness to fiction comes with a price, namely the dissolution of human solidarity:

Powerful human passions evoked by nature were once available in a wide variety of situations: in the hunt, in the forest on the edge of the camp, at sea beyond the horizon. The human group could, and did, draw heavily on the unknown forest and sea for inspiration in the creation of social solidarity out of opposition of man and nature. (1999, 80-81)

Here MacCannell's model is overtly deterministic because nature is seen more as a structural differentiation of modernity's attractions than as a space of external reality. What is needed is an explanation that some spaces, even though inside a general framework of modernity, appear to be partially outside, in conflict or creative tension with, or marked by a different set of rules than other spaces. This partial exteriority appears to rely both on physical features and on cultural ones such as a lesser degree of control. Such spaces could even save the exteriority of nature and the resulting human solidarity. A way out of this dilemma of modern versus exterior space is the idea of "heterotopia."

The term "heterotopia" was first used in a lecture by Michel Foucault in 1967, but the text discussing the term, "Of Other Spaces," was not published until 1984. "Heterotopia" is a term that can be useful in the analysis of the status of natural spaces for a culture, as William Chaloupka and R. McGregor Cawley (1993) have suggested. Foucault retraces the history of space and identifies space as a main structuring device for society. He describes the hierarchical order of spaces in the Middle Ages and distinguishes between sacred and profane, rural and urban, and protected and exposed spaces. The hierarchical order of spaces was challenged by Galileo: "a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement, just as the stability of a thing was only its movement indefinitely slowed down" (1986, 22). But even though in modern society the notion of space is fluid, spatial order is still governed by opposites such as private and public, family and social, and work and leisure space.

The usefulness of Foucault's idea of heterotopia lies in the fact that the term allows us to go beyond the nature-culture dichotomy without assigning the same cultural value to all spaces. Foucault explains that certain sites "have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect" (1986, 23). It is important to note that these spaces, even though they may be in opposition to a social order, exist inside a cultural framework: they are, to use John Calvin's phrase, distinct but not separate from culture. Foucault distinguishes two types of sites, utopias and heterotopias. Utopias are "sites with no real space" that "have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society" (1986, 23). In contrast to utopias, heterotopias are real spaces, "places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all

the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (1986, 24). Foucault discusses a number of principles governing these spaces.

The two main functions of heterotopias are to allow crisis and deviation. Heterotopias of crisis are spaces for “individuals who are, in relation to society [...] in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.” Heterotopias of crisis are disappearing from modern society but can still be found in institutions such as boarding schools, or the honeymoon trip which Foucault explains thus: “The young woman’s deflowering could take place ‘nowhere’ and, at the moment of its occurrence the train or honeymoon hotel was indeed the place of this nowhere” (1986, 24). A recent illustration of this “nowhere” is found in the film “Brokeback Mountain:” Homosexual love is impossible in the male-dominated cowboy culture of the American West and could even be dangerous due to the hostile reactions it causes. However, in the natural space of Brokeback Mountain, “out there in the middle of nowhere,” it is possible for the characters to escape that society and to live, if only temporarily, according to their sexual inclination.

Examples of heterotopias of deviation are institutions such as psychiatric hospitals and prisons. There are hybrids of the two forms, such as the retirement homes because “after all, old age is a crisis, but it is also a deviation since in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation” (1986, 24). Spaces in the work of Abbey can have these two qualities, crisis and deviation. One manifestation of crisis is release, which is a recurrent theme in Abbey and also an important motivation behind touristic use of natural spaces. Especially in *Hayduke Lives!* release in heterotopian spaces of crisis is an important aspect. A borderline case between crisis and deviation is depicted in the novel *Black Sun*, where the wilderness functions as a psychiatric institution. The desert in Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire* is a case of a heterotopia of deviation. Working as a part time park ranger was for Abbey a way to break out of the cultural mainstream of the 1960s where voluntary poverty would have been a social deviation.

There is a variant of the heterotopia of deviance, and that is Abbey’s idea that wilderness spaces could become the base of resistance in case democracy fails. Even though one can question the practicability of this idea, it demonstrates Abbey’s view of nature as a space

that is neither outside culture nor fully controlled by it either.<sup>9</sup> The space can be used even for a conflict inside that culture. Natural spaces, in other words, are not a measure of whether a culture allows us to get out of it or not, they are a measure of how much openness a culture allows inside itself. In extreme cases this openness can manifest itself as resistance, but it is more likely that what is provided in that space are different perspectives in a space where less control is felt. The English poet Jeremy Hooker (1998) calls the heterotopian perspective provided by the nature of the English countryside during his childhood “ditch vision.” Here it becomes clear that natural spaces do not necessarily have to be large wilderness areas, they could even exist inside a city, and that fields, when viewed from ditches, can appear to be endless. What is important about these spaces is not their extension but the perceived difference of social control and the possibility for alternative perspectives, in other words their openness for signification and individual appropriation.

An illustration of the heterotopian ditch vision of childhood is Pam Houston’s short story “I Was a Captain in Colonel Bob’s Army.” Houston recalls her childhood when, “[o]ne weekend a summer, for no other reason than because he liked to, Colonel Bob Miller took all the kids from my Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, neighborhood to a place called Apache Gulch” (1999, 117). The children were told that they were traveling “out west,” crossing the Mississippi, crossing dangerous Indian territory (where they had to hide under a blanket on the back of the truck), and finally came to a wilderness camp. The children experience an exciting weekend, with bravery tests, where “the woods were a serious place that demanded my utmost concentration” (1999, 118). Houston has fond memories of the trip because “someone [was] taking me seriously enough to teach me something real, the adrenaline racing through me, the chance to make someone I cared about proud” (1999, 118). Only later Houston learns about the real location of her childhood wilderness:

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<sup>9</sup> Whereas in a North American context the idea of nature as a space of resistance sounds outmoded with its connotations of frontier, last stands, and survivalist camps, in a Latin American context the idea of resistance in natural spaces is alive. Today there are guerilla movements in several countries, for example Colombia, and also the decisive phase of the Cuban revolution was fought in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra. Already in the 1940s the young student Fidel Castro explored the Pinares de Mayarí in Eastern Cuba and understood that nature at this place could become “an ally in a battle, be converted into a formidable force, and that the forest could be a combat weapon” (Jesús 2004, 21, my translation). Ernesto “Che” Guevara participated in the later battle and describes how the “labyrinths of the Sierra Maestra” (Guevara 1963, 99) became a space of resistance. The landscape provided a refuge from the initially superior forces of the government: “We always lived in the mountain groves, only occasionally and surprisingly we descended upon a group of houses, some of us slept in them, but the majority of us remained protected by the groves and stayed under the roof of the trees during the day” (Guevara 1963, 70, my translation).

“Apache Gulch, as I now know, had another name: Monocay Park, City of Bethlehem. Wider than a real city park because Bethlehem wasn’t a real city, the park filled the small canyon that Monocay Creek cut alongside the town” (1999, 121). Houston realizes that “‘going out west’ only meant the west side of town” (1999, 121). Although the park is developed with soccer fields and jogging tracks, “there was also a several-acre area left wild and overgrown” (1999, 122). Later Houston describes how Colonel Bob had to abandon his trips to Apache Gulch, not because the overgrown areas were destroyed, but because the experience of wildness has become impossible: “It seems like I was nine or ten when Bethlehem got its first skyscraper, a thirteen story building [...]. There wasn’t a place in town from which you couldn’t see that building, not even down in the canyon, not even under the thick canopy of trees in Apache Gulch” (1999, 122-123). The skyscraper had destroyed the heterotopian quality of the city park for the children, in particular its openness for signification: with the skyscraper in place a distance to civilization could no longer be experienced, and Colonel Bob was unable to create a wilderness of his own.

Houston here describes how the character of children is formed through exposure to natural spaces.<sup>10</sup> The interaction of natural spaces and the human mind could be described in the terms of MacCannell, as the re-formation of a marker through exposure to external reality, or in the terminology of Elias as reality correspondence. As a child Houston has very diffuse markers of the “West “ of Indians, and the trips of Colonel Bob provide her with a more concrete marker, a marker that is nevertheless characterized by adventure, danger, and openness of signification. Only later she has another reality update of her markers, in which they lose their heterotopian quality of open signification. The act of reality correspondence or update of the markers is valuable as a cultural experience because it involves the human subject, particularly if the space of external reality has heterotopian qualities.

The theme of character formation in a heterotopian space of deviation is also described by Ernesto “Che” Guevara in his memories of the Cuban revolutionary war in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra. Life in the Sierra proved to be a true testing ground for the new guerilla forces. After landing in Cuba, the troops “lost almost all of their equipment and walked unending hours through the seawater swamps with new boots, which provoked

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<sup>10</sup> Improvement through nature is the underlying motivation of the Norwegian tradition of “friluftsliv” (“open air life”) and the compulsory school subject of “utefag” (“outdoor subject”).

ulcerations of the feet of almost the entire troop” (Guevara 1963, 7, my translation). Guevara describes how new recruits are terrified by the first combat actions and make vital mistakes such as abandoning food. But with time the soldiers learn how to live in nature, how to cook economically, how to pack their backpacks, and how to walk in the Sierra (Guevara 1963, 53). After the initial challenges they learn to “get used to the dirt, the lack of water, food, roof, and security” (Guevara 1963, 30, my translation) and form a cohesive group. It is the struggle, both against the enemy and the adversities of nature that is the basis for human solidarity. Guevara and Houston demonstrate that the experience of heterotopian spaces can be communal experiences and a basis for human solidarity. MacCannell’s above mentioned concern that human solidarity is lost if the theme of a common struggle against a hostile nature is lost is correct only insofar as the frontiers on this planet are gone; in heterotopian spaces, however, cultures can still enact struggles that become a common cultural ground.

One of the qualities of heterotopian spaces is that they are “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986, 25). Despite its limited size, the “traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world.” Much of contemporary nature writing seeks to attain this garden, which is “the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world,” a place of harmony and perfection of natural order. According to Foucault, carpets were originally reproductions of gardens: “the garden is a rug onto which the whole world comes to enact its symbolic perfection” (1986, 25). It can be argued that nature writing attempts to reproduce the carpet, the symbolic representation of an assumed natural perfect order. Perfection and harmony are in high esteem in pastoral forms of Nature Writing, but Abbey does not, metaphorically speaking, try to weave a carpet. Instead, he is torn between primitivist wilderness and the industrialized city but does not try to find a compromise in form of a middle landscape. Abbey knows that there is no way back into a rural past; what he wants instead is “the best of both worlds,” preserving both cities and wild areas. But Abbey wants more than a compromise that preserves the two types of landscape; he wants to preserve the cultural tension between them. He does not look for harmony or homogenization and also finds wild elements in the city and urban elements in the wilderness. What he wants for America is a salad bowl of spaces, not the melting pot of a pastoral middle landscape.

Another quality of heterotopian spaces is that they can structure time. The limited space of a museum is an expression of “the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes” (Foucault 1986, 26). A different space is the space of the festival such as fairgrounds which are “marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, [...] and so forth” (1986, 26). A more recent development is the vacation village “such as those Polynesian villages that offer a compact three weeks of primitive and eternal nudity to the inhabitants of the cities” (1986, 26). A vacation experience combines the strict timing of the festival with the apparent timelessness of the museum. Although trips into nature are limited in time, they generate the impression of connecting to the eternal cycles of nature.

A further principle of heterotopian spaces is that they entail a system of openings and exclusions. Foucault presents the example of traditional Brazilian country houses. Guests who come to these houses will use the main entrance and will be able to use the house. However, “the entry door did not lead into the central room where the family lived, and every individual traveler who came by had the right to this door, to enter into the bedroom and to sleep there for a night.” The guests using this door were not invited guests or close friends, as these were permitted to use another entrance. This system of opening and exclusion can be applied to the administration of the National Parks. A park can appear to be open but still hide its most precious parts. A park that is open for motorized visitation only shows a guest room to the traveler; in order to be invited to the more interesting space, knowledge and familiarity are necessary. Especially in *Desert Solitaire* Abbey describes the deception that is entailed in the apparent opening of National Parks to motorized tourists.

The last characteristic of heterotopian spaces is that they “have a function in relation to all the space that remains.” Foucault describes two opposed functions:

Either their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory (perhaps that is the role that was played by those famous brothels of which we are now deprived). Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as our is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. (1986, 26)

Foucault's analysis can be used to explain the difference between pastoral Nature Writing and Abbey's existential conceptualization of nature. A Nature Writer sees nature as the well ordered other in contrast to the messy disorder of cultural spaces. For a writer who tends to perceive nature in an existential mode such as Abbey, however, natural spaces intensify the notion of human distinction and of the absence of meaning. Pastoral perceptions of natural spaces share similarities with the Puritan colonies that also were "absolutely perfect other places" (1986, 27). Ironically, despite the search for alternative spirituality, at the basis of the pastoral perception of nature lies the wish for Puritan perfection. Rather than evicting God from nature (as Calvin did), the new Puritans declare nature itself divine and perfect. Abbey's nature, on the other hand, is more like Foucault's brothel, exposing human illusions.

For Foucault the perfect example of a heterotopian space is the boat, "a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea" (1986, 27). The boat is also an illustration of the idea that heterotopias do not have a static signification but depend on individual location. For someone living in the city, a natural space can be a heterotopia, as for someone living in a rural area the city is a space into which dreams are projected. In Abbey's picaresque novel *Fool's Progress* the protagonist sets off to his final journey to retrace the stations of his life, without finding any essence or place where he belongs. It is the very placelessness that sets Abbey apart from a genre that fetishizes place and immobility. For Phillips the picaro is defined by "his fluid sense of place and by his savoir-faire: his sensibility is chameleonic and his ethics are situational" (2003, 153). Placelessness and mobility connect Galileo's universe with the modern world and are also a prerequisite for freedom, according to Foucault: "In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police takes the place of pirates" (1986, 27). Abbey frequently describes boat trips in the desert. On the trip described in his essay "Down the river with Henry Thoreau" he quotes Thoreau's view of rivers: "A river is superior to a lake, [...], in its liberating influence. It has motion and indefinite length. [...] River towns are winged towns" (Thoreau quoted in Abbey 1991b, 33). Abbey is not looking at rivers, he is moving on them, and through this movement they become placeless places.



One of the best illustrations of a heterotopian space is found in Ben Corbett's book on contemporary Cuban society. He describes Havana sea point, outside of Havana:

On certain nights, looking north from the Havana sea point, you can see the sky illuminated a faint violet from the lights of Miami, a little over a hundred miles, but worlds away. There is something calming about the warm breeze at the point, the ghostlike hulls of ocean freighters floating into the harbor, the lighthouse beacon, the rhythm of foam splashing against the eroded mortar below. The point is a sanctuary, one of the sacred places to contemplate life. Marriages are proposed there, plots to flee the island are whispered, songs are written, the regime is debated, and the future is discussed. From the shadows, a flame bursts behind a cupped hand as a cigarette is lit. Down in the filthy coral baths, a *bruja* drifts along and kneels to the water, chanting her prayer to the gods, soon throwing a meager offering of aluminum centavos into the hungry waves. She finishes the ritual and climbs slowly up the crumbling steps, passing a few young people who are heading down below the wall, out of sight from the police, where they'll smoke a joint, have sex for lack of privacy at home, or, since there's nothing else to do, pass a bottle of rum and dream. (2004, 4)

This description contains all the relevant elements of heterotopia. The described space is an "other" space that exists both inside the city and offers a temporary relief from it. Whether the space is natural or not is irrelevant; what is important is the creative tension that exists between ordinary cultural spaces and heterotopian spaces. It is public and not developed for commercial use. There is an aesthetic dimension, as the openness of the sea attracts people. The space is also a social space, meaning that the presence of others is part of the attraction. Some of the people would fall in the category of what Foucault calls "deviant," for example the *bruja* (witch). Many of the behaviors in the space are deviant, for example the discussions of the regime or the smoking of joints. There seems to be a relative safety from police control, probably due to the topography or due to tacit acceptance. A certain external reality (breeze, openness of the sea, closeness to the city, the alluring lights of Miami) creates markers in a cultural context. In this case the markers are heterotopian, meaning that there is an openness in signification, a place for deviance, creativity, and dreams, and relative absence of control. People do not go to this place to see a pre-defined sight, but find the attraction of the place in its low degree of marking and control.

Abbey's desert is a space where the different spheres of existence, external nature and knowledge, intersect: "In the desert one comes in direct confrontation with the bones of existence, the bare incomprehensible absolute *is-ness* of being. Like a temporary rebirth of childhood, when all was new and wonderful" (1994, 185). The experience of the

heterotopian space is temporal, and it entails the exposure of culturally constructed knowledge with an unstructured external reality:

Indoors and Outdoors: The human and the non-human. Privacy and space. The manmade and the natural. All that is the product and projection of man and his mind vs. all that precedes, underlies and surrounds man and his mind. To go truly Outdoors is to escape for a while the narrow limits of previous human experience (the cultural apparatus) and to enter a world that is new, different, much greater, and of course largely incomprehensible. A church, e.g., is a place in which to *hide* from the real world. That's why they are so comforting. (1994, 185, emphasis Abbey's)

The experience of relief or crisis in the desert is temporary and is marked by a questioning of cultural knowledge through exposure to external reality. Both church and desert are heterotopian spaces that create a certain cultural contrast. Unlike a church, however, the desert is a space of exposure to an external reality.

Also in his essay "Freedom and Wilderness, Wilderness and Freedom" Abbey describes the desert as a heterotopian space: "What makes life in our cities at once still tolerable, exciting, and stimulating is the existence of an alternative option, whether exercised or not, [...] of a radically different mode of being *out there*, in the forests, on the lakes and rivers, in the deserts, up in the mountains" (1991c, 229, emphasis Abbey's). Abbey realizes that these natural spaces are created by culture, but they nevertheless create an impression of distance and tension:

The boundary around a wilderness area may well be an artificial, self-imposed, sophisticated construction, but once inside that line you discover the artificiality beginning to drop away; and the deeper you go, the longer you stay, the more interesting things get—sometimes fatally interesting. (1991c, 230)

Danger and death are important for Abbey's heterotopian spaces because they indicate an exposure to external reality; danger also means that there is a relative lack of social control in the space, which defines it as heterotopian. A heterotopian space does not have to be a natural space: "Wilderness is and should be a place where, as in Central Park, New York City, you have a fair chance of being mugged and buggered by a shaggy fellow in a fur coat—one of Pooh Bear's big brothers" (1991c, 230).<sup>11</sup> Heterotopian spaces can serve as

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<sup>11</sup> Abbey here refers to the experience of a city park as wilderness. In his book *The Experience of Place* (1990) Tony Hiss discusses how city parks should be designed to foster a sense of being in undisturbed nature (citing Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park as a prime example). Furthermore he points out that even portions of city parks can in a very real sense be turned into wilderness areas: "The [New York] city Parks Department got into the wilderness business itself, setting up a new Natural Resources Group to develop

spaces of crisis. Abbey explains why he goes on a solitary river trip for a duration of ten days: “I preferred this kind of solitude not out of selfishness but out of generosity; in my sullen mood I was doing my fellow humans [...] a favor by going away” (1988, 94). Some of Abbey’s river trips are social, and he describes his fellow rafters:

They range in age from twelve to sixty-five, in river running experience from many trips on many rivers to none. It doesn’t matter; before this voyage is done we will become, as I have witnessed on every river journey yet, one anarchic but reasonably happy family. It seldom fails: there’s something about a progress down a river that brings out the best in anyone. Getting bored with your neuroses? Drop your analyst—drop him/her like a cold potato—and make tracks for the nearest river. (1988, 108)

These spaces do not exist outside of society but interact in different ways with it. The last example shows that heterotopian spaces can function in a similar way to psychiatric institutions, a function that is also a central element in the novel *Black Sun*.

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management plans for 7,000 acres of undisturbed woods, wetlands, meadows, and meandering streams inside dozens of city parks in the five boroughs” (1990, 195-196).

## 2. Abbey and the Imagery of “Mother Nature”

### 2.1 Gendering nature

Nature is often depicted in gendered terms, as the expression “Mother Nature” indicates. The gendering of nature is an old phenomenon and is found in Greek mythology (as for example the myth of the nymph Syrinx and the god Pan, see Abbey’s version of this myth in my discussion of the novel *Black Sun* below), the medieval association of women, witchcraft, and nature, an association later revived by the Puritans, the idea of the “virgin land” of the pioneer age, to the contemporary mystified ecology of Gaia. Due to the pervasiveness of the idea it is often found in nature writing and particularly in Nature Writing. It is not limited to it, as Leo Marx argues, but a device of pastoral literature in general: “Most important is the sense of the machine as a sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction. It invariably is associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape” (2000, 29). On first sight Abbey seems to use these stereotypes in his writing, as one of his main concerns is the protection of defenseless natural spaces from aggressive industrial development. However, I would argue that Abbey’s descriptions of nature are not prone to sexual stereotyping due to two reasons. First, Abbey sees nature an entity distinct not only from humanity but also from human categories such as gender. Second, Abbey’s existential conceptualization of nature does not reduce nature to life, a narrowing that otherwise facilitates the association of nature with women (as both give life). When Abbey sometimes uses sexual stereotyping of nature, as in his novel *Hayduke Lives!*, it is in highly exaggerated and ironic terms.<sup>12</sup>

The gendering of nature means to humanize it, and the reason for this phenomenon particularly in Nature Writing is the wish to assign human meaning and values to nature, values that are later seen as “intrinsic,” in a process that Elias calls “cultural amnesia.” Quigley discusses the creation of nature as a “better metaphor,” where the female is favored over the male, and the natural over the cultural. The problem here is not which metaphor is favored, female or male; according to Quigley, it is the reference to a pre-

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<sup>12</sup> Although he does not perceive nature in gendered terms, Abbey’s characters tend to be one-dimensional and stereotypical, particularly also in regard to sexual stereotypes.

ideological and extra-cultural essence. Instead of assigning a special status to a formerly marginalized entity, the system of marginalization should be questioned:

By fetishizing, or giving permanent ontological status to that which has been attacked by logocentric power, one runs the risk of repeating the transgressions of power. Thus, making references to mythical essences that serve as premises to establish a new and harmonious world may not be as effective as questioning the possibility and nature of knowledge. The history of attributing wonder and beauty to women, for instance, has proven to be a history of exploitation, not respect or self-determination. (1992, 300)

When some environmentalists favor the female aspect of nature, they can claim a moral victory for the nurturing over the exploiting, the spiritual over the rational, the harmonious over the aggressive—but this moral victory will result in cementing existing stereotypes rather than questioning their underlying cultural amnesia.

The pattern of reversing existing stereotypes, of assigning moral superiority to the “better metaphor” is not limited to nature and women. Children too experience a lack of power. In her article on the role of nature in children’s literature Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor states that

silent passivity highlights the violation that is taking place, emphasizing Nature’s inability to protect itself [...] What is so interesting about this narrative strategy is that it may be appealing to a particular and unique aspect of a child’s experience—fear of superior power—for its *effectiveness*. That is, this device of letting Nature voice her fears of powerlessness may appeal to a child’s own need for nurturing and defense from what is dangerous in his/her environment [...] For if we regard “Mother Nature” as metaphorically female, then the inhabitants of that landscape are clearly Nature’s children.” (1996, 148, my emphasis)

This statement fits into the stereotypical pattern and there is no questioning of the child’s powerless status, to the contrary, defining children as passive is praised for its “effectiveness.” A consequence of the argument is that the child’s notion of a strong male humanity and a weak female nature is reinforced by reading well-meaning environmental children’s books. Wagner-Lawlor’s argument furthermore implies that the adult human sphere is seen as predominantly male whereas the world of children is female.

If women and children are unlikely to benefit from their conceptual equation with nature, the metaphor of the nurturing mother will not benefit nature either. In a discussion on a statement by James Lovelock and Sidney Epton’s on the Gaia thesis, Patrick Murphy states

that in the idea of Gaia, a version of biocentrism that sees the whole planet as one nurturing organism,

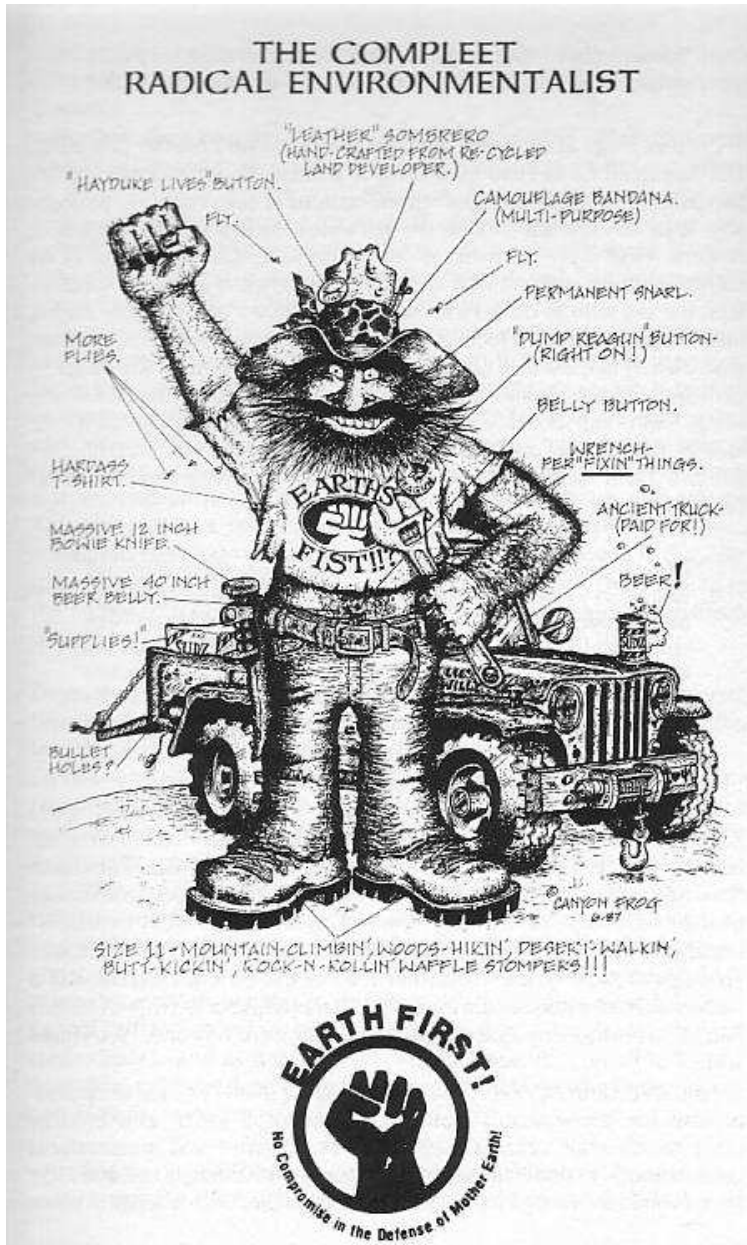
[M]an functions as the intellect and protector of his mother and mate; *he* ensures *her* survival [...] [The] purpose in providing such an analogy is to explain the relation of humanity and biosphere and thereby, in part, to counter anthropocentrism. In so doing, however, they unwittingly reinforce androcentrism by rendering the female side of the duality passive [...] Gaia [...] encourages stereotypes that reinforce the patriarchal thinking that has produced the very anthropocentrism they oppose [...] Gaia designates a female entity; designating an entity female in a patriarchal culture guarantees its subservient status. (1998, 157, emphasis Murphy's)

Although the idea of Gaia imagery seeks to establish a new paradigm for saving the planet, it has found this new paradigm in a reversal of patriarchy. In opposition to rationalism and destructive male power it has constructed spirituality and nurturing female passivity; although this political vision seems to be radically different, it operates with patriarchal stereotypes.

It can be asked how the “better metaphor” influences our perception and conceptualization of nature. A nature perceived as nurturing and life sustaining implies weakness and passivity and a need for protection. Although many environmentalists aim at reducing human influence, human beings execute nature's protection. Whereas the old patriarchal metaphor facilitated the violation of nature, the “lay of the land,” the new metaphor advocates the protection of defenseless Mother Nature by her son, the strong environmentalist. The biocentric quest paradoxically rests on the conceptual control of nature, its scaling down to an entity that is less powerful than humanity. Furthermore, by stressing the female qualities of nature, it reinforces the patriarchal notion of male dominance in the human sphere.

It is small wonder that a lot of macho-rhetoric has developed in the radical environmental scene. Joni Seager points at the fact that the radical environmental movements in the US are predominately male. The caricature below of a beer-drinking male activist shows how *Earth First!* activists see themselves. Note the exaggerated male characteristics of the environmentalist and the mentioning of “Mother Earth” in the logo (illustration from Seager 1993, 228). Note furthermore the “Hayduke Lives!” button that refers directly to Abbey. The jeep in the background refers to *The Monkeywrench Gang* where an old jeep was used by the activists. And the wrench carried by the caricatured activist has become a

symbol for both Abbey and radical environmentalism. Abbey also frequently mentions beer drinking, and the can of beer on the truck completes the image that could well be called a caricature of Abbey himself.



Earth First! was inspired by Abbey's work, and the caricature indicates that Abbey's work and persona are seen as integral parts of a male-dominated activist radical environmentalism. David Oates describes Abbey in a similar way: "Abbey is the father of monkeywrenching and EarthFirst!ing, after all; he's the beer drinking knucklehead who advocated resistance to all things civilized. 'No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth,' his eco-terrorizing offspring chant" (2003, 42). Even if this exaggerated image of

aggressive maleness characterizes an activist fringe section of the environmentalist movement, sexual stereotyping is also found in the mainstream of environmental literature.

There are conceptualizations of nature that are not stereotypically gendered, and that do not fit the idea of an inherent goodness and morality of nature, for example Douglas Kennedy's description of the inhuman quality of the Australian desert:

That was the real danger of the Outback: the way its emptiness heightened your creeping self-doubt. Forget all that crap you hear about scenic grandeur making all your insecurities appear insignificant. If anything, it amplifies every little fear, every tendency towards self-loathing. Because this terrain informs you: *you are nothing*. (1994, 37, emphasis Kennedy's)

Kennedy here depicts a nature that is not passive and threatened but is seen as an external reality that challenges human systems of meaning creation. His existential depiction of nature is not a reversal of "Mother Nature" imagery, it is different exactly because it does not perceive nature in either gendered or human terms; nature remains outside of the human sphere. Abbey's work is also marked by existential depictions of nature, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

The conceptual narrowing of nature to a passive and manageable entity not only confirms its status as a victim and commodity, it also narrows the cultural horizon. Something is lost in a concept of a weak nature and I will illustrate this point with a story: Some years ago I went on a cross-country ski trip in Lodalen, in southern Norway. I was on my way home, and since it was late April, there was no snow left in the deeper parts of the valley, and nature, showing the first signs of spring, was beautiful. The last five kilometers of the way were a walk on a dirt road through a beautiful valley. The road was new and led from the main road to a dozen cabins further up the valley. On closer inspection I saw the massive erosion that the construction had caused. This privately owned and publicly funded road for the sake of a few cabin owners had caused erosion and spoiled the valley. Having read Abbey, I thought about monkeywrenching, about how this road could be damaged, how the valley could be saved. On the far side of the valley rose a steep gray mountain with a brighter flank. This bright flank was a trace of an event that had happened in 1905: a part of the mountain had collapsed, fallen into an adjoining lake, and the resulting flood wave had killed about seventy people. This had been the largest natural catastrophe in Norway. Before my eyes were two acts of meaningless destruction and I was not so sure any longer

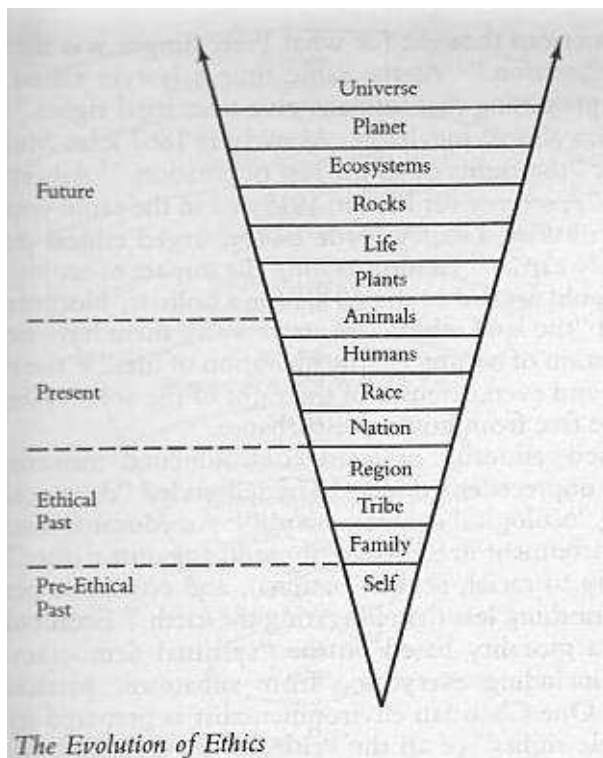


what exactly I had wanted to protect. The idea of a coherent nature became questionable. It seemed easier to defend nature than to define it. I am still convinced that it makes sense to oppose the building of roads in natural spaces or to favor certain uses of nature over others; it makes sense as long as one does not have ideas about fighting for nature or protecting one's mother. Fighting for "Mother Nature" is so questionable because it masks the intersecting and sometimes opposing human interests in natural spaces.

The question arises whether the conceptual limitation to a favorable nature does not imply an impoverishment of cultural experience, the impossibility of feeling the limitation of human existence. Neil Evernden points out the dilemma that "our actions on behalf of nature seem destined to disappoint, because the solutions called for in the response to our despair are animated by the ubiquitous project of global domestication" (1992, 120). This means that saving nature is another way of domesticating it—and the first step of the domestication is a conceptual narrowing. The underlying logic in this form of paradoxical domestication is what Norbert Elias describes as the cultural amnesia in the synthesis of the concept of nature. Nature is seen as static and stable rather than as a dynamic process, and its stability is a prerequisite for its protection. Abbey's concept of nature, on the other hand, is marked by a notion of distinction not from female nature but between the human and animated world where gender is a meaningful concept and an existential nature where it is not. The environmentalist notion of re-contextualizing humanity into nature (which by definition has to be good) is logically prone to sexual stereotyping since re-contextualization implies that the world into which humanity is integrated is not utterly inhuman.

## 2.2 The notion of the intrinsic rights of nature

Part of the conceptual humanization of nature originates in the notion that nature and natural entities have inherent rights, an idea advocated by Deep Ecology and biocentric strains of environmentalism. In his model of ethical extension of "natural" rights from humans to nature, Roderick Frazier Nash uses the image of a widening ethical circle (illustration: Nash 1989, 5):



The idea that nature has inherent rights is now a staple argument among environmentalists. In his 1972 article “Should Trees have Standing,” Christopher Stone proposes the idea that these inherent rights should be seen as legal rights. Several cases of this type have come to courts, and environmentalists have seen themselves as the legal representatives of swamps, beaches, trees, a National Monument, and a species (Stone 1985, 4).

For Nash there is an ongoing acknowledgement of “natural” rights by the elites. However, the concept of “inherent rights” is ahistorical and obfuscates the fact that these rights are the result of an historical struggle of marginalized human groups for these rights. The model starts out with self-interest and extends the liberal notion of “natural” rights towards living and nonliving entities. At the end of Nash’s circle is the universe. But even if humanity acknowledges the rights of the universe one day, how could the universe benefit from that? The whole notion is so absurd because it is impossible to press the entity universe into the weak/passive/nurturing role of the victim. It is furthermore absurd because, as Elias states, the term “universe” denotes the dynamic qualities of an external reality whereas “nature” refers to a static entity. Luc Ferry points at the logical inconsistencies of the Deep Ecology notion of inherent rights. First of all the question can be asked: “Aren’t the deep ecologists acting ‘anthropocentrically’ themselves when they claim to know best what is best for the natural environment” (1995, 131). Granting rights

to an entity presupposes that this entity is currently in need of these rights and would benefit from them; this presupposition, however, means that the notion of human superiority, including the notion of nature's passivity and human agency, is acknowledged tacitly. But apart from the obvious impossibility of a purely non-anthropocentric position, Ferry also points at the conceptual limitation of nature in the Deep Ecological discourse, where "everything that is hateful in nature is disregarded" (1995, 133). What is presupposed here is the "sacralization of a natural world harmony [which implies ] a metaphysical, even a mystical optimism for which we unfortunately have no justification" (1995, 133). As can be seen, there is nothing "natural" about natural rights, and the seemingly logical extension of these rights is grounded in an anthropocentrism of its own. This implies a conceptual scaling down of nature that also affects the aesthetic level. However, many writers, among them Abbey, conceptualize a nature that is not gendered and that is distinct from human reality.

### 3. The Existential Conceptualization of Nature in Abbey

#### 3.1 Introduction

Because Edward Abbey's fictional depictions of ecological sabotage inspired the founding of the activist group *Earth First!*, he is often understood as the quintessential radical environmentalist. Paul Watson claims that Abbey "drafted" him into radical environmentalism and sees his organization Sea Shepherds as "the navy of mother Earth and *Earth First!* the army" (Manes 1990, 111). Abbey's critics also often see him as a macho-style eco-warrior, a "crusty, take-no-guff curmudgeon" (Seager 1993, 226). In spite of the fact that Abbey indeed was "one of the crowd" (Manes 1990, 4), it can be argued that his relationship to radical environmentalism was an uneasy one. On the one hand he used the visibility of organizations such as *Earth First!*, on the other hand he was aware of their conceptual limitations. As discussed earlier, the notion of protecting nature implies a conceptualization of nature as weak and as an ethical ground. Therefore the image of an amoral and indifferent nature is seen as counterproductive by environmentalists; in a literary context, however, it produces an aesthetically interesting tension between the human observer and external nature. Abbey combines environmental engagement with the literary depiction of an existential nature that is marked by human distinction. His combination of environmental interest and outdoor enthusiasm with the literary depiction of an existential nature has a parallel in the Norwegian writer and philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe.

Because they want to see Abbey primarily as an environmentalist and because they see a pastoral or biocentric conceptualization of nature as a necessary ingredient of environmentalism, some critics tend to neglect Abbey's existential side. James McClintock sees Abbey as a late-romantic anti-modernist who offers a "positive vision" of biocentrism in an increasingly technocratic world (1994, xvi). McClintock claims that 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic ideas have resurfaced in contemporary environmental literature, and that there is "a new validity and authority conferred by the ecological sciences" (1994, 129). The new views "approach the mythic, and those who articulate them adopt prophetic stances," and the writers find, as McClintock argues using a phrase by Rachael Carson, "a measure of

hope, a ‘common thread’ of ‘meaning and significance’” (1994, 129). Furthermore McClintock argues that Abbey and other nature writers have integrated Thoreauvian veneration of nature and post-Darwinian ecology, which describes “a more benign nature kept stable through complex networks of interdependent organisms” (1994, 3). Jack Loeffler too sees Abbey as a biocentric writer:

Abbey loved the natural world, or wilderness [...] His refined sense of egalitarianism extended far beyond the realm of man to include all species of fauna and flora [...] He perceived everything to be part of the whole. [...] He came to fully realize that as wilderness is reduced by the hand of man, [...] biotic diversity is threatened, [...] and that Nature is seen simplistically as a reservoir of natural resources and not what it really is—a planetary biotic community. (1993, 47-48)

Loeffler’s Deep Ecological view assumes a goodness of the “whole” of nature, an interpretation which is haunted by the problem of evil—which is impossible to explain in a discourse where nature is good by definition (see Abbey’s view on the problem of evil in his criticism of Emerson’s concept of “Maya” above). Jacques Derrida identifies this conceptual exclusion in Rousseau: “[T]he negativity of evil will always have the form of supplementarity. Evil is exterior to nature, to what is by nature innocent and good” (1995, 145). The idea of extra-human goodness and of human evil has Christian origins. William Cronon notes the parallels between Deep Ecology and religion and points out that the idea of nature as a moral imperative is the product of the monotheistic Western culture. The spiritual qualities that were once ascribed to God are now transferred to a capitalized Nature (1996, 36). I think that McClintock is correct when he states that biocentrism is “Abbey’s brand of religious feeling” (1994, 74) inasmuch he identifies biocentrism with religion; placing Abbey into this tradition, however, is incorrect.

Whereas the biocentrism of Deep Ecology is popular among ecocritics, the existential mode is not. The ecocritic Don Scheese quotes Abbey: “Men come and go, cities rise and fall, whole civilizations appear and disappear—the earth remains, slightly modified. The earth remains, and the heartbreaking beauty where there are no hearts to break” (Abbey quoted in Scheese 1996b, 116). This quotation echoes the inhumanism of Jeffers and could be regarded as a typical example of Abbey’s existential mode. However, Scheese argues that Abbey “finds solace in the ultimate biocentric realization” (1996b, 116). It is difficult to see how Abbey’s quotation can be interpreted as biocentric because Abbey operates with a geological time frame here. Scheese goes on to interpret Abbey’s existential mode:

“Whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern whatsoever to the desert” (Abbey in Scheese 1996b, 117) and reads Abbey thus: “Abbey is drawn to the desert because of its stark indifference to human fate. This appreciation could come only from confidence in one’s own beliefs and an understanding of one’s place in the larger scheme of things” (1996b, 117). This statement is a *non sequitur*: it is not clear how indifference generates belief and how human insignificance generates a feeling of belonging to a larger scheme. This I would regard as a typical ecocritical misreading of Abbey, where his texts are forced into a biocentric interpretation. The underlying conceptual problem of this misreading is the synthesizing of different phenomena in the external world as “nature” and the derivation of human ethics from them.

Why is it so difficult to accept the existential mode? The reason is that some ecocritics are not only oblivious to the danger of the naturalistic fallacy but see the derivation of values from nature as a prerequisite for its protection. If human values are to be generated from nature, this nature has to be conceived as good. The depiction of an indifferent nature is seen as a threat because this nature appears to justify misanthropy, social Darwinism, or even fascism. However, if one assumes that the notion of human distinction underlies Abbey’s texts and that a description of one sphere remains limited to that sphere, then the naturalistic fallacy can be avoided. There may even be a sense of alleviation and liberation in such a depiction of nature because nature is freed of the need to “mean” something or to be a basis for ethics. If nature is seen as the product of a cognitive synthesis, it is possible to disentangle its components. Whereas the human sphere is the location of values and ethics, the non-human sphere is not. Due to affective engagement, values and also aesthetics can be transferred to non-human spheres (such as biological or geological ones), but this does not make them the source of such values/aesthetics.

An exclusively pastoral or biocentric conceptualization of nature narrows the range of possible meanings of the term and makes literary effects of ambiguity or paradox appear antithetical to the politics of environmentalism. The texts of Abbey are rich in these often contradictory significations. However, this does not fit into an environmental discourse that made Abbey the prototype of the defender of Mother Nature. Daniel G. Payne explains how Abbey’s ambiguity in signification conflicts with the politics of radical environmentalism:

[It is a paradox that] some of the same things that help to make [Abbey's] work so rich in a literary sense often serve to diminish its effectiveness as environmental rhetoric. While paradox and textual ambiguity certainly have their virtues, particularly where academicians and literary critics are concerned, in a rhetorical context they are usually counterproductive. (1996, 153)

Payne is right to note the potential conflict between environmentalism and aesthetics.

Whereas texts such as *The Monkey Wrench Gang* depict prototypical ecowarriors defending nature, other texts focus on the indifference of nature. In the course of making Abbey an environmental hero, the reception of his texts had to undergo a narrowing, for example in McClintock: "The essentials of Abbey's spiritual insight are that love, light, and joy are possible, despite the seductions of despair" (1994, 67). By calling elements of existential despair seductive, McClintock marginalizes these textual elements. Although McClintock admits that Abbey has a "darker side" (1994, xviii),

[Abbey and other nature writers] acknowledge dramatic conversions in their thinking, feeling, and behavior that turned them from modernist alienation characteristic of mainstream American literary intellectuals to affirmations based upon experiences in nature. (1994, 17)

In this narrative of environmental conversion and salvation from modernistic seductions, there is little space for doubt and paradox. The intellectual straitjacket that limits our understanding of Abbey to an affirmative biocentric position makes an appreciation of his existential texts impossible.

Both Payne and McClintock see "academicians" and intellectuals as potential traitors to the environmentalist cause, and they must feel themselves doubly removed from nature being ecocritics of the "rather be hiking" stripe. Their latent anti-intellectualism becomes virulent in Christopher Manes who denounces the problem of the signification of nature as "philosophical speculation [for] critics [who] have remained in an academic wasteland still debating whether nature is a meaningful concept." He states that "[t]his epistemological conundrum may be of great interest to traditional philosophy in search of ultimate grounds for knowledge, but it is irrelevant to dealing with the environmental crisis as a social reality" (1990, 157-58). The Mother Earth metaphor has already resulted in a totalitarian and anti-intellectual rhetoric. Placing Abbey into a conceptual context dominated by engagement with and affection towards nature alienates those readers who see nature predominantly in terms of cognitive function.

Abbey's conceptualization of nature was not formed through his participation in the radical environmental movement but through his study of literature and philosophy. One of his main literary influences is the poet Robinson Jeffers. In Jeffers' poem "Quia absurdum"<sup>13</sup> there is an existential focus on the dynamic nature of the universe: "Guard yourself from the terrible empty light of / space, the bottomless / pool of stars. (Expose yourself to it: you might learn / something.)" (1977a, 118). Abbey also often evokes cosmic nature and sees all experience as influenced by it: "there has been, over everything, the great starry universe included, the hint of tragedy" (1994, 17). Emptiness and tragedy are aspects of nature that conflict with the biocentric assumption of the goodness of nature. Abbey and Jeffers' existential nature of the universe is also a dynamic one, as seen in Jeffers' poem "To the Stone Cutters:" "For man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die, the / brave sun / Die blind and blacken to the heart" (1965, 3), whereas the nature of life is, paradoxically enough, often seen as static by those who have a concept of ecology marked by affective engagement.

Whereas some of Abbey's depictions of nature could be interpreted as affirmations of biocentrism, others are more clearly existential; often Abbey alternates between the two modes, and this creates an effect of paradox. Both of the following quotations describe mountain lions—they are from different essays, but are only a few pages apart in the same collection:

About fifty yards behind me [...] stood this big cat, looking straight at me. I could see the gleam of the twilight in his eyes. [...] I felt what I always feel when I meet a large animal face to face in the wild: I felt a kind of affection and the crazy desire to communicate, to make some kind of emotional, even physical contact with the animal. (1991c, 237)

This passage appears to fit into the narrative of "reentering the womb" of nature, of enlarging the self by reintegrating oneself into the ecosystem. Even though Abbey attempts contact with the lion, he is unable to communicate: "I myself was not yet quite ready to shake hands with a mountain lion" (1991c, 238). The main point in this episode is that Abbey's sense of distinction is not canceled out by nature's physical proximity.

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<sup>13</sup> The title of Jeffers' poem takes up Tertullian's statement "creo quia absurdum," an expression of the idea that there is no justification for faith in a rational world, and that faith therefore must reach beyond the rational, that it is absurd seen from a rational and worldly perspective. Note that Jeffers leaves out the "creo" of the statement, indicating that in his existential view there is no higher truth behind worldly appearances, leaving humanity with a meaningless world.



The second passage, from his experimental piece “Dust, a Movie,” features a mountain lion that neither allows identification nor is marked by physical proximity:

Slowly, deliberately, the lion turns its head and stares with burning yellow eyes directly into the camera. The camera zooms in close, the eyes fill the screen, and we see in their golden depths the reflection of the sunrise, the soaring birds, the cliffs, the clouds, the sky, the earth, the human mind, the world beyond this world we love and hardly know at all .... dissolve. This film goes on, it has no end .... dissolve .... dissolve .... dissolve.... (1991c, 242)

This would be an example of what McClintock sees as Abbey’s “darker side,” meaning that Abbey depicts a nature that does not allow the extrapolation of values or identification.

In European existentialism the natural environment represents the presence of an absurd universe. Abbey finds this type of existentialism “completely homocentric egocentric anthropocentric” (1994, 351). His critique of existentialism may be justified,<sup>14</sup> but, despite his criticism, he took up its main theme. In contrast to European existentialism, however, Abbey highlights the fact that all living entities, human and nonhuman, share a fate of death, from which he develops a lifeboat ethic. As in Stephen Crane’s short story “The Open Boat” about a handful of men who discover their “subtle brotherhood” (Crane in Burrell 1953, Vol. 1, 584) in the face of an indifferent ocean, in Abbey all natural entities share a common fate and sit, metaphorically speaking, in the same boat.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the European existentialist view that sees the human mind confronting an absurd world, in Abbey the world of existence (the totality of living and nonliving entities) confronts nonexistence, the nature of the void. Abbey’s conceptualization of distinction is not fixed, and there are different levels of distinction such as living versus inanimate nature, the human versus existence, and the existing world versus the void. The resulting sense of interconnectedness does not stem from common cooperation in a meaningful ecosystem, or

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<sup>14</sup> In his study on existentialism, John MacQuarry points out that existentialism gives us “an unduly anthropomorphic understanding of reality” where the universe is simply seen as a setting for humanity, and that existentialism has not provided a philosophy that “could encourage a respect for non-human realities.” (1991, 281).

<sup>15</sup> A commonly experienced threat from an existential nature can also inspire egalitarianism among the affected. Leo Marx (2000) analyzes this egalitarian element in William Strachey’s report on his shipwreck in the Bermudas: “‘What care these roarers for the name of the King?’ So far as he is concerned, what counts in the crisis is seamanship. Technical skill, the ability to resist and repress primal forces. But Gonzalo, who even then fails to appreciate the need for power, thinks the seaman impudent: ‘...remember,’ he warns him, ‘whom thou hast aboard.’ Whereupon the boatswain, emboldened by danger, invites the nobleman to prove his authority over the tempest—‘command these elements’—or, in effect, keep still” (51).

from common “natural rights,” but from common transitoriness. Since all entities share this fate, human beings do not have a privileged position in the existential drama.

### 3.2 Abbey and Peter Wessel Zapffe

Whereas the biocentrism of Deep Ecology originates in the philosophy of Arne Naess, Abbey’s existential conceptualization of nature is paralleled in another Norwegian ecophilosopher, Peter Wessel Zapffe. In both Abbey and Zapffe the search for meaning in a meaningless cosmos is the main theme.<sup>16</sup> Abbey explains to the reader why he goes into the desert and what he finds there:

Near the summit I found an arrow sign. [...] The arrow pointed into the north. But what was it pointing *at*? I looked at the sign closely and saw that those dark, desert-varnished stones had been in place for a long, long time; [...] I studied the scene with care, looking for an ancient Indian ruin, a significant cairn, perhaps an abandoned mine, a hidden treasure of some inconceivable wealth, the mother of all mother lodes ... But there was nothing out there. Nothing at all. Nothing but the desert. Nothing but the silent world. *That’s why.* (1991c, 21-22, Abbey’s emphasis)

Although Zapffe was a mountaineer and not a desert rat, both writers describe the same sense of emptiness in a natural space that has no intrinsic meaning:

Mountaineering is, by the way, not a sport. It is a Dionysian affirmation of life. It is human creatures meeting the wrinkles of anger in the face of the earth; but the purpose, people ask, what is the meaning, the aim? There is no meaning and no aim. Mountaineering is meaningless as life itself—therefore its magic can never die (1993, 89, 92, my translation).

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<sup>16</sup> Abbey mentions Naess, but he could not know Zapffe since his texts remained untranslated until after Abbey’s death (only a few were translated by Rothenberg, 1993, and Bigell, 2003). The reason for the parallel development of a non-anthropocentric existentialism is a comparable historical situation. Whereas European existentialism was a reaction against the dehumanizing social forces in this century, the situation is different both in Abbey’s Southwest and Zapffe’s Northern Norway. Nature is still perceived as a powerful and often threatening force in these remote parts of the planet and industrialization has only reached them as late as the 1950s and 1960s. Here humanity is not primarily seen as a victim of social forces but as a victimizer of nature. The two main symbols of destruction in the respective areas were dams, Glen Canyon and Alta. The changes in the land were seen as a lack of respect for nature. The focus of existential meaninglessness in the two authors is not directed against nature but against the massive changes affecting the environment. Although nature in the sense of “totality of all things” cannot be destroyed, it is possible to demonstrate arrogance and a lack of respect for this nature by defacing natural spaces.

Both authors react to the changes in their environment not by embracing notions of harmony and identification (which is difficult in such extreme environments) but by emphasizing the dynamic power of nature and the relativity of human importance. In both authors this relativity can be experienced either as a tragedy or in a playful way, because both nature and the human spectator are freed from the need to create meaning.

Zapffe and Abbey describe the existential void through their experience of nature. Going into the desert and mountaineering are activities that, in a paraphrase of Søren Kierkegaard's expression "in virtue of the absurd," are carried out "in virtue of the void." What for Kierkegaard were moments of "either/or", i.e. of stark choices where the irrational character of life is revealed, are for Zapffe and Abbey moments of exposure to stark nature, facilitating insight into the absurdity of existence. The void does not have the same negative connotations as the Puritan wilderness or the hostile nature of naturalism; the void is, to the contrary, the element that the two writers actively seek. Abbey has a similar explanation as Zapffe for why he climbs (he is not a real mountaineer and points out that what he calls climbing is a popular expression for the technical term "scrambling" (1992a, 223)):

Then why climb Tukuñnikivats? Because I prefer to. Because no one else will if I don't—and *somebody has to do it*. Because it is the most dramatic in form of the La Sals, the most conspicuous and beautiful as seen from my terrace in the Arches, Because, finally, I like the name. Tukuñnikivats—in the languages of the Utes "where the sun lingers." (1992a, 225, emphasis Abbey's)

For both Zapffe and Abbey climbing is a playful activity because it is free of purpose.

The relativity of meaning both writers experience in a natural space becomes meaningful in a cultural context, this means that the external reality of natural spaces influences cultural markers. Zapffe visualizes the transfer of natural meaninglessness into a cultural context, the finding of meaning in the absence of meaning, when the mountaineer returns to society:

And what they grasp there, what happens in them when they stand at a point beyond life, in a world of spiritual rock-bottom, where the law of the stones is the only and eternal one, they carry back with them to the hothouses as a new dimension, a freedom over duty, a power in powerlessness, a new knowledge about what it means to be human. (1993, 55, my translation)

The "power in powerlessness" means that the insight of human insignificance in the spaces of nature can be translated into a cultural context and serve to question the importance of human ideas and authority. Existential nature has two aspects, existence and non-existence;

the nature of the void questions cultural constructs, whereas the shared nature of existence contains an element of interconnectedness with a transitory world.<sup>17</sup>

A similar picture of the influence of eternal on transitory nature is found in “The Open Boat.” Crane first creates an image of human distinction from nature and then shows how nature’s meaninglessness is translated into a cultural context where meaning is created *ex nihilo*:

This tower was a giant, standing with its back to the plight of the ants. It represented in a degree, to the correspondent, the serenity of nature amid the struggles of the individual—nature in the wind, and nature in the vision of men. She did not seem cruel to him then, nor beneficent, nor treacherous, nor wise. But she was indifferent, flatly indifferent. It is perhaps plausible that a man in this situation, impressed with the unconcern of the universe, should see the innumerable flaws of his life, and have them taste wickedly in his mind and wish for another chance. A distinction between right and wrong seems absurdly clear to him, then, in this new ignorance of the grave-edge, and he understands that if he were given another opportunity he would mend his conduct and his words, and be better and brighter during an introduction or at a tea. (Crane quoted in Burrell 1953, Vol. 1, 596)

As Zapffe, Crane sees the existential void as a negative reference for culture and shows the limitation of created meaning to the human sphere. There is neither eternal value in nature, nor can any authority be grounded there, to the contrary, exposing human values to external nature puts them into perspective. This is what Zapffe means with “freedom over duty.” However, putting values into perspective does not void them, the absence of eternal values can even create the necessity for a human-based ethical system, and this is why Crane can find a distinction between right and wrong in an indifferent nature.

Existential nature does not have to be dramatic. In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey describes his pleasant days as a park ranger: “I sit down at the table, pull off my boots and socks, dig toes into the gritty, cleansing sand. Fear no more the heat of the sun. This is comfort. More,

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<sup>17</sup> The idea that the void and terror are valuable explains Melville’s description of the Galapagos islands: “It is to be doubted that any spot on earth can, in desolateness, furnish a parallel to this group” (in Lauter 1990, 2432). Terror is something to be sought because it is an expression of human contact with existential nature. Melville later describes that he is sometimes haunted by the images of the islands when hiking in the Adirondack Mountains in summer: “[I] have beheld the vitreous inland rocks worn down and grooved into deep ruts by ages and ages of the slow draggings of tortoises in quest of pools of scanty water. I can hardly resist the feeling that in my time I have indeed slept upon evilly enchanted ground” (in Lauter 1990, 2435). The terror finally is transformed into the social sphere as a sense of freedom, the insight that the human world of meaning is limited: “I have drawn the attention of my comrades by my fixed glaze and sudden change of air, as I have seemed to see, slowly emerging from those imagined solitudes, and heavily crawling along the floor, the ghost of a gigantic tortoise, with “Memento” burning in live letters upon his back” (in Lauter 1990, 2435).

this is bliss” (1992a, 129). The book contains many undocumented references to literature, like here to Shakespeare’s “Fear no more the heat of the sun.” Life in the desert is marked by physicality, by toes in the sand and by a sun that makes “[t]he majority of living things retreat before the stunning glare” (1992a, 132). Physical nature is indifferent to life, and the only way to evade that indifference is death; Shakespeare ends the above mentioned strophe with irony: “golden Lads and Girls all must / As Chimney-Sweepers come to dust.” Like Shakespeare and Zapffe, Abbey finds an affirmation of life in the indifference of physical nature.

The parallels between Abbey’s desert experience and Zapffe’s mountaineering can be contrasted to Jon Krakauer’s description of his mountaineering experience as a young man:

By fixing my sights on one summit after another, I managed to keep my bearings through some thick postadolescent fog. Climbing mattered. The danger bathed the world in a halogen glow that caused everything—the sweep of the rock, the orange and yellow lichens, the texture of the clouds—to stand out in brilliant relief. Life thrummed at a higher pitch. The world was made real. (1996, 134)

Krakauer describes a direct experience of affirmation through the mountains. Zapffe and Abbey, on the other hand, conceptualize their respective landscapes as corroding meaning, and only after this corrosion can new meaning be created.

Zapffe takes up Schopenhauer’s idea that the human brain with its thirst for meaning is an evolutionary accident. The sociobiologist E. O. Wilson makes a similar argument when he “treats general intelligence as a major advantage but also as a major problem—as a source of confusion and disorientation—and he suggests that the arts evolved as a means for counterbalancing this confusion” (quoted in Carroll 2002, 40). Zapffe also speaks of the arts as a means to deal with the problematic fact that humans search for meaning where nature does not provide it. However, the very meaninglessness of nature can be transformed into cultural meaning through “transformation rather than suppression: with creative talent or unshakable panache, one might be able to transform the very agonies of life into pleasant experiences” (Zapffe in Rothenberg and Reed 1993, 49; Norwegian original in Zapffe 1992, 25). Wilson and Zapffe suggest that the fountain of artistic activity and creativity is not a mimesis of natural forms but, to the contrary, the insight into human distinction from nature, a distinction rooted in an evolutionary accident that has made possible abstract reasoning and the search for meaning.

Existential nature allows Abbey and Zapffe to question culture without reference to better metaphors or to metaphysical grounds. In Abbey's journals, there is an example showing how the existential, meaning-corroding concept of nature can function as cultural criticism.

In a review of Peter Matthiesen's *Snow Leopard*, he remarks:

Good writing, but - there's something ludicrous and pathetic in the spectacle of these rich Americans going all the way to Nepal, trekking through the Himalaya, followed by a string of porters bearing the white man's burden, spending thousands of dollars, in order to - "find themselves"! [...] The colossal egoism of these soul-searchers. What makes them think their useless pitiful souls are so godawful important?" (1994, 282-83)

It seems ironic that Abbey criticizes Matthiesen for his egocentrism, considering the fact that virtually all of Abbey's writing "was about Ed," as his sister put it. What Abbey criticizes is not that Matthiesen writes about himself or that he is searching: what Abbey objects to is that Matthiesen *finds* himself, in other words, the affirmation that is entailed in the act of finding.

The egocentrism that Abbey reacts to is not limited to Matthiesen but is a frequent phenomenon in nature writing. According to Phillips:

[M]ost contemporary nature writing, it seems to me, is *too selfish*, by which I mean that it is too preoccupied with the self as the formative and essential element of experience, and overly concerned with the self, not as an ethically responsible entity and a citizen of the world, but as the locus of what passes for spiritual life in a secular culture. (2003, 195, emphasis Phillips')

There is an irony in the fact that the biocentric obsession with reconciling the self with nature focuses on the spiritual transformation of the self and thus breeds egocentrism in the attempt to overcome anthropocentrism. Nature writing furthermore "tends to veer off into writing about the supernatural" (Phillips 2003, 205), and this leads to a further focus on the human: "it treats nature as a vehicle, and not tenor: as a medium and not message" (Phillips 2003, 204). In other words, many nature writers focus on the process of their transformation and see this transformation as facilitated by a nature that speaks spiritual truths.

The invocation of existential nature serves two purposes in the texts of Abbey. On the one hand it suggests a heroic struggle against the unavoidable: not only biological death, but

also the transitoriness of meaning. On the other hand, the absence of intrinsic meaning and importance suggests a position of humility, as seen in the example above. Abbey does not criticize Matthiesen's soul-searchers for their unethical treatment of bio-nature or their negative impact on the Himalayan ecosystem, but for their lack of humility in the face of existential nature, their unthinking affirmation of individual meaning and significance. To limit the concept of nature to only that which is favorable impoverishes experience; it makes the feeling of limitation intrinsic to human existence difficult. In an environmental context the notion of a powerful nature is often thought to be counterproductive, and there are no organizations that protect natural disasters. Environmentalists often highlight the weak and battered side of nature; this appeal may institute a feeling of guilt, but it will hardly provoke respect for the external world.

Bio-nature and existential nature are not two aspects of the same concept but represent two distinct strategies. "Nature knows best" and "Mother Earth" metaphors have no common ground with a nature of cosmic indifference. Note the conceptual difference between the natures in the following examples of Abbey's writing on the one hand, and McClintock's "common thread of meaning and significance" and Loeffler's "planetary biotic community" on the other:

Always looking and listening, these deer. Even the fawns have that wary look. Danger everywhere. [...] Always hard times for deer. The struggle for existence. All their energy goes into survival—and reproduction. The only point of it all—to go on. On and on and on. What else is there? Sometimes I am appalled by the brutality, the horror of this planetary spawning and scheming and striving and dying. One no longer searches for any ulterior significance in all this; as in the finest music, the meaning is in the music itself, not in anything beyond it. (1991c, 57)

In contrast to Loeffler and McClintock, Abbey does not see a "measure of hope" in nature, nor intrinsic meaning neither in the nature of the universe nor in biological nature. Nature is neither a "better metaphor," nor can it function as a point of reference in a political context; it merely exists. The biologist Richard Dawkins warns against the derivation of ethics from an assumed natural order, the naturalistic fallacy: "if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature" (1989, 3). All grounding of an ethical system in a concept of nature is problematic: "Human suffering has been caused because too many of us cannot grasp that words are only tools for our use, and that the mere presence in the dictionary of a word like 'living' does not mean it necessarily has to

refer to something definite in the real world” (Dawkins 1989, 18). Abbey’s nature is meaningless in the sense that it does not provide an external ontological ground for human affairs.

The thought that processes of replication are at the basis of life and the human mind are, at first glance, troubling. Leo Marx paraphrases Melville’s character Ishmael who wonders about “these ceaseless toilings.” According to Marx, Ishmael, “[p]ursuing the analogy between human and natural productivity” asks: “what is the ceaseless striving for? why the endless production [...] asks: why the endless production and reproduction?” (Marx 2000, 311). Ishmael sees the parallel between natural and industrial processes: “Ishmael deliberately making his way to the center of primal nature only to find, when he arrives, a premonitory sign of industrial power. Art and nature are inextricably tangled at the center” (Marx 2000, 312). However, the fact that nothing but blind reproductive processes are at the center does not deny culture its importance. Writers such as Abbey have shown that, once freed of a metaphysical ulterior significance, the natural world is full of wonder and beauty. When one assumes a common principle behind culture and nature, their sharp distinction must be called into question. Leo Marx quotes Shakespeare’s “The Winter Tale,” where the problem is pinpointed:

Yet Nature is made better by no mean  
But Nature makes that mean: so over that art  
Which you say adds to Nature is an art  
That Nature makes [...] (Shakespeare in Marx 2000, 67)

Marx refers to Shakespeare’s view, voiced by his character Polixenes, about the distinction between culture and nature: “the artificial is but a special, human category of the natural. Mind and nature are in essence one. Nature is all” (2000, 67). According to Marx, romanticism is more than a reaction against industrialism, the “machine in the garden,” it is also a reaction against the principle of the machine which refers to “the cosmos as well as an industrial tool” (Marx 2000, 376). Abbey, in contrast to this brand of pastoral romanticism, acknowledges the principle of the machine, the “planetary spawning and scheming and striving and dying” as a principle also of nature.

The question of whether nature is a source of cultural meaning or meaningless can be answered differently. In the pastoral or biocentric mode nature is seen as harmonic and as a cultural ground, whereas in the existential mode nature retains notions of distinction and



conflict. In pastoral nature writing, therefore, seeking union with nature is a main theme, whereas existential nature writing focuses on distinction. Where the pastoral mode tries to overcome the human-nature dualism, the existential tradition sees it as a given.<sup>18</sup> Paul T. Bryant finds Abbey hard to categorize because some of his texts fall outside of the paradigm of biocentric pastoralism. He sees “the wish for the union with nature” in many of Abbey’s texts (1993, 9), although, according to Bryant, Abbey also describes the other, “Darwinian, impersonal, implacable” side of nature (1993, 15).

The difference between pastoral and existential modes is not only seen in descriptions of nature but also in the experience of natural spaces that often precede the descriptions. A form of nature experience that grew out of the pastoral mode is ecotourism. Erve Chambers defines a variety of ecotouristic experiences, among them “embedded tourism” where “the purpose is to isolate oneself from the human community in order to acquire an identity from nature, often in the form of an animal spirit” (2000, 73). Chambers sees the travel writing of Peter Matthiesen as typical for this kind of experience:

The search may begin with a restless feeling, as if one were being watched. One turns in all directions and sees nothing. Yet, one senses that there is a source for this deep restlessness: and the path that leads where there is not a path to a strange place, but the path home. (“But you are home,” cries the Witch of the North. “All you have to do is wake up!”) The journey is hard, for the secret place where we always have been overgrown with thickets of “ideas,” of fears and defenses, prejudices and repressions. The holy grail is what Zen Buddhists call our own “true nature”; each man is his own savior after all. (Matthiesen quoted in Chambers 2000, 73)

I would argue that Abbey does not share Matthiesen’s aim of finding oneself through finding one’s true home. Abbey sees the idea of being embedded in a benevolent nature as a delusion: the dualism of existential nature and humanity cannot be overcome; only a feeling of companionship with transitory nature can alleviate it.

By intermingling and alternating the two strategies, companionship with the transitory and the feeling of distinction from existential nature, Abbey constantly deconstructs his own

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<sup>18</sup> No matter how one answers the question of dualism, the perception of whether humans are a part of nature or apart from it does not necessarily influence how we relate to the natural world or how society frames environmental policies. Kate Soper discusses this point and finds it “implausible to suppose that metaphysical naturalism is the automatic ally of ecology, dualism (or ‘humanism’) its obvious enemy. [...] It is difficult to see why ‘humanists’ should necessarily be indifferent to the fate of non-human nature, or prove incapable of advancing its cause. Nor does there seem any reason to suppose that naturalism will guarantee good human relations or necessarily help to mitigate ecologically damaging forms of social exploitation” (1995, 174-75).

narrative. The transitory perspective is corroded with a cosmic outlook, and the bleakness of the existential outlook is counteracted by an affirmation of the importance of life. The essay “Cape Solitude” juxtaposes life and death as Abbey seeks a place overlooking the Grand Canyon:

I come to the edge. The verge of the abyss. [...] One step further would take me into another world, the next world, the ultimate world. [...] But I pause, hesitate, [...] as always. Not out of fear [...] but again, from respect. Respect for my obligation to others [...] respect for myself. The despair that haunts the background of our lives, sometimes obtruding itself into consciousness, can still be modulated [...] into a comfortable melancholia and from there to defiance, delight, a roaring affirmation of our existence. [...] I [...] take my flute from the pack, stand, and play a little desert music: [...] a song for any coyotes that may be listening, a song for the river and the great canyon, a song for the sky. [...] I stop; we listen to the echoes floating back. I write “we” because, in the company of other nearby living things - lizards, ravens, snakes, bushes, grass, weeds - I do not feel myself to be alone. (1991a, 194-195)

Here the suicidal temptation of an existential outlook is relativized by a life-affirming position, where Abbey shares his existence with other beings. The element of sharing a common fate with life is highlighted here, not identification with nature. Life—his own, other humans’ and other beings’—is contrasted to the abyss. In the natural space, both strategies—questioning meaning by highlighting transitoriness and affirming the communality of all life—are possible. Abbey shows that an aesthetic appreciation of nature and an environmentalist attitude are not necessarily linked to the type of pastoral nature writing that Matthiesen represents.

Abbey’s abyss has a parallel in Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*. Here too there is an edge that one cannot step over without renouncing one’s humanity:

[Kurtz] had something to say. He said it. Since I had peeped over the edge myself, I understand better the meaning of his stare, that could not see the flame of the candle, but was wide enough to embrace the whole universe, piercing enough to penetrate all the hearts that beat in the darkness. He had summed up—he had judged. ‘The horror.’ (1995, 113)

There is the same existential horror in Abbey as in Conrad, and both authors confirm their humanity in their meeting with existential nature. The abyss is more than a physical feature of the landscape; it symbolizes the borderline between the human and the inhuman spheres. It is, on the other hand possible to expose oneself to nature in an inhuman way, as in Jack

London's story "To Build a Fire." The main character's exposure to the extreme Alaskan nature does not result in human reflection, that in contrast to the narrator:

But all this—the far reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all—made no impression on the man. It was not because he was long used to it. [...] The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero [...] impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man's frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man's place in the universe. (in Burrell and Cerf 1953, Vol. II, 20-21)

In spite of an extremely hostile nature, for the nameless man in London's story there is no abyss since there is no human reflection. In London's story the lack of human reflection constitutes a flaw because the man tries to rely on his animal nature while possessing neither the fur nor the instincts of an adapted animal such as his dog.

Corrosion of meaning and affirmation of life are not mutually exclusive. The Norwegian-Canadian philosopher Herman Tønnessen points at the logical error that exists in finding meaning in nature or experiencing one's life as meaningless. Meaning, according to Tønnessen, belongs to the human sphere and exists in the relationship between (long-term) ideas and beliefs on the one hand and (short term) actions on the other. However, it cannot be deduced that the whole interval of life has meaning in itself (1983, 44). Tønnessen uses a structuralist argument here and states that there is no outer referent that could give meaning to life in general. What Abbey does is shift between the two perspectives, between the meaninglessness of his and others' lives in general and the meaningful actually lived life, and here Abbey mentions his "obligation to others", which includes both humans and other entities from transitory nature. Therefore Abbey is not a nihilist; for him meaning and value are limited but not delegitimized.

The difference between a life-affirming and a meaning-corroding nature corresponds to the difference between pastoralism and biocentrism on the one hand and existentialism and naturalism on the other. Pastoralism and biocentrism are projects aiming to re-infuse external reality with meaning, with the effect that that reality is humanized. On the other hand there is the existential outlook described by Tønnessen: "Man's ability to 'stand out'

(*'ek-sistere'*) and, while still breathing, examine himself and his 'total situation' is, [...] a prerogative with which no other being hitherto has been blessed or cursed" (1966, 203). Romantic pastoralism and the idea of going "back to nature" are, according to Tønnessen, a regression to ontological innocence. He uses the outdoors as a metaphor for explaining his and Zapffe's existential world-view, describing a situation where common defense mechanisms break down and the majority of people will "shiver in their nakedness under the white, indifferent stars and cry to psychotherapists for a solid and cozy metaphysical armor." However, "there may be some, the true existentialist philosophers, who would rather risk remaining in the chilly outdoors than give up a jot of the noble privilege of human 'ek-sistence'" (1966, 203). Tønnessen's outdoor metaphor can be taken literally if applied to Abbey. It points at the connection between the experience of human distinction (*'ek-sistence'*) and the experience of a hostile environment such as the desert.

Abbey shifts between the life-affirming and the meaning corroding perspectives and remains ambivalent towards the environmental movement. This ambiguity should not be seen as indecisiveness, a sort of literary fence-sitting. Donn Rawlings argues that "Abbey's critique depends as much upon the imaginative fullness and range of his willingness to participate (as a writer, at least and for the moment) in the same stances and affirmations that he will also question." (1999, 411). Abbey's combination of affirmation and questioning, which also means a continuous skepticism towards his own life and views is the main quality of his nature writing.

### 3.3 Heterotopian spaces: White spots on the mental map

Abbey's existential position has an environmentalist rationale because the experience of existential nature is culturally meaningful. His perspective can be clarified by looking at Zapffe's concept of nature. According to Guttorm Fløistad, there are three different modes of nature in Zapffe, sympathetic, indifferent, and inimical (1989, 60). This means that nature in the existential mode does not have to be threatening but that its character depends on the state of human interests. This view assumes that the spheres of humanity and nature are different since there is a distinction between the interest-bearer and the environment (Fløistad 1989, 59), and that meaning and value are exclusively human categories. Nature can be experienced as meaningful or valuable, but only due to human affective

engagement. There is indeed an element of sharing with nature, but this only refers to transitory nature. In both Abbey and Zapffe's existential position there is an environmental rationale. Neither author wants to protect nature as such, but spaces where the experience of nature is possible. In contrast to the biocentric notion of the "rights of nature," these spaces do not mean anything in themselves but represent spaces of open signification, spaces that acquire meaning in a cultural context. For Zapffe the white spots on the map are sacred, not because nature represents a value in itself, but because "they represent spaces for contemplation" (Kvaløy 1992, 275).

These spaces of contemplation are heterotopian spaces. According to Foucault a heterotopian space can either be "a space of illusion" exposing every real space or a real and perfect space in contrast to "messy, ill constructed, and jumbled" (Foucault 1986, 27) spaces. The "space of illusion" corresponds to existential nature where the absence of meaning questions all cultural constructs; the perfect space, on the other hand, corresponds to pastoral or biocentric imagery where a nurturing nature exposes the destructiveness of Western culture. The same space can be experienced either as a harmonious ecosystem or an existential question mark. Neither experience is "natural" but are both culturally determined. Protecting heterotopias such as wilderness areas does not mean to protect "nature," but rather a cultural openness, both in space and signification, of a "radically different mode of being *out there*" (Abbey 1991c, 229, emphasis Abbey's).

Abbey most clearly conceptualizes nature as space with conflicting meanings (as perfect romantic space and space of existential terror) in *Black Sun*. In this novel the two functions of a psychiatric ward—treating a crisis (in a perfect space) or providing space for living through a crisis (by exposing the illusory character of all spaces)—can be equally fulfilled by natural spaces like forests and deserts. For environmentalism, Foucault's concept of heterotopia provides the possibility of linking the necessity of cultural crisis, of different perspectives that compete inside a cultural discourse, with the protection of existing natural spaces. The concept represents a way beyond the nature/culture dichotomy without denying nature its particularity. Zapffe illustrates that the need to save a heterotopia is not the same as saving an ecosystem:

In the Alps already now several of the peaks can 'be done' unconsciously. – 'Have you been on the Zugspitze, Mr. Nilsen?' – 'Absolutely possible – we had, so to say, one too many these days.' Things are changing according to the eyes that see, both in science

and in everyday life. Gausta Mountain, which is now *being made* accessible, is different from the one that *will have become* accessible. Someone in Tromsø wrote: ‘All too few enjoy the stunning loneliness in Ørnedalen. When the ring road comes, this will change.’ He was right. Now ‘all’ can take the bus to Ørnedalen. But what shall they do there? (1993, 127, emphasis Zapffe; translation in Bigell 2003).

A quality of human experience is threatened by the development of natural spaces, quite independently of whether this development increases or decreases biological diversity. The case of Gausta furthermore stands for all the natural spaces that have become a victim of their reputation. MacCannell calls this phenomenon sight obliteration: a cultural marker leads to the obliteration of a sight. This obliteration does not have to be physical but can consist just in a fundamental change of experience of a sight.

### 3.4 Existential nature in *Black Sun*

The novel describes the life of Will Gatlin, a fire lookout who escapes from a personal crisis in the city into what seems to be a stable and structured life in the forest. After meeting Sandy, however, Will falls in love, and his life falls apart. Later Sandy disappears, and Will experiences a crisis; at the end of the novel Will overcomes his crisis with the help of his friend Ballantine and leaves the forest. In all stages of Will’s personal development, natural spaces play a decisive role, and all natural spaces are marked by an exposure of the subject to an intense physicality of the external world. The forest of the opening is protective; the desert plateau where he spends time with Sandy is an almost ethereal land; on the plateau there is a river with strong currents, foreshadowing the coming crisis; the desert where Will searches for Sandy is described as hell. At the end of the novel the forest becomes a claustrophobic space which Will leaves.

The “black sun” is a symbol for depression. Abbey wrote the novel in an intense state of depression after his wife had died of leukemia. Like the author, Will is depressed, first of all because of his recent divorce that made him seek work as a fire lookout, and second because of the disappearance of Sandy. The symbol of the black sun could either refer to the sun-like intensity of depression or to death. Abbey’s use of the sun symbol may refer to Jeffers’ poem “To the Stone Cutters” where the “sun blackens to the heart,” referring to the fact that even the most permanent things are transitory. The blackness of the sun furthermore refers to the episode in the novel where Will, in an act of defiance against

nature, stares at the sun until it goes black. Of course, the sun only blackens for him while the rest of the world still enjoys sunshine. The symbol of the black sun implies both transitoriness and individual distinction.

The theme of the novel is the undermining of a meaning-confirming nature by an existential outlook. In the opening of the novel, well-arranged and perfect nature is depicted in a pastoral hyperbole:

Each day begins like any other. Gently. Cautiously. The way he likes it. A dawn wind through the forest, the questioning calls of obscure birds. He hears the flutelike song, cool as silver, of a hermit thrush. [...] The sun is close but not yet up. A few dim stars still hang blinking on the west. Deer are grazing at the far side of the clearing, near the foot of the fire tower - dim figures in the pearl-gray light: The dark and somber forest surrounds them all with its heavy stillness. (1982, 13)

Will seeks shelter from an existential crisis, a divorce, and becomes a fire-lookout. Green and friendly nature insulates him for the time being from an intolerable reality in the city, and his crisis is temporarily alleviated in the heterotopian space of the forest. The forest, like a psychiatric ward, has the function of treating Will's instability and of insulating him against the outside world.

Will finds himself in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand he has fled into the forest to seek shelter from a personal crisis in his old life, on the other hand, in his role as a fire lookout, he provides protection for the forest. However, the idea that a forest is protected by humans is an illusion, because both fire protection and the setting of fires are human interventions. In a discussion of Stephen Budiansky's book *Nature's Keepers: The New Science of Nature Management*, Phillips points out that "Humans play a central role, for example, in the ecology of fire: many habitats long thought to be entirely natural are now recognized as the products of deliberate and not always carefully controlled fires set by humans" (2003, 81). Fire lookouts are neither a sign of human protection of nature, nor of protection of nature from human intervention but indicate a certain use of nature. Abbey is aware that forest fires are part of a natural cycle, and fire lookouts serve the interests of the lumber industry more than those of the forest. In *Black Sun* this contradiction is exposed when Will falsely reports what at first glance looks like smoke but turns out to be dust from a construction site (1982, 19).

Karlheinz Tschachler uses Leo Marx' statement that it is impossible for the modern writer to solve the dualism of nature and civilization, of machine and garden, and interprets the problem of Will accordingly as "the tragic isolation of a pastoral individual" (1988, 101). The opening of *Black Sun* is indeed pastoral, but I would see this depiction as exaggerated and ironic, not unlike that of Hollywood thrillers where an exaggerated normalcy serves as a background for impending doom. Furthermore, Will is not a pastoral character; he is an urban character seeking temporary escape from a stressful reality in the forest. Ironically his attempt to isolate himself leads to a social life, in the form of visits from his friend Ballantine (who also seeks a temporary shelter) and his love-affair with Sandy. Abbey is not trying to solve the conflict between machine and garden but uses the creative tension between the two worlds.

Roland Barthes notes the connection between "the cult of nature and of puritanism (regeneration through clean air, moral ideas at the sight of mountain-tops, summit-climbing as civic virtue, etc.)" (1993, 74). In *Black Sun* Will seeks a rebirth or regeneration, and this is why so little is said about his former life except a passing mention of his divorce. Will tries to immerse himself in a new natural context but fails; the ghosts of the past cannot so easily be cast off. He remains caught in the patterns of the past, and nature, rather than providing a chance for a rebirth, intensifies his crisis. If there is a puritan element in *Black Sun*, it is the notion that a natural space can function as a testing ground. *Black Sun* is a modern version of Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, without a reward or rebirth.

*Black Sun* can be seen as an ironic comment on the pastoral tradition. Scheese describes an episode where John Muir conceptualizes a pastoral nature that is marked by both harmony and the feeling of being removed from civilization, a "classic pastoral island experience" where "the social world with all its dysfunction and complexity becomes distant, and the only history that matters is the interaction of the self and the land" (1996, 69). Whereas life in nature indeed begins like this for Will Gatlin, in the course of the novel life in nature becomes more social, more complex, and more dysfunctional than the life that he tried to escape from. Nature does not soothe his crisis but intensifies it. Therefore I disagree with Scheese's argument (in his discussion of *Desert Solitaire*) that a frequent theme in Abbey is the contrast between an "idyllic life of the individual in the wilderness and the dissonant, sometimes intrusive, life of civilization" (Scheese 1996, 109).



In the opening of the novel, nature is part of a defense mechanism, a mechanism that insulates the individual from the amoral character of daily experience. Zapffe speaks about “the thousand comforting fictions” (quoted in Kvaløy 1992, 273) that insulate the individual from an intolerable reality. The cultural defense mechanisms are, in the terminology of Zapffe and in analogy to Freudian thought, isolation, distraction, attachment, and sublimation (1993a, 40-52). Heterotopian spaces play a special role in the enactment of these mechanisms. Consolation and questioning can be experienced in both wilderness areas and psychiatric wards, providing the visitor/patient either with relief from existential angst or a chance to live through the crisis.

Will uses the defense mechanism of isolation in a secluded natural space. Art Ballantine, his friend, represents another defense mechanism, diversion. Will’s isolation, the eventless world of pastoral nature, gives Ballantine a negative point of reference. With his life of incessant entertainment he is also in need of a heterotopia. Will and the forest demonstrate for Ballantine how boring life in the woods is, thus confirming his own lifestyle. On the other hand, the forest represents a space where Ballantine can express his existential doubts; for example, his concerns about ageing. Taking up the analogy of a psychiatric hospital, Ballantine is an outpatient who experiences his moments of crisis at a safe distance from his everyday life. For Will, Ballantine’s letters and visits are a constant reminder to keep up his isolation. Their friendship is essential for both men: they each need the other’s life as a point of reference outside their own experienced reality in order to maintain a certain degree of stability. The strategies of both men are not opposed, as they are both based on the use of nature as a heterotopian space.

The central narrative in *Black Sun* is the Dionysian love-story between Will and Sandy. Nature is benevolent for both; the desert provides a heterotopian space where they can live their “plutonic” love (1982, 75). The life-affirming passion of this relationship is juxtaposed with life-negating natural forces. The desert, at this stage, functions as a double metaphor. It provides space for their passion, but also reminds them that life is transitory. Making love is contrasted to “deserts of vast eternity.” The joyful swimming in a river almost ends in a lethal contact with the rapids. In his journals, Abbey also uses the mutual amplification of life-affirming and life-negating forces: “Paris—the city of light and light-hearted laughter [...] of all that is brightest and most lyrical in men. Exactly. That’s why it’s so tragic. The sweeter, the more poignant; the more beautiful, the more pathetic. There

is more tragedy in the kiss of young lovers than in all the murders of all the royal clowns who ever lived” (1994, 95).

For Sandy the natural spaces and the affair with Will have the function of providing a vantage point over her future and her marriage that was planned before she met Will. For all three characters nature provides a different perspective and outlook on life that all three use in different ways. Turner, Sandy’s fiancé, is the only character whose defense mechanism, an attachment to a military code of conduct, is functioning well, and who is not plagued by doubt and crisis. He is, however, depicted as almost inhuman. When Sandy disappears, nature can no longer provide isolation and treatment for Will; it is now a space where he can experience the breakdown of his defense mechanisms, the collapse of his meaning-creating systems: “The idiot. Alone on tower. Walking around the catwalk. Again. And again. And again [...] Anything, anything to smash his idleness and reverie, to drag him into the midst of trouble and terror [...] Tower and forest and world - ship without stars, in a boundless sea - sail into night” (1982, 128-29).

Will’s falling in love disturbs his retreat from civilization into nature. This is doubly ironic: Will escapes into nature only to be overwhelmed by his own uncontrollable human nature, by his love. It is furthermore ironic that Will confirms his human distinction as a human being in a natural space. Terry Eagleton paraphrases Schopenhauer’s sense of tragedy that arises from “our disengagement from the world,” and it could be argued that Will has found such solace in disengagement in a natural space: “the joy of an ultimate freedom, which knows itself to be invulnerable because like the depressive or melancholic it has withdrawn all investment from reality. The subject is simply no longer at stake enough to be injured, and the sense of immortality which this breeds is an additional source of solace” (2003, 172). However, the insulation from nature in a natural space is an illusion, and Will is overwhelmed by desire. Discussing Racine, Eagleton describes desire as a “wayward, anarchic force which plays havoc with duty and violates the bonds of friendship, kinship, legality, civic allegiance” (2003, 147). Love is not a force that helps to overcome distinction but comes packaged with its opposite, fear. St. Augustine describes the ambivalence of his experience of God which fills him “[w]ith terror inasmuch as I am utterly other than it, with burning love that I am akin to it” (St. Augustine, quoted in Eagleton 2003, 161). Love, the feeling of closeness, always contains the possibility of separation. This disturbing force of nature comes from the inside, and as a consequence

external nature, which was burdened with the projection of a stable world, now intensifies the crisis. The heterotopian space serves both as a stable retreat and a space of crisis. What makes Will's fate interesting is the sharp contrast of these two functions; his mistake was to seek not so much distinction but complete apartness from the world, an attempt that led to its opposite.

After the disappearance of Sandy, Will experiences nature differently from the opening: a space to live through the crisis, a psychiatric ward that keeps him at safe distance from more controlled cultural spaces. In the desert he can enact the final destruction of meaning:

The sun rose out of the desert far beyond and glared through an unclouded sky into the canyon. The heat intensified immediately. [...] His descent into this inferno was itself an act of insanity. [...] Searching for a shred of cloth, the imprint of a girl's foot, a sign of meaning, he found only the maze of paths made by feral burros among the brush and rocks, and the winding trail of reptiles in the dust. (1982, 140-46)

Heterotopia is no longer the green idyllic cabin in the forest, but a space of existential terror in the desert. The end of the novel is positive: Although he has gained neither stability nor consolation during his time in the forest, Will survives his crisis and literally closes the road to his old life. The horrors of existential nature, even though they do not provide a rebirth, have a therapeutic effect.

In *Black Sun* Abbey for the first time uses an existential nature as a major structuring device for his narrative. There are, however, earlier instances of existential nature. In Abbey's earlier novel *The Brave Cowboy* there is one instance where Jack Burns, the protagonist, is confronted with existential nature when trying to evade the law:

He felt that he was being watched. Not by human eyes. He sensed no immediate danger in his intuition, but without looking over his shoulder he felt and knew that he and the mare were not alone. For a moment he was troubled, not by fear, but by a sensation of utter desolation and rejection, as if he were alien not only to the cities if men but also to the rocks and trees and spirits of wilderness. (1992b, 266)

In *The Brave Cowboy* there is no explanation for the sudden emergence of this indifferent existential nature and it does not make any sense in terms of the narrative. However, when one keeps Abbey's later development in mind, this is a forerunner to the existential nature descriptions that play a dominant role in later texts such as *Black Sun*.

A similar scene with an unexpected and unexplained depiction of existential nature is found in *Desert Solitaire*:

Finally I came to a place in the canyon so narrow and dark and wet and ghastly that I had no heart to go farther. Retracing my steps I heard now and then, a faint and mournful wail, not human, which seemed to come from abysmal depths far back in the bowels of the plateau, from the underworld, from subterranean passageways better left forever unseen and unknown. I hurried on, the cries faded away, I was glad to be getting out of there. Then they came again, louder and as it seemed from all sides, out of the rock itself, surrounding me. A terrifying caterwauling it was, multiplied and amplified by echoes piled on echoes, overlapping and reinforcing one another. I looked back to see what was hunting me but there was only the naked canyon in the dim, bluish light that filtered down from far above. (1992a, 122)

Abbey provides no explanation for the sudden onset of terror on the trip down the Glen Canyon, an otherwise merry and carefree journey. *Black Sun*, however, shows that these depictions are not just mere lapses into a “dark side” but a main element in Abbey’s texts.

The circumstances of Sandy’s disappearance suggest that she had used the desert as a space for reflection in which to question her relationship to both Will and Turner. In the end she rejects Will’s instability, self-centeredness and inability to commitment, as well as Turner’s stability that allows no existential doubt. It is rather revealing that both men do not even consider the possibility that Sandy has deliberately left them; it seems that the death of their lover is easier to grasp than a possible rejection. The question of whether Sandy has died or not is also answered by the classical reference of the novel. In Ovid’s story of Pan and the nymph Syrinx, an amorous Pan pursues an unwilling Syrinx who, with the help of her sisters, manages to escape. The classical reference suggests that Sandy disappeared because of Will and that she had planned her disappearance.

The typescript of *Jonathan Troy* contains a synopsis of the novel by the author that demonstrates its thematic parallel to *Black Sun* in terms of the character of the protagonist:

What is wrong with Jonathan Troy? Several things; first of all, he is too intelligent [...] to accept and live by any available and particular system of ethics and ideals. [...] He has the unfortunate talent for seeing not merely *into* but also *through* things and so naturally imagines that he sees nothing at all. The world of appearance is for him an obvious lie and a fake, without any certain or intrinsic value, and behind the appearance he sees only the appalling void. [...] [H]e lacks the moral and intellectual courage necessary to cope with his valueless world; he cannot accept it as it seems to be, so he spends his days seeking better illusions. (1950, 1, emphasis Abbey’s)

The inability to find essences behind natural appearances connects both Will and Troy, although Will, in the beginning of *Black Sun*, manages to insulate himself against the void. In both novels heterotopian natural spaces such as deserts and forests play a central role because questioning and crisis take place there.

### 3.5 Conclusion

Abbey sees nature as an open space, both literally and metaphorically, and nature in his texts has shifting significations, one of them existential. With the concept of heterotopia nature reenters language, not only as a concept with a “myriad of meanings” (Winner 1994, 137) but as a material entity. Paradoxically it is the process of making nature cultural that makes it possible for nature to maintain its otherness, to keep conflicting meanings that exceed a monologic conceptualization. Abbey does not try to unify these conflicting meanings but keeps them in conflict. This conflict can be enacted playfully, as J. Hillis Miller explains: “linguistic play is necessary to break up or destabilise the ways of thinking, speaking, and writing that are already programmed and in place in order to give a chance to the secret other that is hidden in [...] places where language shimmers with contradictory meanings. [...] [T]he other never comes except in multiple voices” (1996, 169). The problem of most Abbey criticism is that it tries to either ignore the conflicting conceptualizations or to marginalize them (for example as his “darker side”). If nature is seen as an open signifier, the biocentric and existential conceptualizations might conflict, but they do not exclude each other. Abbey manages to overcome the cultural amnesia that has gone into the synthesizing of nature and to present a nature that is ambivalent and dynamic.

Since the world “out there” always exceeds the meanings that are ascribed to it by language, the only way to write about nature without humanizing it is in a voice that points at its own limitations by using paradoxes and polyphony. To rephrase the title of the last chapter in *Desert Solitaire*, “Paradox and Bedrock,” the bedrock of Abbey’s writing is paradox. This does not deny the ethical dimension of his writings, because the absence of a fixed system of moral reference makes a constant ethical reevaluation necessary. Abbey’s major achievement is not that he provides a rationale for the protection of Mother Nature but that he introduces a modern element into the often monologic genre of nature writing.

## **4. *Deus absconditus*: The Experience of Calvinist Nature**

### 4.1 Introduction

Particular themes such as human distinction from nature, of seeing natural spaces as testing grounds, of meaning corrosion experienced in nature, of an outer world that does not correspond to an inner world, as well as an existential outlook in general are not uncommon in American writers that can be labeled nature writers in a loose sense. The existential outlook in Abbey, that finds its purest expression in *Black Sun*, is not a singular phenomenon in American literature. In this chapter I will analyze two other authors that can be compared to Abbey. Robinson Jeffers, whom Abbey calls the “most cold-eyed and clear-eyed of our national poets” (1992a, 132), has been one of the most important if not the most important literary influence on Abbey, and Abbey frequently refers to Jeffers. The other writer that will be presented here is Paul Bowles who is a contemporary of Abbey. His novel *The Sheltering Sky* has several parallels to Abbey’s work. The protagonists of *The Sheltering Sky* find themselves in an existential crisis confronting the meaninglessness of existence. Like in Abbey the crisis is experienced and exacerbated in a natural space, the desert.

Although the thematic focus of the three authors has certain parallels to European existentialism as well as to German romanticism, these authors write in an American tradition of nature existentialism that appears to originate in Calvinism. Environmentalists often see the human/nature dualism of Western culture as being at the root of environmental problems and propose to re-integrate humans into nature. In a climate where it is seen as a priority to re-integrate humanity into nature, conceptualizations of nature as distinct from humanity or as a testing ground seem to be out of place. The discussed authors experience nature as engendering distinction, alienation, and epistemological doubt. These themes are common in modern literature, but the roots of the idea of human distinction are older than the modern age. Notions of alienation and epistemological doubt are not a (post-)modern fad, but have been part of Western culture for many centuries. There is a tradition of skepticism in Western thought that can be traced from the Gnostics, Augustine, Calvin, Edwards to Kierkegaard and the existentialists. In an American context,

John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards are especially important, and their perceptions of nature have left a mark on the texts of Abbey, Jeffers, and Bowles.

In the pastoral tradition the connotations of paradise were transferred to nature, and the originally bleak connotations of desert and wilderness were revised. Accordingly, Philippon argues that Abbey reverses the Biblical opposites of garden and wilderness and sees the desert as a true paradise (2004, 229). I would argue, however, that there may be a good measure of the original meaning of wilderness in Abbey's desert. It is problematic to see the beginning of the American appreciation of wilderness in a pastoral reversal of the Puritan tradition because this obscures the Puritan appreciation of nature.

David Williams argues for a re-evaluation of the Puritan view on nature:

the American wilderness tradition owes its power and language and imagery, not to the Greeks, nor the enlightened rationalists, not the European Romantics or the rebels of the 1960s. Instead, despite Abbey's protest it is pure Old Testament in origin and must be traced back [...] to the reformed theologians of Luther and Calvin's Reformation. (2001, 2)

I think with his idea that the wilderness tradition has exclusively religious roots, Williams overstates the case, as he misinterprets Abbey as being opposed to an Old Testament mood. Williams nevertheless identifies an important current of thought that is often disregarded. He is right insofar as Old Testament imagery, transmitted through Calvinism, is an important influence for American perceptions of nature. This influence can even be seen in writers who are atheists and reject organized religion, as Abbey does. The Calvinist element in Abbey is not primarily a religious ground (Abbey is not a crypto-Christian), the religious ground itself is part of a skepticism that had entered the American cultural context through Calvinism. The key element is the unattainability of God (*deus absconditus*) or essences. Individuals and humanity in general are not separate from God but experience distinction and a sense of apartness from God. Abbey illustrates this experience of distinction and apartness in his reflection upon a juniper tree in *Desert Solitaire*:

I've had this tree under surveillance ever since my arrival at Arches, hoping to learn something from it, to discover the significance in its form, to make a connection through its life with whatever falls beyond. Have failed. The essence of the juniper continues to elude me unless, as I presently suspect, its surface is also its essence. Two living things on the same earth, respiring in a common medium, we contact one another but without direct communication. Intuition, sympathy, empathy, all fail to guide me

into the heart of this being—if it has a heart. At times I am exasperated by the juniper’s static pose; something in its stylized gesture of appeal, that dead claw against the sky, suggest catalepsy. Perhaps the tree is mad. The dull, painful creaking of the branches in the wind indicates, however, an internal effort at liberation. (1992a, 27)

Abbey demonstrates that distinction does not mean separation but can lead to an aesthetic engagement with the tree, including humorous anthropomorphism (“the tree is mad”). The essence of this piece, the phrase “have failed” contrasts with Matthiesen’s exclamation “but you are home.”

There is a parallel between the idea that essences are unattainable and the Christian myth of Creation, as Terry Eagleton observes:

The narrative of Creation, in other words, would seem to give some point to the world. This is ironic, since the theological meaning of ‘creation’ is exactly that there is no point to the world. It was brought to birth not as the last step in some inexorable causal process, but purely out of God’s gratuitousness. Creation is that which might as well never have been, and is thus the final refutation of an instrumental rationality. This, indeed, is part of the meaning of God’s transcendence. He transcends his creation in the sense that it is not necessary to him, and he did not have to bring it about. The world is gift, not fate. It has its source in freedom, not compulsion. Like the artist and his product, God fashioned the world just for the hell of it, as a quick look around it will no doubt confirm. (2003, 128)

Eagleton’s Calvinist interpretation of the Creation myth sheds a new light on Abbey’s juniper tree episode. Seeing the juniper tree as part of creation, understanding its essence would not only mean to commit an anthropomorphic fallacy, it would be heretical, questioning God’s (or, as Abbey would see it, nature’s) glory and transcendence.

The field of environmental literature creates its own canon, and works that have a biocentric perception are included while others are left out. Lawrence Buell states that “western metaphysics and ethics need revision before we can address today’s environmental problems” (1996, 2) and includes the biocentric idea that “[t]he human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest” (1996, 7) into his definition of the genre (“What is an Environmental Text”). On this basis Buell criticizes Faulkner’s “The Bear” because it creates “a forest where treeness matters but the identities and the material properties of the trees are inconsequential” (1996, 10). Much the same could be said about Abbey’s juniper tree, and one wonders whether Abbey would be included into an environmental canon if he did not have his status as an environmental folk hero. I argue



that the Calvinist tradition has created a perception of nature that is not obsolete for today's environmental literature and that Calvin's notion of "distinction but not separation" would furthermore help to avoid the essentialism that is associated with a biocentric conceptualization of nature while retaining an interest in its physicality.

#### 4.2 The Calvinist concept of nature

Warren Susman notes that Puritanism today is defined by four major issues: restraint, community, morality, and material success. However, inside the Puritan way of thinking, two opposing interpretations are possible for each of the issues, reflecting disagreements in the early Puritan communities. Restraint is coupled with the notion of individual liberation from man-made law, the sense of community is contrasted to individual liberty, morality is countered with doubt, and material success is contradicted by a suspicion against materialism (1984, 41). Whereas the notions of doubt and suspicion towards materialism have disappeared from the cultural mainstream, they can still be found in literature.

Through Puritanism, Calvinist ideas have had a decisive influence on American culture. However, as Susman argues, this heritage cannot be described as monolithic but as a tradition of often contradicting ideas. Calvin is usually seen as the father of strict moralism and of a capitalist work ethic. Leo Marx, for example, describes the aims of the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s as to "repudiate the Calvinist work ethic in favor for a 'new' set of rules" (2000, 385). This conceptualization is one-sided and leaves out a skeptical side of Calvin that undermines dogmatism—not only the dogmatism of his religious adversaries, but even his own. In the context of nature writing, Calvinist skepticism clashes with affirmative notions of nature, and it could be said that the idea of nature as a "better metaphor" or as a moral ground is alien to the Calvinist strain of thought.

Calvin's view of nature is based on the Old rather than the New Testament. Although it has had an enormous influence on Western culture, the Old Testament's images of a punishing God and harsh nature have seldom been used in an environmental debate and seem to be counterproductive to the preservation of nature. The near exclusion of the Old Testament and Calvinist thought from the environmental debate is surprising when one thinks about

the importance of these elements in American culture. Could there be something more to this tradition than the “subdue the earth” commandment? I will argue that there is a frequent use of Calvinist ideas in the conceptualizations of nature in writers like Robinson Jeffers, Edward Abbey, and Paul Bowles. A main theme in these authors is undermining the complacency of their culture. Their characters experience alienation, doubt, fear, and crisis.

Calvin’s teachings were directed against the self-righteousness of the official religion of his time and instilled an element of doubt into the accepted beliefs of the time. For Calvin, doubt does not threaten faith, quite the contrary:

[s]urely, while we teach that faith ought to be certain and assured, we cannot imagine any certainty that is not tinged with doubt, or any assurance that is not assailed by some anxiety. On the other hand, we can say that believers are in perpetual conflict with their own unbelief. (1975, 392)

Doubt arises from the fact that God’s essence is unknowable: “Indeed, his essence is incomprehensible; hence his divineness far escapes all human perception” (1975, 333). Williams states that the Calvinists “believed that God stands apart from and against this world and that only the saints have even a glimpse, not of Him, but of His son” (1989, 166). For Calvin God is a hidden god, a “*deus absconditus*.” The unattainability of essences and the element of doubt are seen in Abbey: “Questions. Every statement raises more and newer questions. We shall never be done with questioning so long as men and women remain human” (1991b, 14). Abbey’s statement is both negative and affirmative, as he defines humanity through its ability to question, not through access to an essential truth.

Calvin has inherited a dualistic view of the world from the Gnostics and Augustine, most notably in the form of the dualism of good and evil. It should be noted that Calvinism does not support the mind/body dualism that is associated with the Christian heritage; for Calvin both (human) mind and body remain on this side of the ontological dividing line. This interpretation goes back to Martin Luther’s reading of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans: “For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death” (Romans 7,5). Luther comments that “[y]ou must not understand flesh here as denoting only unchastity or spirit as denoting only the inner heart. Here St. Paul calls flesh (as does Christ in John 3) everything born of flesh, i.e. the whole human being with body and soul, reason and senses, since everything in him tends

toward the flesh” (1983, 4). In this interpretation there is no ontological difference between the elements of creation and no special role for humanity. This interpretation contradicts the influential position of Lynn White, who blames the Judaeo-Christian tradition for the ecological crisis:

God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and rule: no item of the physical creation had any purpose, save to serve man’s purposes. And although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image. Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen. (1967, 1205)

White does not do justice to the Calvinist concept of God’s apartness from both humanity and nature. By making the essence of God unattainable to humans, Calvin places humanity into a worldly context, “Calvin’s impressively world-affirming theology may be said to rest upon asserting the utter ontological distinction between God and the world” (McGrath 1993, 221). Being placed in the world, however, is not a separation from God but a “*distinctio sed non separatio*” (Calvin, quoted in McGrath 221). The idea of distinction but not separation is at the heart of Abbey’s perception of nature: “I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate” (1992a, 6).

A consequence of Calvinist thought is existential doubt and the notion that humans who live in a transitory world do not have access to essences. A non-essential nature may be conceptualized in several ways: as an entity that reflects the absence of meaning (stressing ontological difference) or that shares its transitoriness with humanity (stressing ontological equality); it is furthermore a space or stage where the existential drama is enacted. None of the conceptualizations reflects “real” nature: all are culturally transmitted and therefore do not exclude each other. In contrast to many nature writers that are informed by Deep Ecology, the Calvinist approach to nature does not have, strictly speaking, a normative function. For Abbey nature does not have an intrinsic meaning; meaning belongs to the human sphere and is constructed both through writing a book and through experiencing nature. As a ranger he advises visitors to Arches National Park who look at Delicate Arch: “You may therefore find proof for or against His existence. Suit yourself. You may see a symbol, a sign, a fact, a thing without meaning, or a meaning which includes all things” (1992a, 36).

Calvin's notion of God's apartness is informed by the writings of Augustine, whose God is in the world, but beyond knowledge and human grasp (*deus absconditus*). For Augustine "it is better to find God by not finding him than by finding not to find him" (quoted in Chadwick 1996, 50). Augustine speaks of "informed ignorance," "*docta ignorantia*" (quoted in Chadwick 53) of a mind that "hungers for truth" (Chadwick 51). Although Augustine doubts the possibility of reaching final answers, he strongly encourages the search. The knowledge obtained in this search is always subjective and preliminary; it may alleviate spiritual separation, but it does not question the ontological distinction between the human and the divine spheres. The Augustinian and Calvinist problematization of knowledge and essence is surprisingly compatible with the epistemological doubt of modernism, but not with the essentialism of biocentric environmentalism.

One of the consequences of this human apartness from God is existential fear. The "fear of God" has ambivalent psychological consequences: Only by submitting to fear can one experience one's full religious-psychological potential: "For not only does piety beget reverence towards God, but the very sweetness and delightfulness of grace so fills a man who is cast down in himself with fear, and at the same time with admiration, that he depends upon God and humbly submits himself to his power" (Calvin 1975, 400). Calvin's notion of God is directed against the commoditization of a "culture God" and reinstalls what is called "the glory of God," a respect for the divine which exists apart from humanity and has to be feared. Hope and fear presuppose each other, "when the former is rising up the latter is oppressed; when the latter rises again, the former falls once more" (Calvin 1975, 400). The reason for employing the strategy of frightening sinners with fear of an incomprehensible God is to counteract the human arrogance that uses a predictable culture God for selfish objectives. An ironic example of the commoditization of a culture God is Janis Joplin's song "Mercedes Benz:" "Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz? My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends," and a contemporary variety is expressed in the slogan "confession brings possession" that is used by some African American preachers. Calvin's main aim is to instill a sense of humility into his culture: "Thus, nothing hinders God from training his own people in humility, that while fighting stoutly they may restrain themselves under the bridle of self-control" (1975, 400).

Since God is the source of existential fear, Calvin has no need for the devil. John Dillenberger observes that the "logic of his argument leads him to make God the cause of

evil, but denies this conclusion, escaping only by verbal declaration that this is not the case” (1975, 17). Calvin’s terrible and incomprehensible God is directed against a religious order that has domesticated its own culture God. Since “no one is loved by God apart from Christ” (Calvin 1975, 410) nobody can claim a special status before God. Calvin’s most effective blow against a culture God is to deny the cause-and-effect relationship between good works and salvation. In the deterministic world-view of Calvin, human fate depends on the predestination of an incomprehensible God. Denying good works and righteousness their status as prerequisites for salvation means that Calvin deconstructs the basis for morality: “all the works which proceed from us [...] are vicious, and therefore they can do nothing but displease God, and be rejected by him” (1975, 263). It is neither possible to please God with works, nor is it possible to conclude God’s good will from prosperity: “it follows that God does not everlastingly witness his love to those for whom he causes all things to prosper, nor does he always manifest his hate to those whom he afflicts” (1975, 416). Calvin’s concept of predestination follows Augustine’s position. For Augustine “[n]othing in man, past, present, or future can be the moving or meritorious cause of God’s election” (Augustine, quoted in Chadwick 1996, 115). As with Calvin, the argument to save God’s glory from the notion that his election can be traded for good works has some problematic implications: “it treats God as a wholly inscrutable arbitrary autocrat” (Chadwick 1996, 115) and may lead to moral relativism.<sup>19</sup>

The only links that remain between a depersonalized God and sinners are Jesus and the scripture. The normative authority of the scripture does “not only [...] prepare our hearts to reverence it, but to banish all doubt” (Calvin 1975, 354). The interpretation of the scripture, however, is a human endeavor and therefore subject to error: “It is utterly in vain, then to pretend that the power of judging Scripture so lies with the church, that its certainty depends upon churchly assent. Thus, while the church receives and gives its seal of

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<sup>19</sup> Williams discusses the two strains of Puritanism, Arminianism and Antinomianism. Whereas the Arminians believed that conversion was wrought by God in the soul and nothing humans did could either enhance or retard it. They stressed God’s sovereignty and man’s absolute dependence” (1989, 47). Nevertheless the Antinomians were confident that they were saved and “imagined themselves to be beyond Sinai, beyond the law and already entered into Canaan” (1989, 48). This means that Antinomians saw America as the Promised Land, a garden that did not have to be converted, whereas the Arminians stressed the necessity of both personal conversion, e.g. through trials in the wilderness and conversion of the wilderness itself. This means that the religious roots of the American view of nature are more complex than they appear. For some Puritans the terms “Calvinistic work ethic” makes sense, for others it is a contradiction in terms. Some are confident and believe themselves to be God’s chosen people while others stress the need for conversion. Some have a need for the wilderness as a space of conversion while others see it as a garden. Whereas some are moralistic and righteous, the ones that stress predestination remain doubtful and humble and question ethical systems.

approval to the Scriptures, it does not thereby render authentic what is otherwise doubtful or controversial” (1975, 355). Calvin’s text is riddled with the paradox that the scripture contains eternal truth but that this truth cannot be obtained and remains subjective; therefore its essence is as distant as God himself. But this is a paradox only if one wants to unify the spheres of faith and knowledge/reason. Calvin’s belief in a God who is far removed from human concerns causes the links to this God, namely organized religion with an ethical system built on reason, to wither. Søren Kierkegaard develops the Calvinistic idea of apartness further, and for him the only bridge between the human and the divine spheres is faith in something that is beyond knowledge. Faith is not grounded in historical knowledge but remains a paradox for the mind and is built upon the “abyss of doubt” (Kierkegaard, quoted in Liessmann 1993, 112). As in Augustine and Calvin, for Kierkegaard doubt and the search for truth rather than truth itself become the main ingredients of a religious experience.

Calvin’s relationship to rationalism is ambivalent; while his critique of moralism and the church implies support for the notion of individuality and is open to the scientific revolutions of his time, he criticizes the hubris and arrogance that accompanies the growing sense of humanistic self-importance. Calvinism is not directed against rationalism, but against some of its psychological consequences. The scientific human endeavor is relativized by God, but not contradicted:

For if in broad daylight we either look down upon the ground or survey whatever meets our view round about, we seem to ourselves endowed with the strongest and keenest sight; yet when we look up to the sun and gaze straight at it, that power of sight which was particularly strong on earth is at once blunted and confused by a great brilliance. (1975, 321)

The notion of apartness does not remove humanity from nature, nor does doubt devalue the scientific exploration of the world. Apartness or distinction from God does not mean separation because humanity is integrated into God’s creation but has no access to his essence. What we can see in nature are signs but no final meaning. Removing the essence from the world means to position humanity within a worldly context. Calvin precedes the modern epistemological position that experience is not (final) knowledge of the world; there is no access to the essence of nature or God. Calvin’s dualism of the spiritual and the worldly does not only lead to a positive reevaluation of the worldly but redefines the relationship between freedom and determinism. Freedom and determinism do not exclude

each other because they belong to different spheres. In a worldly context humanity is free, but in a metaphysical context humanity is determined. Calvin's humanism is a here-and-now humanism without any metaphysical aspirations. Death is the dividing line between freedom and determinism. The emphasis on the death theme in the analyzed authors does not undermine humanism, but rather shows its limits:

You, Edward Abbey [...] are going to die, and the day of your dying is not so very far away. You are going to die and all the world's loveliness—the love of young girls and old friends, the taste of cold water on a hot afternoon, the smell of green willow leaves, the molecular dance of fireflies over the swamp in Bennett's pasture, the feel of warm rain in April [...]—all the world's loveliness, the heartbreaking beauty, is going to die with you and for you and in you and forever. (1994, 31)

This excerpt from his journals shows how, for Abbey, the spheres of transitory and of existential nature clash and how existential nature aesthetically intensifies the perception of transitory nature, “the world's loveliness.”<sup>20</sup>

For Calvin God is present in his creation as is a sculptor in his own sculpture, but should not be confused with it: “it can be said reverently [...] that nature is God, but [...] it is a harsh and improper saying, since nature is rather the order prescribed by God” (Calvin 1975, 339). In other words, Calvin does not allow any notions of pantheism to slip into his view, and whereas God's creation can be studied in nature, his essence cannot be found there. This notion is echoed in Abbey who, on the one hand, describes nature in very physical terms but for whom essence remains elusive, as in the episode with the juniper tree. God is, however, the author of an “awesome voice which strikes the earth in thunder, winds, rains, whirlwinds, and tempests, caus[ing] mountains to tremble” (Calvin 1975, 353). Nature is the mirror of an incomprehensible God, “he alone [...] guides the whole course and order of nature: who at once sends rain and drought, hail and other storms, as well as calm, who of his kindness fertilizes the earth, and on the contrary, by withholding his hand, makes it barren: from whom come health and disease” (Calvin 1975, 252). Since

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<sup>20</sup> In “Billy Budd” Herman Melville states that the ability to distinguish between the transitory and the eternal spheres is not only limited to humanity but that the fear of death is more pronounced in civilized societies. The good-natured, innocent, and “barbarian” Billy Budd is sentenced to death. Although he understands the practical meaning of his death sentence, he is unable to grasp its metaphysical signification: “True, Billy himself freely referred to his death as a thing close at hand; but it was something in the way of children will refer to death in general, who yet among their other sports will play a funeral with hearse and mourners. Not that like children Billy was incapable of conceiving what death really is. No, but he was wholly without irrational fear of it, a fear more prevalent in the highly civilized communities than those so-called barbarous ones which in all respects stand closer to unadulterated Nature” (Burrell and Cerf 1953, Vo. 1, 197). As in Abbey, the insight into the limitation of the human sphere does not devalue that sphere, but, to the contrary, define it.

God has to be feared, the mirror of God, nature, does not have to be benevolent to humanity, it can reflect all his ambivalence and incomprehensibility. Whereas Calvinism maintains the theistic notion of a world that is steered by God, the course of the world and the meaning of God's actions expressed in natural phenomena are unattainable.

#### 4.3 Calvinist morality and aesthetics: Whirlwinds in the desert

William E. Connolly discusses the problems of providing an ethical ground with the example of the Biblical story of Job. Job is stricken by catastrophe although he has lived an exemplary life: "If these things were possible, [the] moral world would spin out of control. Contingency, luck, and blind fate would replace providence, justice, and order in the cosmos; these blind forces would inhabit every human project" (1993, 200). Job's story challenges notions of stability and moral order in the world.<sup>21</sup> Connolly argues that it is the absence of a moral order that interferes with the perception of nature. The interrogative voice in Job

calls up images of energy, diversity, strangeness, and uncanniness in nature. On one register it invokes whirlwinds, thunderclouds, lightning, deserts, [...]. On another it calls forth lions, antelopes, wild asses [...]. These energies, forces and beasts reflect the wonder of an earth more diverse, strange, vital, and vast than anything Job and his friends have been able to digest in their morally ordered cosmos. (1993, 204)

Connolly further discusses the god that is in control of Job's fate: "This god is not the designer of a cosmic womb that envelopes the little circle of human categories, wishes, fears, and hopes in its care. It is the instigator of a strange, vast world of internal energies and external forces; they clash, collide, converge, and careen through, over, and against one another in multifarious ways" (1993, 205). The main qualities of the god that Connolly describes equals that of Calvin's notions of the "glory of God" and that of the "*deus absconditus*," who is not to be found in the material world. The world can be strange because it does not have to reflect order, and God cannot be tainted by the imperfections of the material world.

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<sup>21</sup> In his essay "Jobs Bok" (1992) Zapffe makes a similar point claiming that in Job's story God behaves as an immoral autocrat, leaving the sphere of morality to humanity, himself behaving like a "world ruler of grotesque primitivity, a kind of cosmic cave dweller [who is] almost sympathetic in his complete ignorance of spiritual culture" (1992, 57, my translation).



The difference in the perception of God leads to a radically changed perception of nature. The absence of morality becomes the prerequisite for a full appreciation of the glory of nature. Connolly argues that the poetry of Job “gestures beyond the provincial boundaries of moral discourse” (1993, 206). The main problem of a morally ordered nature is, according to Connolly, its egocentrism—the Jobian perspective is its antidote:

Nature as intrinsic purpose or nature as plastic matter to be used—these two conceptions have competed for hegemony in the history of the West [...]. The Jobian theophany upsets both of these voices and the respective conceptions of moral order associated with each. Each [...] embodies transcendental narcissism. Each demands that the world be *for us* in the last instance, either as a dispenser of rewards for virtue or as a pliable medium susceptible to human mastery. (1993, 206, emphasis Connolly’s)

From a Jobian or Calvinist viewpoint, seeing the world as a material resource or seeing it as a source of intrinsic order or morality are two sides of the same narcissistic and anthropocentric coin. In this perspective Abbey’s concurrent distance towards industrialism and Deep Ecology makes sense. In Abbey’s world there is no access to essence, and a distinction between that essence and humanity is maintained. For many, as Connolly points out, the notion of the absence of a moral order in nature is difficult to accept. They “endorse a complex picture of moral order, partly because they doubt that any viable conception of collective identity and moral life can sustain itself unless it is attached to an external source of authority” (1993, 208). The derivation of ethics from nature is, of course, highly problematic, and it can be argued that Abbey’s self-professed anarchism is not so much a coherent political position as it is a reaction against external justifications of authority—justifications that are based on human narcissism.

#### 4.4 Calvin and Luther

There are several parallels between Calvin’s position and that of Martin Luther. Like Calvin, Luther had an image of God as terrible and all-powerful, and Roland H. Bainton points out that Luther “entertained a so exalted and so vivid a concept of God, the majestic, the all-holy, who inhabits eternity, sits upon the circle of the earth, in whose presence angels bow, at whose nod the earth trembles, whose ways are past finding out, [and] whose judgment are terrible” (1952, 28). As Calvin conceptualizes a God who is to be feared, Luther replies to the question whether he loves God “I do not love him. I hate him” (Luther quoted in Bainton 1952, 33). Like Calvin, Luther believed in predestination and the

uselessness of good works, but unlike Calvin he saw the gift of faith as a way to reach salvation. Luther and Calvin have similar positions when it comes to the image of God and the importance of good works. These parallels help to explain the parallels between Abbey, who was influenced by a Calvinist heritage and Peter Wessel Zapffe, who grew up in a Lutheran culture. For both Luther and Calvin human distinction from God is a central element of faith. Nevertheless, Luther seems to have focused on the importance of faith for salvation, whereas Calvin seems to have stressed the element of doubt. Luther was an optimist who believed in the “miracle of forgiveness,” whereas Calvin stressed the “impregnability of God’s purpose” (Bainton 1952, 114).

#### 4.5 Nature in Jonathan Edwards

One of the most important figures to transmit Calvinist thought into American culture is Jonathan Edwards. Like Calvin, Edwards perceived his culture to be complacent and his sermons were meant to shatter the foundations of a culture that had created its own benevolent culture God. According to Williams, Puritanism contained “two apparently contradictory strains, a communal pessimism that looked to the wilderness of human depravity and an individualistic optimism that rejoiced at being one with God in the sunny vineyards of Canaan” (1989, 48). Edwards saw himself in the desert of Sinai and preached against the complacency of Canaan where a domesticated God exchanges salvation for good works. Edwards preaches an “angry God without any promise or obligation at all” (Edwards 1992, 22) who cannot be regarded as a base for morality. Morality is built on the importance of external works, which is pointless for Edwards since all humans are sinners and their fate has been predetermined by an angry God, “all your righteousness would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider’s web would have to stop a falling rock” (20). Fear, doubt, and crisis are prerequisites for faith, whereas spiritual certainty is objectionable.<sup>22</sup>

Since God’s “arbitrary will [is not] restrained by [any] obligation” (Edwards 1992, 12), all creation is subject to “the terribleness of the omnipotent God” (Edwards 1992, 28). But

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<sup>22</sup> The conflict that Williams sees among the Puritans was also a conflict in the very person of Calvin who held both skeptic and affirmative views. Despite the skepticism that could lead to an “I cannot judge you”-style of moral humility, he was responsible for a death sentence as head of his church state in Geneva.

since only humans are sinners, their standing is even lower than the rest of creation: “creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly; the sun does not willingly shine upon you and give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth does not willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts” (1992, 20). The human power to subdue the earth is not a sign of the benevolence of God but is a curse. Here Edwards has laid the foundations for a non-anthropocentric world-view, rooted in the Old Testament, that still has to be discovered by environmentalism. The ambivalent nature of the Old Testament seems to be unpalatable for environmentalists used to the friendlier metaphors of Gaia and Mother Earth. An environmentalism inspired by skeptical Calvinism could be non-anthropocentric without having to subscribe to the normative consequences of essentialist positions and will not fall prey to the naturalistic fallacy. When Abbey starts his trip down the doomed Glen Canyon he writes:

We shall not see another of the tool-making breed for a long time and we could not care less.  
Misanthropy? Shakespeare could say  
Man delights not me,  
No, nor woman neither....  
And Raleigh too,  
I wish I loved the human race,  
I wish I loved its silly face.  
And Jeffers:  
Be in nothing so moderate  
as in the love of man. (1992a, 154-155)

The misanthropy that is seen in Jeffers’ work is also present in Abbey. Its roots do not lie in the human unwillingness to integrate into nature but in the fact that humans are sinners and are set off from the rest of creation. Abbey quotes Whitman’s lines from “Song of Myself:” “They do not sweat and whine about their condition / They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins” (Whitman quoted in Abbey 1992a, 21), and also here the distinction between humans and the rest of creation can be seen. Both belong to the material and transitory world, but only humans can ask metaphysical questions.

#### 4.6 Nature as a testing ground

Depending on whether one sees oneself in Canaan or in the desert of Sinai, natural spaces acquire a different status. The perception of nature by someone who sees himself in the

hands of a terrible God differs from someone who is in the Promised Land. For Cotton Mather wilderness is inhabited by the devil and must be subdued and transformed by the people of God: “The New Englanders are a people settled in those, which were once the devil’s territories” (1994, 320). For the Calvinists, however, the wilderness is a necessary testing-ground; it is not marked by the absence of God but is a place of spiritual struggle that may well result in madness or death, where salvation is not guaranteed. The status of the individual in the Calvinist worldview is paradoxical; although the individual may be destroyed in the existential struggle, the struggle also confirms the humanity of the individual. The struggle is a prerequisite for salvation and does not have negative connotations; struggle, doubt, and crisis in the wilderness are necessary elements of faith. Wilderness, the desert of Sinai, is therefore not the land of the devil but God’s own testing ground. An example of this is Mary Rowlandson exclaiming, after her dreadful experiences in captivity: “It is good for me that I have been afflicted” (1994, 131). Nature is not only an entity but also a space of experience. The difference between Puritan times and today is that until the closing of the frontier, nature provided that testing ground; today, however, there is a shortage of land, and that leads to the paradoxical situation that in order to experience nature as a testing ground, the actual ground has to be preserved, not transformed. This ambivalence of exposure and protection is at the heart of Abbey’s style of environmentalism.

#### 4.7 The concept of nature in later Calvinist thinkers: An overview

Calvinism did not disappear with the Puritans but was transformed and entered the theological mainstream. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Calvinist thought evolved in competition with liberal theology, transcendentalism, and science. Three theologians and scientists, Louis Agassiz, Horace Bushnell, and Edwards Amasa Park were emblematic of the transformation and dissemination of Calvinist ideas. They are the bridge between old Calvinism with its idea of *Deus absconditus* and a modern theology featuring the image of an intelligible and benevolent God while retaining central Calvinist elements.

Two main themes of these thinkers are relevant for a discussion of nature. One is Neo-Platonism with its notions of human distinction and the glory of God. The stressing of distinction is directed against the challenge of transcendentalism. The other challenge for

Calvinist thought is science, particularly Darwinism and geology. Agassiz, Bushnell, and Park did not challenge science as such but incorporated elements of scientific thinking into theology. Different strategies can be seen: science was used to confirm Creationism, it was attempted to reconcile Darwinism with theology, and the spheres of religion and science were defined as distinct. Despite the different strategies, the Calvinist thinkers confirmed the analytical and experimental approaches to nature, and this means that industrialization did not meet religious resistance despite a number of theological concerns. The modern Calvinism of Agassiz, Bushnell, and Park shows a typical pattern in its relationship to nature: on the one hand it is interested in the direct physical involvement of the scientific experiment, on the other hand it stresses distinction from the material world. Humanity is seen as playing a double role, partaking in both the natural and in the supernatural spheres. It is important to note that material nature is seen as imperfect and is neither the image of God nor a moral ground.

Louis Agassiz was a researcher and knew, “by virtue of careful work done in ichthyology, marine biology, paleontology, and zoology that knowledge of nature is at once experimental, comparative, and historical” (Lurie 1974, 26). He attempted to find scientific proof for creationism, and even though he eventually failed, he helped to make scientific thought acceptable for theologians. Agassiz’ method of research and of teaching was focused on direct experience, an attitude that bordered to the anti-intellectual. Although it was important for his marine research students to have a daily supply of specimens, Agassiz wanted to ban books from the working rooms (Lurie 1974, 60). For Agassiz the spheres of religion and science were complementary, and “God’s magnificence [is] drawn from the radiata, the echinoderms, and the brachiopods” (Lurie 1974, 25).

Like the scientist Agassiz, the theologian Park also saw his goal as “establishing an analogy or conformity of the truths of religion with what is observed in nature” (Cecil 1974) and to combine “dogma, piety, and reason” (Cecil 1974, 46). Park was aware of the fact that the study of nature is not a study of God, and that scientific findings can contradict the Bible. In order to retain a notion of God’s glory, it was necessary to preserve his transcendence over creation. This dualism “allowed for an empirical affirmation of science” (Cecil 1974, 66) while saving God from the scientists. Whereas he saw science dominated by the intellect, religion remained in the sphere of emotions. For Park “intellect and feeling should not be elevated or emphasized one over the other, because they work

from completely different, noncompetitive, but equally valid perspectives” (Cecil 1974, 108). Park did not see the Bible as a book of science (Cecil 1974, 166) and did not see Darwinism and theology in fundamental opposition. To the contrary, it could be argued that Calvinism with its notion of predestination and Darwinism with its determinism share an understanding of the world and that Darwinism is a “hyper-Calvinism without any of the redeeming remedial features inherent in the Calvinistic system” (Cecil 1974, 167).

Bushnell too was concerned about the question of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural spheres. For him “the natural and the supernatural are not two realms worlds apart, but both are functions of the divine” (Johnson 1963, 13). Human beings have, according to Bushnell, an ambivalent nature:

He [man] is not independent of nature in the sense of being separated from it in his action, but he is in it, envired by it, acting through it, partially sovereign as regards his self-determination [...] In certain parts or departments of the soul itself, such as memory, appetite, passion, attention, imagination, association, disposition, the willpower in him is held in contact, so to speak, with conditions and qualities that are dominated by laws of cause and effect; for these faculties are partly governed by their own laws, and partly submitted to his governing will by their own laws; so that when he will exercise any control over them [...] he can do it, in a qualified sense and degree by operating through their laws. As far as they are concerned, he is pure nature, and he is only a power superior to cause and effect at the particular point of volition where his liberty culminates, and where the administration he is to maintain over his whole nature centers. (Bushnell quoted in Johnson, 1963, 67)

Human beings are fully part of the physicality of nature but also transcend it. Bushnell’s statement is a variation on Calvin’s “distinction but not separation” theme. Bushnell does not have a problem with Darwinism because he sees the body and its functions as governed by nature, that is, in Bushnell’s definition, by cause and effect. The distinguishing element, however, is the ability to transcend that cause and effect through willpower. Abbey expresses this act of transcendence in his journal: “when the imagination can break through the wall of its own desires and fears, and can embrace the naked beauty of the real world, then we have discovered Paradise” (1994, 93).

An important aspect of this model is that morality does not originate in nature but in the transcendence of nature. Bushnell faced the logical dilemma of simultaneously accepting both the notion of God’s benevolence and of the divine origin of nature. However science, particularly geology, showed “a realm of deformity and abortion; groaning with the

discords of sin” (Bushnell quoted in Johnson 1963, 83). In order to explain the imperfect state of nature, Bushnell had to use the concept of sin. This leads to the somewhat paradoxical notion that nature is not natural but, due to corruption through sin, is in a state of “unnature” (Johnson 1963, 103). Seeing the external world as imperfect, or “unnatural,” Bushnell is able to incorporate scientific discovery into his theological system. Anthony Cecil argues that “[t]he pervasive atmosphere of optimistic democratic humanitarianism tended to be rather inhospitable to the theocentric, paradoxical gospel of Augustine, Calvin, and Edwards” (Cecil 1974, 249). This optimism tended towards religious expressions such as transcendentalism. Transcendentalism, however, is not the only religious expression at this time to have discovered nature. Equally strong is the dualistic tradition of a transformed Calvinism.

In a nutshell it can be said that transcendentalism, while not having a problem with scientific discoveries that contradict the Bible, assumes a benevolent God and has a problem with evil. Calvinism, on the other hand, with its dualistic world-view may struggle with Darwinism but manages to incorporate it eventually. It solves the problem of evil by either assuming an arbitrary God (old Calvinism) or assuming a state of original sin (newer forms of Calvinism). Even though it has fallen into disfavor, the dualism of Calvinism is still an important cultural factor, not least for the conceptualization of nature. Due to its dualism, it is not a paradox that the Calvinist view of nature is marked by a scientific rather than a spiritual attitude.

#### 4.8 Robinson Jeffers and Calvinism

Like Calvin and Edwards, Robinson Jeffers perceived his culture as self-absorbed and complacent. His God is even further depersonalized and inhuman than Edwards’. In his two long poems, “Dear Judas” and “The Loving Shepherdess” (1977b) he breaks the only remaining link between God and humanity by demystifying the Jesus figure. Without Jesus there is no hope for salvation, no need for a religion, just the desire for the truth of the human condition that makes Jeffers explore his Calvinist universe. God is not the basis for a moral system and the only truth that can be found in God is negative. All things are transitory and unrelated to a God residing in eternity. Jeffers uses different perspectives in his work in order to highlight the incompatibility between the eternal and the transitory.

Natural entities like the rocks, the sea, the earth and the stars often represent the eternal, in contrast to the short life span of humans and humanity: “Guard yourself from the terrible empty light of / space, the bottomless / Pool of stars. (Expose yourself to it: you might learn / something)” (1977a, 118) or in “old granites stones, those are my people [...] where they stand today they will stand / also tomorrow” (1965, 93).<sup>23</sup>

In the following quotation, however, entities like sun, earth, and rocks are perceived in the transitory mode and share the fate of death with human beings: “Time will come, no doubt / When the sun too shall die; the planets will freeze, and / the air on them; frozen gases, white flakes of air / Will be the dust [...] Also the galaxy will die” (1977a, 58). At times Jeffers looks upon human suffering and endeavors from a human perspective and he becomes more conciliatory, as in the poem “To the Stone-Cutters:”

Stone-cutters fighting time with marble, you foredefeated  
 Challengers of oblivion  
 Eat cynical yearnings, knowing rock splits, records fall  
 down,  
 The square-limbed Roman letters  
 Scale in the thaws, wear in the rain. The poet as well  
 builds his monument mockingly;  
 For man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die, the  
 brave sun  
 Die blind and blacken to the heart:  
 Yet stones have stood for a thousand years, and pained  
 thoughts found  
 The honey of peace in old poems. (1965, 3)

Natural elements can be perceived in the eternal or in the transitory mode; the resulting conceptualizations are incompatible and remain conflicting. An illustration of the conflict between the natures is found in London’s short story “To Build a Fire,” where the extreme cold of the eternal universe strikes both the protagonist and the planet: “The cold of space

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<sup>23</sup> A similar use of the star symbol is found in Stephen Crane’s short story “The Open Boat.” The four shipwrecked men are exposed to the “flatly indifferent” nature of the sea. The message that they read from their exposure is expressed in the symbol of the star: “A high cold star on a winter’s night is the word he feels that she says to him” (in Burrell 1953, Vol. 1, 594). As there is a change of the perception of nature through the exposure to it (i.e. a change of the marker) in Jeffers (“you may learn something”), also in Crane the significance of nature is changed: “When it came night, the white waves paced to and from in the moonlight, and the wind brought the sound of the sea’s great voice to the men on shore, and they felt that they could be interpreters” (Crane in Burrell Vol. 1, 1953, 600). The eternal and indifferent nature of the sea remains distinct from the transitory nature of humanity, but since they exist in the same physical space (they are not separate) they interact.



smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on the unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow” (London in Burrell and Cerf 1953, Vol. II, 26).

The endeavor of the stone-cutters and poets is indeed meaningless in a metaphysical perspective; from a human perspective, however, meaning can be created. Jeffers does not deny the meaning in human endeavors in a worldly context; what he denies is the metaphysical value of human works. His “inhumanism” is not a denial of humanity, but it is a denial of human arrogance. It could be argued that Jeffers, despite what he calls himself, is not an inhumanist. From an existential perspective his “inhumanism” stresses human distinction which is found in the search for meaning. The alternative to accepting human distinction or dualism, a reconciliation with nature, has its own pitfalls, as Terry Eagleton demonstrates: “either this will be, in classic style, a rational, idealized Nature of its own creation, in which case nothing has been achieved; or it will be actual Nature, Nature as rapacious and barbaric, in which case it is not clear how humanism can avoid the monstrous and mythological” (2003, 251). Jeffers’ inhumanism is in fact a salvation for humanism: because it cannot reign a dualist world (it would either be escapist and project an image of itself onto nature or barbaric such as in the attempt to unify the natural and human spheres in social Darwinism), humanism has to be limited to the human sphere.

Jeffers’ view of nature is non-anthropocentric without being biocentric. Humanity does not play a privileged role in the universe, and neither does nature. From the transitory or human perspective, Jeffers could be called a humanist. His brand of humanism is a *creatio ex nihilo*, a search for meaning in the absence of meaning. The common fate of death of all entities including humans, other life-forms, even the earth and the stars, binds these entities together in a form of life-boat ethic, a communality of an unprivileged transitory status in the face of eternity. A good illustration of the life boat ethic is Crane’s short story “The Open Boat,” where communality is found through a common existential threat; a threat that is not so much the imminent danger of death but the arbitrariness of death, its meaninglessness. In his poem “Original Sin” Jeffers expresses the Calvinist derivation of ethics from the idea of original sin: “But we are what we are, and we might remember / Not to hate any person, for all are vicious” (1965, 80). The “groundless ground,” which is finding communality through arbitrariness—is also the main theme in existentialism, a fact that is not surprising if one keeps in mind that both existentialism and Jeffers’ inhumanism share a common heritage of Calvinism. In Sartre’s statement “Things are entirely what they

appear to be and behind them... there is nothing” (1965, 140) the “nothing” is as important as the “things.” Sartre’s statement, although a negation of the metaphysical, is also a defense of the metaphysical instinct that cannot find an object in the real world.<sup>24</sup>

David Copland Morris interprets Jeffers’ inhuman nature in an ecocritical fashion: “From the inhumanist perspective, the nihilism and destructiveness of compulsive technological expansion can only be overcome by recognizing that ultimate value resides in nature, not in the human will” (1997, 2). I would argue that Morris’ ecocritical way of infusing meaning into inhuman nature is the opposite of what Jeffers expresses. Meaning and values belong to the human sphere, and nature can either corrode that meaning or confirm it, but is ultimately meaningless in itself. What Morris does is to bring nature back into the human and moral spheres and thus domesticate nature. With a Deep Ecology inspired mindset it is difficult to come to terms with the lack of control and purpose of existential nature. It is ironic that some radical Deep Ecology inspired environmentalists decry human control only to demand the re-contextualization of humanity into nature, in other words, a life that is controlled by an assumed natural order. These environmentalists see the notion of a lack of purpose in nature as a problem because their ethics needs an extra-human base. For Jeffers, on the other hand, ethics belongs purely to the human sphere: “Justice and mercy / Are human dreams, they do not concern the birds nor / the fish nor eternal God” (1965, 108). Jeffers here conceptualizes a Calvinist god who is removed from the human sphere. Depending of whether one stresses *human* or *dreams*, the poem adopts a more humanist or a more existentialist tone, but in neither case does nature provide any “ultimate value.”

From a Calvinist perspective, there is no metaphysical value in the transitory world and temporal values reside in the human mind only. The biocentric idea of the “inherent rights”

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<sup>24</sup> There is a crucial difference between Calvinism and European existentialism. Whereas for Calvinism (divine) essence is outside human experience and thus humanity is placed into the context of the world, humanity for Sartre is alienated not from the essence but from material existence. “A cardinal sin, from the existentialist viewpoint, is to conceive of human existence as being akin to the kind of being enjoyed by ‘mere’ things” (Cooper 1996, 3). For Sartre nature’s existence is nauseating: “Nature has slipped into their town, it has infiltrated everywhere, into their houses, into their offices, into themselves [...] they breathe it, and they don’t see it, they imagine that it is outside, fifty miles away. I *see* it, that Nature, I *see* it... I know it has no laws, that what they consider its constancy doesn’t exist” (1965, 225, Sartre’s emphasis). Stuart Holroyd points out that there is an affinity between Gnosticism, and existentialism; for both the human condition is one of entrapment in an “inauthentic” mode of existence (1994, 110), a line of thought leading to extreme dualism and anthropocentrism. In the Augustinian/Calvinist position, however, humanity, mind and body, is entirely part of the creation and is only alienated from essences, not from the world. Sartre’s existentialism and Calvinism share epistemological doubt; their ontological positions, however, are different.

of nature (and humans) is not supported by a Calvinist position. The attempt to dissolve the human/nature dualism has a paradoxical effect. What looks like a submission of the human to the eternal values of nature turns out to be the result of a conceptual appropriation of nature and increases human arrogance. It could be regarded as an attempt to gain metaphysical significance for humans via nature. In the above mentioned juniper tree episode, Abbey demonstrates the impossibility of human appropriation. He shows that it is impossible to overcome distinction, but he also shows that both narrator and the tree share the same world and are not separate. In his journals there is an ironic treatment of the themes of distinction and separateness: “‘God’ – a word for not thinking. ‘Mystery’ is better because it suggests questions, not answers. ‘Why’ is always a good question, the one question that distinguishes us from *the other* brutes” (1994, 254, my emphasis). Both humans and brutes are distinguished from the metaphysical sphere of mystery. Also, humans and “brutes” are distinguished due to the human aspiration to share the sphere of mystery, but they are not separate, as they are not “brutes” but “*the other* brutes.” (Here Abbey plays with Thoreau’s ironic reversal of “Brutes and Neighbors” in *Walden*).

Jeffers with his non-theist Calvinist conceptualization has been a major literary influence for Abbey. Whereas in Jeffers Calvinist themes surface in a clear form, echoing the unforgiving Old Testament demeanor of Edwards, in Abbey the Calvinist themes appear in different forms, sometimes unaltered, and sometimes playfully transformed into humor and comedy. In general Abbey has a more world-affirming outlook on life, although both writers share a similar worldview.

#### 4.9 The Calvinist desert of *The Sheltering Sky*

The journey of an American couple into the desert, in Paul Bowles’ *The Sheltering Sky*, is, literally speaking, a journey from America into the Sahara desert. Metaphorically, however, this is a reversed biblical journey from the Promised Land back into the desert of Sinai. What looks superficially like a romantic journey into the exotic, “going off with no proof of his identity to a hidden desert town about which no one could tell him anything” (1990, 174), develops into an existential crisis. Port and Kit have left the American fleshpots for an existential quest. They come from Canaan and their quest is Sinai, the spiritual testing ground. In contrast to the biblical story and to Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative,

however, their journey into the desert is not a passage because there is no end-point, no salvation, and no Promised Land. Only two options remain for the travelers, going back or going further. Their friend Tunner and the other American travelers serve as constant reminders of what Kit and Port have left and why they have left it. Tunner is superficial, complacent, self-absorbed, without a trace of self-doubt. Tunner fears the desert because “[n]othing ever happens the way one imagines it is going to. One realizes that most clearly here; all your philosophical systems crumble” (1990, 263). For Tunner the element of doubt and crisis that the desert represents has purely negative connotations, and he cannot grasp why anyone would travel there (his reason for going to the desert is to follow Kit). Since Port and Kit’s way back is blocked, the only way forward leads deeper into the crisis, to an immersion into the inscrutable desert. The only possible outcome for their quest is death or madness. The difference between the two characters and the Israelites is that for Kit and Port the Promised Land loses its appeal as the promise can not be fulfilled and develops into a new Egypt. Their fate, despite its terror, does not have negative connotations.

As in Jeffers, Bowles’ text is underlain with inhumanism. Port rejects the traditional humanism that assigns special importance to human beings: “I don’t have to justify my existence by any such primitive means. The fact that I breathe is my justification. [...] I’m not going to carry a passport to existence around with me, to prove I have the right to be here! I’m here! I’m in the world! But my world is not humanity’s world. It’s the world as *I* see it’ (1990, 94, emphasis Bowles’). Port denies the construction of a common ground on the basis of humanism. It is not a special meaning that defines human beings, it is rather the quest for this meaning—self-reflexivity rather than self-importance. Stephen Crane expressed the discovery of lack of importance such: “When it occurs to a man that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him, he at first wishes to throw bricks at the temple, and he hates deeply the fact that there are no bricks and no temples” (in Burrell 1953, Vol. 1, 594). Humanity is defined by what it has not, and this absence of meaning becomes in itself a common ground, a groundless ground, for humanity and a new ground for the relationship between Port and Kit.

Kit and Port do not discover God, they discover the nothingness behind appearances; this is why Port can say, “the difference between something and nothing is nothing” (1990, 206).

The desert is a Platonic shadow, but it does not mirror ideas or God, but nothingness. For Calvin and Edwards the spheres of humanity and God are distinct; for Jeffers the eternal and the transitory are incompatible, and for Bowles existence is threatened by non-existence; the underlying theme is similar: there is a sphere outside of and distinct from humanity. The human attempt to transcend material existence, an attempt that defines humans as humans, and to unify the spheres, leads to annihilation, to “the roar of nothingness the spirit hears as it approaches the abyss and leans over” (1990, 304). Kit is able, at the price of madness, to view this abyss of nothingness:

Before her eyes was the violent blue sky—nothing else. For an endless moment she looked into it. Like a great overpowering sound it destroyed everything in her mind, paralyzed her. Someone once had said to her that the sky hides the night behind it, shelters the person beneath from the horror that lies above. (1990, 328)

The specifically human aspect in this existential tragedy is not the human difference from nature; it is the ability for self-reflection that defines humanity. Paradoxically humanity distinguishes itself from nature in the act of understanding that it is a part of nature and does not have a metaphysical privilege. Like Bowles, Abbey sees the desert as a window to the universe and describes it as a

wasteland surrounded by dark canyons and the course of rivers and mountain ranges on the vast plateau stretching across Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona, and beyond this plateau more deserts and greater mountains, the Rockies in dusk, the Sierra Nevadas shining in their late afternoon, and farther and farther yet, the darkened East, the gleaming Pacific, the curving margins of the great earth itself, and beyond earth that ultimate world of sun and stars whose bounds we cannot discover. (1992a, 216)

Here the desert is suggestive of infinity. Later he describes the sun: “from here, at 13,000 feet above sea level, the sun is a white star, a white fire fierce as radium, burning in a sky of deeper, darker blue” (1992a, 226). Since the existential theme determines Abbey’s sense of aesthetics, it is not surprising that he finds Death Valley appealing: “Of all the deathly places the most deadly—and the most beautiful” (1991c, 80).

For Bowles the spheres of humanity and existence are incompatible; humans ask metaphysical questions about meaning, and the desert, representing existence, answers with a “no,” becoming a point of negative reference. Bowles’ desert is a heterotopia, it is a cultural stage where a crisis can be enacted and lived through; it is like a Puritan testing ground without an exit. The type of crisis enacted in a desert or wilderness has, since

biblical times, been the human quest for meaning and the corrosion of that meaning, in other words, both transitory and eternal modes of existence can be experienced here. Both Bowles and Abbey perceive nature as a space, and the most interesting space for both is where the human individual can come closest to nothingness, the desert. Both writers describe the human encounter of this space with an intense physical quality. In contrast to Bowles, however, in Abbey the boundaries between humanity and existence are not so clearly defined, as humanity partakes in different natures, one of them the nature of common transitoriness that binds together the nature of the body, of animals, plants, and rocks in a fate of transitoriness.

#### 4.10 Edward Abbey's Calvinist tragic and comic modes

Port's emotional isolation finds a parallel in Abbey's journal: "Oh God, there is a fearful tornado of Nothingness spinning in my soul. Raging against my own inner deadness—I have cut myself off from so much I can barely reach my own children, my own wife, I truly love no one. I live in a vast solitude" (1994, 180). For both Abbey and Bowles the desert is a place for spiritual crisis, a heterotopia. Like in Jeffers, the space can represent either the existential terror of nothingness, the metaphysical abyss, or it can represent a community of fellow entities that confront transitoriness, like animals, plants, or rocks. Abbey frequently shifts between these contradictory conceptualizations; this fact is responsible for the sudden twists and surprises in his texts. In contrast to Jeffers and Bowles, Abbey uses the existential perspective for comedy. The spheres of eternity and transitoriness do not exist independently; they collide and bump into each other without resolution. The spiritual mocks the material and the material mocks the spiritual:

I feel again the old sick romantic urge to fade away into those mountains, to disappear, to merge and meld with the ultimate, the unnamable, the bedrock of being. Face to face with the absolute—whatever it is. Sweet oblivion, final revelation. Easy now. What's the hurry? I light a cigar instead. (1991a, 78)

Lighting a cigar in the face of existential terror does not resolve the terror, but it relativizes it by stating that the existential view is but one possible perspective. Guttorm Fløistad analyzes the humor in Peter Wessel Zapffe's work, and it can be argued that Abbey and Zapffe's humor has a similar pattern. "The humor has a similar pattern: "The humor emerges now as a sovereign expression of life, as an ingredient in the deathly seriousness

of existence. These two elements can appear to be incompatible. This is hardly the way Zapffe experiences them” (1989, 46, my translation). For Abbey and Zapffe life and death, eternity and transitoriness, and comedy and tragedy spring from the same existential outlook on life and presuppose each other.

Comedy and tragedy are related genres, and Walter Kaufmann argues that “the difference between tragedy and comedy is not in the essence of the subject matter, but depends on our point of view” (1968, 40). Miguel de Unamuno expresses the same idea in “And you, who are you? You ask me; and I reply with Obermann, ‘For the universe, nothing; for myself, everything!’” (1954, 47). Richard Kerr states that comedy derives from tragedy (1967, 17), and that tragedy is a background of human experience:

Tragedy returns so many different answers because it must keep itself free to report what freedom finds. It cannot be narrower than the area it invades. Tragedy is in the area: not in the flaw, not in the hero, not in any moral conclusions which may be drawn from a difficult experience, not in sadness or suffering or fate. Tragedy is a terrain, vast, unmapped in advance, waiting for the impress of feet which will not break stride until the last possible step has been taken. (1967, 127)

Kerr uses the topographical metaphors of area and unmapped terrain to state that the tragic is a quality of nature, not something that is enacted by humans. What becomes clear is that comedy and tragedy are closely related, depend on perspective, and that comedy depends on tragedy. The idea of the tragic as an unavoidable quality of nature has a parallel in the doctrine of predestination that subjects the individual to the hands of an inscrutable God. But as tragedy has a comic side, predestination has a liberating side, as Bainton explains: “For Calvin the doctrine of election was an unspeakable comfort because it [...] freed man from concern about himself in order that he might devote every energy to the unflinching service of the sovereign Lord” (Bainton 1952, 117). Ironically, by denying a special metaphysical role, both the ideas of tragedy and predestination confirm the importance of humanity in the real world.

An illustration of the idea that tragedy is “in the area” rather than based on a character flaw is Zapffe’s “Cat Fable,” which I quote in full length:

A ship with some cats onboard is being abandoned by its crew and becomes stranded at a deserted island, and here the cats jump on land. The only inhabitants of the island are some spry but inedible beetles, and therefore the fate of the cats appears to be sealed.

But then the cats discover that the soft mud along the shore contains fat and delicious mussels that are easy to open.

Autotelically it is much less desirable for the cats to dig in the mud than to jump like tigers onto the land beetles; only the latter represents a life that is worthy of a cat. To choose it is an expression of an idealistic view of life—valuable and, at the same time, lethal. Life giving, however, is another, disgusting pursuit, that no decent cat would lower itself to.

The individuals that most gloriously represent the *cat form* and its characteristic life style will find it most difficult to participate in the digging of the mussels and are therefore, *under given conditions*, biologically inferior. Others, however, with a larger degree of indifference towards cat standards will lay in the mud all day, fatten themselves and breed. Once in a while they lift their dirt-covered faces and peek towards the snobs on land; mockery and satire alternates with glowing hate because the land cats remind them of their betrayal of the most valuable property of the species. Optimism develops to cover up the felling of guilt and shame, and if those others do not answer to the accusations, they should not really call themselves cats. Soon the defense has to be developed further; land cats are called neurotics and psychopaths—difficult words that stimulate the worn-out self-esteem of the mud colony. The analysts that are sent to the beach state a “resistance against the healing process” and diagnose a fear of water. The sea cats are triumphant, but also the others found the explanation to be correct and accepted it because they know what lies behind it.

The hunting cats, however, became pessimists. Not because of the problems that the others saw as essential, injuries and hunger, shortness of breath and cold, but because they found themselves placed in a world that did not offer a prospect for the holy form in their hearts. Realizing this they stopped to procreate. Soon prophets among them raised their voices and taught them the art of hope: One time we will all come to a land where what we catch with our noble art of hunting will be both edible and digestible. Many of us, however, behaved badly and would not take care of their liveness and power, and it was therefore the ship stranded. Now doom awaits the firm believers, but when we are dead a new ship will come and take the ones that did not lose faith. And all the others will die then and never be taken along.

But hunger tore their intestines and an incredible clamor was heard. They complained in many voices and said: *Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in unserer Brust* [Two souls, alas, inhabit in our breasts]. And many became traitors and went into the mud and ate until they were full, others, however, turned around at the word of the prophet and went towards the land, washed their pelts and prepared for the long journey. The proudest among them congregated and declared that it was the duty of every decent cat to rather die than to sell its soul for a plate of mussels. And when their leader realized that their powers left them, they lay down on a stump and died what could be called a tragic-heroic death. And many followed that example because they could not find itself into useful resignation; they became believers in the highest aims of the cat form, even though they saw through the consolation of the prophet and housed desperation in their hearts.

Most from both camps became slaves to eternal doubt and divided their time between uneasy replenishment and asceticism with deep cravings. Of course, there was a great



sense of relief that the aristocrats were gone; however, the new ideal to become one with the crabs could not yet be realized. (Zapffe 1941, 158-160, my translation)

Zapffe's sense of the tragic does not depend on some fatal flaw of the protagonist: instead it is based on the insight that human ideals and reality do not correspond. Herman Melville paints a similar picture of this conflict in his description of tortoises that were caught and kept alive on ships for food:

As I lay in my hammock that night, overhead I heard the slow weary draggings of the three ponderous strangers along the encumbered deck. Their stupidity or their resolution was so great that they never went aside for any impediment. One ceased his movements altogether just before the mid-watch. At sunrise I found him butted like a battering-ram against the immovable foot of the foremast, and still striving, tooth and nail, to force the impossible passage. That these tortoises are the victims of a penal, or malignant, or perhaps a downright diabolical enchanter seems in nothing more likely than in that strange infatuation of hopeless toil which so often possesses them. I have known them in their journeyings ram themselves heroically against rocks, and long abide there, nudging, wriggling, wedging, in order to displace them, and so hold on their inflexible path. Their crowning curse is their drudging impulse to straightforwardness in a belittered world. (in Lauter 1990, 2437)

The problem of the land cats and the turtles is structurally similar to that of Hamlet who comes with his ideals of learning, friendship, and justice that he had acquired in Wittenberg to a world where these ideals have no currency. In all three cases the reason for the tragic quality of the struggle is not a flaw but the insight into the irreconcilable difference between ideal and reality (in the case of the turtles it is not the turtles that have this insight but the human observer) and the unwillingness to give up one's distinction. This distinction can be based on a certain defining trait of the animals (hunting for the cats and straightforwardness for the turtles) or humanist ideals as in the case of Hamlet. The tragic structure is not necessarily a struggle between humanity and nature but one between entities that are distinct but not physically separate: between the cats and the reality of the island, between the turtles and the "belittered world," and between human ideals and human realities in the case of Hamlet. Although the basis for tragedy may well be the incompatibility of human ideals with natural reality, it is not a human-nature dichotomy that defines tragedy, instead it is the necessary distinction of all organizational principles of matter (such as life) with the dismantling forces around it, i.e. of being distinct without experiencing strict separation.

In his book *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, Terry Eagleton discusses different definitions of and views on tragedy. One major distinction of tragic forms is that between Aristotelian and existential tragedy. Aristotelian tragedy is defined by a number of qualifications such as the notion of hubris and greatness of the tragic character. However, for a “certain strain of existentialist philosophy death is tragic as such, regardless of its cause, mode, subject, or effect” (2003, 9). In this latter sense there are tragic elements in Abbey’s writing. Seeing death as tragic as such does not mean that all literature that contains death is tragic; tragic literature in the existential sense is literature that focuses on life’s transitoriness and on the consequences of death for individuals and cultures.

Tragedy is built on a distinction between the real world of imperfection and death and the ideal world of perfection, permanence, and inherent meaning. The ideal world is a human invention, and tragedy both undermines and confirms it; human distinction is undermined by death, but without distinction and the conflict of spheres there can be no tragedy.

Eagleton quotes Adorno’s definition of Kierkegaard’s sense of the tragic: “For Kierkegaard, the tragic is the finite that comes into conflict with the infinite, and, measured according to it, is judged by the measure of the infinite” (Adorno, quoted in Eagleton 2003, 52). The first sentence of Abbey’s *Black Sun*, “Each day begins like any other” (1982, 13) already contains the main error of the protagonist. Will thinks of the natural space of the forest as timeless and isolated from the disruptive finitude of the world. The error Will commits is to fall prey to what Elias calls a cultural amnesia, i.e. to forget the dynamic qualities of nature and to project upon it a static one.

According to Eagleton, the idea of the tragic is related to the “Christian doctrine of original sin, the belief that transgression is part of the way we naturally function, an essential structure of our species-being, and that this is a felicitous state or *felix culpa* because it is the source of our achievement as well as of our self-undoing” (2003, 146). In the tragic view, original sin is a prerequisite of being human, and a return to the garden would entail a renunciation of humanity. This means that the tragic view of the world is suspicious of Utopian and Edenic narratives that promise to overcome the split between humanity and nature. Eagleton discusses human liberation as a consequence of the split from nature:

The universe no longer speaks a specific language, which then leaves you free to invent your own. But the price one pays for this is to surrender the comforts of naturalism. Nature no longer grounds human value, so that humanity’s freedom is also its tragic

solitude. The schism which opens between Nature and culture is at once the source of our dignity and the truth of our alienation. (2003, 113)

According to Eagleton, the distinction between humanity and nature is a source of freedom because it “presents a temptingly blank slate on which to inscribe one’s own values rather than slavishly conform to those of God, Nature, or social convention.” Eagleton goes on to ask ironically: “Perhaps it is simply a metaphysical hangover to expect the world to be the kind of thing which could be meaningful in the first place, and so to find its apparent senselessness somehow lamentable” (2003, 65).

Abbey’s wish “to merge with the ultimate” is more than a suicidal temptation. Of course, merging with the ultimate would mean death in the actual situation, but the motivation behind it is more than death, it is the impossible wish to transcend human limitations. Unamuno explains the situation:

The visible universe, the universe that is created by the instinct of self-preservation, becomes all too narrow for me. It is like a cramped cell, against the bars of which my soul beats its wings in vain. Its lack of air stifles me. More, more, and always more! I want to be myself, and yet, without ceasing to be myself to be others as well, to merge myself into the totality of things visible and invisible, to extend myself into the illimitable of space and to prolong myself into the infinite of time. (1954, 38-39)

The basis for Abbey’s existential perception lies in the human condition, the ability to search for meaning in a meaningless environment and to experience natural limitations despite a capacity to imagine something limitless.

Existential terror is always present in nature, but Abbey manages to pierce this terror with moments of comedy because, in Kerr’s words, “power always has an untied shoelace” (1967, 27). However, it seems to be paradoxical that it is tragedy that stresses “man’s extraordinary freedoms” (Kerr 1967, 146) and that it is comedy that “will speak of nothing but limitation” (Kerr 1967, 146). Tragedy stresses the gulf between human freedom and natural necessities, whereas comedy foregrounds the limitations of nature. This means that comedy and tragedy depend on each other and are inseparable. The ecocritic Joseph Meeker, however, sees the tragic view as “wasteful and destructive” (1996, 167) and as affirming the “mastery and [...] greatness of man” (1996, 157). He wants humans to integrate into nature: “Evolution itself is a gigantic comic drama” (1996, 164). Meeker here repeats what Eagleton calls the “censure of glumness” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “Like atheism

and determinism, pessimism was socially disruptive, breeding cynicism, fatalism, and dissent, whereas the role of art was to edify” (2003, 24). In the activist and political aims of ecocriticism, environmental edification is a central element. Tragedy, on the other hand, “perceives a frightful abyss where the stout burghers see a foundation; but an unfounded world is also a self-founding one, with all the blissful pointlessness of a stupendous work of art” (Eagleton 2003, 55).

The difference between the above-mentioned views here is based on different perceptions of the human condition; whereas Kerr, Abbey, and Zapffe live in an existential universe marked by the Calvinistic apartness of God, Meeker is an organicist who wants to integrate humans into nature. Trying to see Abbey as an organicist limits his aesthetic scope. Abbey does not integrate himself into nature; he is, however, aware that finally death will bring integration, and he also seeks spaces in nature where he can experience both existential and transitory nature. But I would argue that his basic perception of nature as well as the source of his humor derives from the Calvinistic theme of *distinctio sed non separatio*, not from integration into nature. This is what Abbey means when he states that he imagines a mysticism where “the self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate” (1992a, 6). The struggle with a distinct nature is also the basis for Abbey’s aesthetic perception of nature: “The indifference of nature! Better yet, the hostility of it, the *positive* resistance! I *like* it that way. The enmity of the mountain. I *like* it tough” (1994, 116, my emphasis). Abbey transforms the hostility and difference into a positive experience. Although Abbey’s nature is sometimes life-threatening, there is an affirmation in its hostility.

Both Abbey’s comic and tragic elements stem from distinction and apartness, from the tension between transitory and existential nature. From the same source come Zapffe’s hilarious outdoor adventures in *Barske Glæder*. However, if one tries to abandon the tragic element in literature, the results might be didactic, moralistic, and descriptive, but they will not be funny.<sup>25</sup> Despite Meeker’s claim, there is little comedy in environmental literature. On the other hand, not living in a nature that has moral lessons to teach enables a sense of release. Abbey is famous for defining the desert as a place to throw beer cans into, and in

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<sup>25</sup> David Oates sees a sense of loss at the thematic center of nature writing: “A huge chunk of all the nature poems I’ve ever read (and it must be thousands) take that elegiac tone; and a similar proportion of the nature-writing essays. Some mixture of memory and regret will almost inevitably shape the experience” (2003, 39).

the following quotation he describes a scene that one would hardly expect in a nature writer as for example Matthiesen:

From the edge we look down almost directly on the river and our bright little orange skiffs lined up like toys in the sand. We can see Kevin Briggs lying there, sleeping another one off. Perhaps we should drop a few boulders down his way, wake him up, make sure he is all right? That suggestion is tabled but the urge to violence and destruction on the part of some cannot be wholly suppressed. One member of our party, followed soon by two others, leads a scramble across loose talus to a better promontory upriver. There they sweat and grunt for a while until they succeed in dislodging a half-ton block of limestone; they nudge it off the brink, it falls, revolving lazily in space, and explodes on impact far below. (Abbey 1991b, 138-39)

Sigmund Kvaløy reports the similar attitude of his friend Peter Wessel Zapffe: “I had learned from Peter to make fires that emitted an incredible amount of smoke, and that it is funnier to roll big rocks down a steep slope than to admire their well-placedness in the terrain” (1989, 226-227). Although on the surface these actions appear to demonstrate human arrogance, they show a sense of humility. Zapffe and Abbey do not take themselves seriously, and their actions are innocent play. They are aware that by rolling rocks they do not destroy nature but merely accelerate a natural process. Zapffe said that “values must continuously supplied with energy from the outside ... but destruction gets help from nature” (quoted in Kvaløy 1989, 227). It is the conflict with nature, not the identification with it that is the basis for both the tragic and the humorous elements in these writers. According to Kvaløy, Zapffe was “one of the few prophets among us [...] who see as a starting point the constant stream of conflict, where a full existence as a human being does not provide a meditative break in this stream, but rather an experience of freedom and a catharsis-based happiness on a higher level that causes a distance to everyday life and, among other things, is the basis for humor” (1989, 228). Conflicts with nature do not have to lead to an enmity towards the natural world, they can be lived out playfully or they can lead to a perspective that provides freedom through the act of denying nature any predetermined meaning and also denying human existence any metaphysical importance.

Can there be an environmentally friendly tragic view? I think that Meeker is wrong when he states that tragic man is “a triumphant image of what man can be” (1996, 157). This view does not take into consideration that the existential element in tragedy, developed from Calvinism, demolishes the notion of human superiority. Furthermore Meeker builds his notion of comedy on a concept of nature that is pastoral: “Productive and stable

ecosystems are those which minimize destructive aggression, encourage maximum diversity, and seek to establish equilibrium among their participants—which is essentially what happens in literary comedy” (1996, 160). Notions of a benevolent nature are situated in a historical context and are not necessarily politically benevolent. A tragic view of nature, where existential nature is separated from the human sphere, on the other hand, does not easily lend itself to use as a moral and political ground. Meeker claims that a prerequisite for tragedy is the “belief that the universe cares about the lives of human beings” (1996, 167). However, the opposite is true, at least in the notion of tragedy derived from Calvinism and existentialism. Meeker also claims that tragedy assumes “that man is essentially superior to animal, vegetable, and mineral nature and is destined to exercise mastery over all natural processes” (1996, 167). The Calvinist view does not presuppose human superiority over nature, quite the contrary (see my discussion of Lynn White’s thesis). In Kaufmann’s view tragedy “moves into the center immense human suffering,” a “suffering that is universal—not a mere accident in our experience” (1968, 85). It is easy to imagine that the notion of human suffering can be extended to other non-human beings, and this definition of tragedy is not inherently anthropocentric. From this definition a notion of kinship with nature—with transitory, not with existential nature—can arise, and this is what happens in *Abbey*.

*Abbey* depersonalizes the Calvinistic God to such a degree that no systematic religious substance remains: “Not God—the term seems insufficient—but something unnamable, and more beautiful, and far greater, and more terrible” (1991a, 120). *Abbey* frequently approaches the negative point of reference without ever reaching it. He discusses the attraction of the desert, first listing its peculiar qualities such as landforms, the “queerness of the plant life [...] the splendor of sundown after an August storm, [...] the human history” (1984, 153) but then describes the limitation of the descriptions:

Yet none quite fulfills the peculiar appeal that the desert scene has for some of us. There is something more in the desert, something that has no name. I might call it a mystery—or simply Mystery itself with a capital *M*. Unlike forest or seashore, mountain or city, plain or swamp, the desert, any desert, suggests always the promise of something unforeseeable, unknown but desirable, waiting around the next turn in the canyon wall, over the next ridge or mesa, somewhere within the wrinkled hills. What exactly? Well ... a sort of treasure. A kind of delight. God? Perhaps. Gold? Maybe. Grace? Possibly. But something a little more, a little different, even from these. (1984, 154)

Whereas Bowles' characters fully embrace the abstract idea of the void in a desert that acts as a stage, Abbey embraces the physical quality of the desert, but its essence remains inaccessible. Abbey describes his experience in religious terms, but like Calvin's God, the essence remains elusive and distinct. Abbey's brand of religious experience could be paraphrased as the act of not finding God, but in his search he may experience the fear of God: "What *am* I doing here? Who cares? I can't think of any other place I'd rather be, despite the sensation in my heart of panic and dread. Of fear. Fear of what? I don't know" (1991a, 79, emphasis Abbey's). Certainly, experiencing fear and a crisis is a "negative" experience but not necessarily a useless one since it is a cornerstone for an understanding of what it means to be human and is a prerequisite for Abbey's roaring celebration of life and for his humor. Like Calvin, Edwards, and Jeffers, Abbey uses the unsettling quality of the wilderness to counteract cultural complacency. Peter Quigley speaks of "the sense of vastness" that Abbey learned from Jeffers, a vastness or "groundlessness [that] taught him to look at pomposity with satire and humor, and to respect the quiet hum of eternity embodied by the graceful, solemn calm of a floating buzzard" (1998a, 8). Vastness against pomposity is Abbey's translation of Calvin's reinstatement of the glory of God against a commoditized culture God.

#### 4.11 Conclusion

Lynn White's argument is that "wilderness" and "desert" in the Bible have negative connotations, thus proving that the Judaeo-Christian enmity towards nature is common in environmental thought.<sup>26</sup> This point of view neglects that there is a need for crisis and doubt. An argument for environmentalism inspired by Calvin would not condemn scientific or material progress, but could warn against some of the spiritual implications of this progress, such as the feeling of human omnipotence. Abbey describes this middle ground between progress and humility in his essay "Science with a human face" (1991a). A Calvinist ethical system with only a negative point of reference could not construct a moral system such as Deep Ecology; it could, however, using a lifeboat ethic, stress the

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<sup>26</sup> As a possible way to overcome anthropocentrism, White proposes that the church focus more on figures such as Francis of Assisi. Assisi has indeed become the patron saint of environmentalism in the last few decades, but I would argue that other Christian traditions, such as Calvinism, could be used in an environmental debate. The strategies of Assisian and Calvinist non-anthropocentric arguments are, however, diametrically opposed. Whereas Assisi stresses the value of other beings around him, Calvin counters human arrogance, specifically the arrogance of believing oneself to be chosen by God.

communality of suffering with all living entities. It could not assign any special role to humans, and its non-anthropocentrism would be born out of humility.

In order to develop a non-anthropocentric world-view that operates with notions of incomprehensible existence, a God apart from humanity, the impossible quest for meaning, and the spiritual need for doubt, crisis and fear, one may look at the Calvinistic heritage that is visible in writers like Jeffers, Bowles, and Abbey. Abbey is right when he complains about the narrow criticism of his texts, which “I’ve had to endure now for the past twenty years” and that a *New York Review of Books* reviewer “seizes on one narrow aspect of my writing (the desert-loving, deep-ecology bit), and ignores the other ninety percent, thus misrepresenting my books and falsifying my life” (1994, 350). This other ninety percent is environmental literature too, although not informed by Deep Ecology. When Abbey writes about the desert, he is not necessarily writing about the environment but about his human condition: “Is the Grand Canyon truly the *‘locus Dei’*? Perhaps so. The gorge and the God-term have much in common—both are vast, awesome, incomprehensible ... and entirely devoid of content” (1994, 113). The author Douglas Kennedy explores the same conceptual ground as Abbey’s “ninety percent,” stressing the sense of doubt and apartness in a natural space:

And, on the horizon the most glacial vista imaginable—the menacing, forbidding silhouettes of the Grand Tetons. Craggy summits scraping the sky at thirteen thousand feet, arrogant in their austerity. There was nothing inviting or user-friendly about these peaks. They had an Old Testament demeanor; solemn, fateful, unforgiving. They dwarfed you. They mocked your temporal preoccupations. They let it to be known: you are a negligible transient destined for obliteration. (1997, 228)

Both examples furthermore show that the Calvinist notions of the apartness of God and the fear of God have evolved into a form of nature existentialism. Environmental criticism cannot afford to neglect the conceptualizations of nature that have been informed by the Calvinist heritage. A disregard for the cultural roots of Calvinism would cut off environmental literature from a strong cultural current, particularly in the United States.

The status of nature in the discussed authors remains ambivalent. Nature either represents apartness, or it shares existence with humanity. This second conceptualization can be developed into a non-anthropocentric “in”-humanism. Both conceptualizations of nature in the discussed authors have been inspired by the Calvinist heritage and often take the form



of existentialism. This existentialism is different from its European counterpart, which remains caught in anthropocentrism, but is paralleled in the Norwegian philosopher and writer Peter Wessel Zapffe. The Calvinist conceptualizations of nature are more in accordance with modernism than with the essentialism of Deep Ecology or other forms of nature spirituality. For the discussed authors the insight that nature provides is negative, it questions and corrodes existing systems of meaning, but does not create better ones. Whereas the conceptualization of nature as shared transitoriness can kindle a feeling of closeness to nature, a conceptualization marked by incomprehensibility and apartness does not facilitate love for the natural world, but it generates respect for what could be called the glory of nature.

Conceptualizations of nature that have derived from Calvinism stress the existential conflict between the transitory and the metaphysical. This could lead to a re-definition of the terms biocentrism and anti-anthropocentrism. Often these terms are seen as synonyms, but it is possible to distinguish between them. Whereas the above-mentioned authors are not biocentrists, they advocate a form of anti-anthropocentrism that is not directed against difference (or distinction) but against human arrogance. The Calvinist and existentialist tradition in nature writing challenges the position that Western dualism and/or the Judaeo-Christian heritage are responsible for an ecological crisis. It furthermore challenges Meeker's notion that comedy is more environmentally friendly than tragedy.

## 5. Abbey and Science

### 5.1 The romantic ambivalence towards science

The romantic movement in general and nature writing in particular have a complex and ambivalent attitude towards science. As is nature writing, science is committed to the exploration of external reality, and consequently science is seen as an ally by nature writers of the lower-cased variety. Some nature writers even see themselves as partaking in the scientific exploration of nature, and Thoreau's measuring of Walden Pond may serve as an example here. Another attitude towards science, found in Nature Writing inspired by Deep Ecology, could be called domestication of science through affective engagement. The affectively engaged ecology of biocentrism attempts more than its scientific counterpart because it provides an ideological basis for a re-contextualizing strain of environmentalism and for activism. In ecocriticism this affectively engaged version of science is encountered frequently. A third attitude towards science that is found in environmental literature is fear not so much of science but of its technological application. The sometimes heard skepticism towards a "techno-fix" for environmental problems stems from this attitude. A fourth attitude towards science is the "cold science" argument: science is blamed for removing a sense of wonder from the experience of the world and for reducing the world to graphs. Often this argument is coupled with the wish to re-infuse spirituality into the world.

### 5.2. Science and the sense of wonder

Romantic literature sometimes contrasts intellectual science, with its indirect methods, with a direct, emotional experience of nature. William Wordsworth claims that: "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings / Our meddling intellect / Misshapes the beauteous form of things: / We murder to dissect" (quoted in Dennett 1995, 386). Another example of the argument that science interferes with a sense of wonder is found in Whitman's poem "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer:"

When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them, [...]

How soon unaccountable I became, Tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars. (quoted in Allison 1983)

Abbey too argues along this line when he discusses an *LA Times* article about the claim made by a psychologist that there is little known about the psychology of dogs: “[a]nyone who has ever kept a dog knows more about dogs than that psychologist—who doubtless considers himself as a legitimate scientist—will learn in a year of Sundays” (1991b, 29). As in Wordsworth and Whitman, the scientific view is seen as an adulteration of direct emotional experience generating a sense of wonder.

Criticism against this simplistic contrast of science and wonder, of indirect versus direct experience, has come from the scientific community. The biologist Richard Dawkins contests the allegation that science destroys wonder in his book *Unweaving the Rainbow*. Dawkins claims that a sense of wonder towards nature is not prevented by science but, on the contrary, is facilitated by scientific insights. In order to experience wonder one cannot resort to direct emotional experience but should break with existing patterns of experience: “There is an anaesthetic of familiarity, a sedative of ordinariness which dulls the senses and hides the wonder of existence. [...] We can’t actually fly to another planet. But we can recapture that sense of having just tumbled out to life on a new world by looking at our own world in unfamiliar ways” (Dawkins 1998, 6-7). Dawkins continues to list some of the scientific discoveries that are antidotes to the “anaesthetic of familiarity” and asks: “Isn’t the speechless universe a worthy theme? Why would a poet celebrate only persons, and not the slow grind of natural forces that made them?” (1998, 16). Another scientist promoting a sense of wonder is the physicist Richard Feynman who explores the aesthetic potential of a biochemical discovery:

Is no one inspired by our present picture of the universe? This value of science remains unsung by singers: you are reduced to hearing not a song or poem, but an evening lecture about it. This is not yet a scientific age.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this silence is that you have to know how to read the music. For instance, the scientific article may say, “The radioactive phosphorous content of the cerebrum of the rat decreases to one half in a period of two weeks.” Now what does that mean?

It means that phosphorous that is in the brain of a rat—and also in mine, and yours—is not the same phosphorous as it was two weeks ago. It means the atoms that are in the brain are being replaced: the ones that were there before have gone away.

So what is this mind of ours: what are these atoms with consciousness? Last week's potatoes! They now can remember what was going on in my mind a year ago—a mind which has long ago been replaced.

To note that the thing I call my individuality is only a pattern or dance, that is what it means when one discovers how long it takes for the atoms of the brain to be replaced by other atoms. The atoms come into my brain, dance a dance, and then go out—there are always new atoms, but always doing the same dance, remembering what the dance was yesterday. (Feynman, quoted in Dennett 1995, 360)

Feynman sees the scientific discovery as a basis for an aesthetic appreciation that translates the discovery into the poetic image of the dance and into a question of identity.

Although Dawkins and Feynman rightly criticize a reductionist view of science found in some romantic literature, they may be accused of a reductionism of their own, namely assuming that all romantic literature shares an anti-scientific bias. They may have been dazzled by the fact that in the world of literature contradictions are seen as poetic license in the spirit of Emerson who exclaimed “Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then?” One does not have to go much further than to Whitman and Abbey to find celebrations of science. Whitman not only celebrates science, “Hurrah for positive science! Long live exact demonstration!” (quoted in Lauter 1990, 2745) but sees it at the basis of poetry:

Exact science and its practical movements are no checks on the greatest poet but always his encouragement and support. [...] The sailor and traveler, the anatomist chemist astronomer geologist phrenologist spiritualist mathematician historian and lexicographer are not poets but they are the lawgivers of poets and their construction underlies the structure of every perfect poem. [...] In the beauty of poems are the tuft and final applause of science. (quoted in Lauter 1990, 2720)

Although Abbey occasionally deplores the fact that science is reductive and impoverishes human experience, the idea that science generates a sense of wonder is prevalent in his texts:

Science has made the world a sweeter cleaner fresher place in which to live. [...] The old gods have been swept like so many mildewed spiders out of the skies [...] [T]he stars, stripped of adolescent fantasy, are brighter and bigger and a thousand times more beautiful. [...] The human imagination, when it feeds only upon itself, as in the Dark Ages, does not liberate – it confines and poisons the human spirit. [...] But when the imagination can break through the wall of its own desires and fears, and can embrace the naked beauty of the real world, then we have discovered Paradise. (1994, 93)

Abbey describes how science liberates the human mind from the prison of self-referentiality and how this liberation is a prerequisite for an aesthetic sense of the world. In

the following quotation Abbey elaborates on the aesthetic dimension of science, first quoting Keats' accusation that science is reductive:

It seems to me that Keats was wrong when he asked, rhetorically, "Do not all charms fly... at the mere touch of cold philosophy?" The word "philosophy" standing, in his day, for what we now call "physical science." But Keats was wrong, I say, because there is more charm in one "mere" fact, confirmed by test and observation, linked to other facts through coherent theory into a rational system, than in a whole brainful of fancy and fantasy. I see more poetry in a chunk of quartzite than in a make-believe wood nymph, more beauty in the revelations of a verifiable intellectual construction than in whole misty empires of obsolete mythology. The moral I labor toward is that a landscape as splendid as that of the Colorado Plateau can best be understood and given human significance by poets who have their feet planted in concrete—concrete data—and by scientists whose heads and hearts have not lost the capacity for wonder. Any good poet, in our age at least, must begin with the scientific view of the world; and any scientist worth listening to must be something of a poet, must possess the ability to communicate to the rest of us his sense of love and wonder at what his work discovers. (1991c, 86-87)

In this quotation Abbey not only stresses the importance of science for the full development of the aesthetic dimension, he furthermore states that the terms of the aesthetic discourse are scientific. Abbey would agree with Phillips who points out that "[s]cientific discovery and technological achievements do not mark our final alienation from nature: they mark our ever-greater involvement in it" (2003, 31). Like Abbey, Dawkins claims that Keats "might have been an even better poet if he had gone to science for some of his inspiration" (1998, 27).

Although wonder is generated through a scientific worldview, it does not follow automatically but has to be developed and experienced; for the poet this means "to plant his feet in concrete data." The scientist and the poet do not meet on some middle ground between hard facts and wonder: hard scientific facts are the common ground, their aesthetic dimension explored by poets. That these hard facts mean a de-familiarization of a direct or commonsensical perception is not a disadvantage but a prerequisite for an aesthetic appreciation. As in science there exists a close connection between theory and empiricism, for Abbey a description of the world and its physical experience complement each other. In the following quotation Abbey refers to the scientific facts of Death Valley, only to complement it with his own exploration of its physicality. He describes the valley in detail: "Where the salt flats come closest to the base of the eastern mountains, at 278 feet below sea level, lies the clear and sparkling pool known as Badwater," and mentions "Telescope

Peak with its cornices of frozen snow 11,049 feet above sea level.” The exact knowledge of facts is accompanied by personal and physical involvement with the external world: “[o]ne would like to climb or descend that interval someday, the better to comprehend what it means” (1991c, 81). The scientific facts provided do not compete with that involvement but provide a basis for it.

Abbey’s style of using nature and science are not marked by affective engagement, and consequently there is no attempt to re-infuse spirituality into the world. A sense of wonder is generated through a scientific view of the world, but this does not mean that Abbey limits himself to scientifically inspired descriptions of nature. In his writing “[n]ot imitation but evocation has been the goal” (Abbey, quoted in Ronald 1988, 72), and hard facts become elements in Abbey’s highly individual experience of the world, but only structure it loosely. His style of writing could be compared with his style of hiking; he knows how to do proper descriptive nature writing, but has no patience for it:

I firmly believe that one should never [...] go out into that formidable wasteland of cactus, heat, serpents, rock, scrub, and thorn without careful planning, thorough and cautious preparation and complete [...] equipment. My motto is: Be Prepared. That is my belief and that is my motto. My practice, however, is a little different. I tend to go off in a more or less random direction myself, half-baked, half-assed, half-cocked, and half-ripped. Why? Well, because I have an indolent and melancholy nature and don’t care to be bothered getting all those *things* together—all that bloody *gear* [...] (1991c, 17-18, emphasis Abbey’s)

However, this rejection of systematic preparation does not mean that Abbey attempts to embrace nature directly; the physical reality of Abbey’s nature is harsh and retains its otherness: “Something about the desert inclines all living thing to harshness and acerbity. The soft evolve out. Except for the sleek and oily growths like the poison ivy” (1991c, 14). Here Abbey uses scientific insights to show that the natural and the human spheres are different.

There lies an apparent contradiction in the fact that Abbey on the one hand describes nature in all physical detail, and thus familiarizes the reader with the natural space, and that, on the other hand, he de-familiarizes through his use of scientific insight that often contradicts notions of nature that are marked by affective engagement, in other words, he de-humanizes nature. An example is found in a description of a river trip down the Yukon:

We run some lively rapids, continuous for a mile. More icy water in my face, down my neck, inside my pants. Most refreshing. Bald eagles go winging by, as common here as buzzards in the desert. When we stop for lunch I see moose sign on the path, clusters of them here and there, each dropping the size and shape of a dove's egg. And the same color—brown. I keep looking for Lord GRIZ, keep expecting that humped figure to come crashing out of the jungle, looking for me. But when I go probing into the gloom of the alder thickets I see only flies, and hear only mosquitoes, and smell only rotting leaves. Very quiet in there. A sense of—deception. I can hear a voice saying, *Nobody here but us shadows, boss....* (1991b, 68, emphasis Abbey's)

Abbey describes the natural space with the mindset of an explorer and uses scientific details to enhance the sense of physicality in the reader. However, at the same time he describes an alienation that in the concrete case is partially caused by the possibility of meeting a grizzly bear. This ambivalence is also found in the role that science plays in culture in general: On the one hand it is a tool to domesticate the world and thus reduce its otherness (showing that humans are not separate from the material world), on the other the sense of wonder generated through de-familiarization increases otherness (showing that human sense of wonder is a distinctive mark). What science does in Abbey's writing is to physically re-contextualize humanity into the world while spiritually de-contextualizing it. This notion is a variation of the distinction but not separation-theme that dominates Abbey's work.

### 5.3 Abbey's mad scientist argument

Sometimes the sense of wonder associated with science is extended to technology, as in Whitman's poem "To a Locomotive in Winter" that prefigures modernism: "Thy black cylindrical body, golden brass and silvery steel, / thy ponderous side-bars, parallel and connecting rods, gyrating / shutting at the sides." For Whitman the locomotive becomes a "Type of the modern—emblem of motion and power—pulse of the continent" and influences his poetry directly: "Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music" (Whitman quoted in Lauter 1990, 2821). Abbey does not share Whitman's celebration of technology and demonstrates a more cautious position:

Not that technology and industrialism are evil in themselves. The problem is to get them down to human scale, to keep them under human control, to prevent them from ever again becoming the self-perpetuating, ever-expanding monsters we have allowed them to become. (1991c, 46)

However, rather than problematizing the political control in the application of science, Abbey claims that there are good and bad scientists. According to Abbey there were a number of scientists who challenged the political order of their days and whose observations lead to real progress of humanity. He names “men like Democritus, Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, Lyell, Darwin, and Einstein as liberators of the human consciousness” (1991a, 125), while the achievements of others made possible “fantastic crimes [...] against humanity in this century” (1991a, 125). Andreas Goebel argues that Abbey’s Manichean categorization of scientists, (i.e. into “us”-scientists who fight selflessly for the furtherance of humanity, and “them”-scientists who work for a power structure), is a simplification bordering on demagoguery (1995, 145-147). Abbey fails to outline through which political means a society could promote “good” science and technology. Abbey’s simplification is due to his individualism that prevents him from conceiving the social means to control science, and thus he falls back onto a moralist distinction between good and bad scientists.

#### 5.4. Science and affective engagement

Since Abbey is often seen as a literary representative of the radical environmental movement, the role that science plays in that movement must be analyzed. Phillips claims that American environmentalists “still cherish the ideas of balance, harmony, and interconnectedness, and believe that the science of ecology has verified their truth” (2003, viii). However, there is no verification of these conceptualizations to be found in science: “Ideas like these are belied by the natural world’s tendency to chaos, competition, and continual evolution” (Phillips 2003, viii). Because a number of environmentalists, nature writers, and ecocritics adhere to a biocentric version of ecology, it is not surprising that these fields are often “under-informed by science” (Phillips 2003, ix), and that “interdisciplinarity [has] been limited to troping on a vocabulary borrowed from ecology” (Phillips 2003, ix). There is a certain irony in the fact that the evolution of scientific knowledge has left some ecocritics with an outdated concept of ecology: “The values to which ecology dedicated itself early on—especially balance, harmony, unity, and economy—are now seen as more or less unscientific, and hence as ‘utopian’ in the pejorative sense of the word” (Phillips 2003, 42). The problem here, I would argue, lies not so much in the fact that Nature Writing is under-informed by science or has a dated



perception of it, but that it is informed by a science of affective engagement.

An ecology marked by affective engagement is not only found in Nature Writing and in Deep Ecology, but also in some ecocritical positions. Ursula Heise analyzes the influence of Deep Ecology on ecocriticism and states that “[S]ome ecocritics have applied environmentalist terminology to literary texts in highly metaphorical ways: notions such as ecology, ecosystem, ecological balance, energy, resources, and scarcity have been transferred to texts conceived of as systems of an internal logic that, when activated by the reader, reveals the dynamic coexistence of diverse components and the text’s overall evolutionary, negentropic thrust” (Heise 1997). As the spaces of nature are a contested ground, so the interpretation of ecological ideas is contested, and there are, roughly speaking, two traditions: in the re-contextualization strain of romanticism found in Deep Ecology and in Nature Writing science is seen as an adversary, whereas an older tradition of nature writing sees science as a prerequisite for aesthetic appreciation. Unfortunately, according to Heise, ecocriticism has allied itself with re-contextualizing romanticism: “Ecocriticism looks back at a long tradition of criticism that approaches nature as an aesthetic and not a scientific object, and that often sees scientific analysis as detrimental to aesthetic appreciation” (Heise 1997). This means that the rift between re-contextualizing and de-contextualizing strains of nature writing is not limited to that genre but also marks the theoretical approaches for an analysis of nature writing.

### 5.5 Science and humanism

Science is part of the humanist project to demystify the world, whereas the Deep Ecological strand of environmentalism cultivates a new spirituality, as David Oates illustrates:

[T]he ecological cosmos offers a fairly good complete natural theodicy—a systematic defense of the goodness of life and the forces that bring it forth. In traditional theology, such a defense ends by affirming God’s goodness. The ecological theodicy ends in Gregory Bateson’s ‘sacred unity of the biosphere,’ an earth-oriented affirmation of the innate goodness of life. Whatever the ups and downs of detail within our limited experience, the larger whole is primarily beautiful. The feeling of living in such a universe is a bright contrast to life in the twilight of sin depicted by traditional Christian theology, and further, yet, from the post-Christian dungeons of existential thought. (1989, 175)

One of the dogmas of this nature religion is the idea of nature's inherent goodness. Paradoxically, even though Oates attacks Christianity for its idea of sin, the new ecological religion relies on another Christian theme, namely humanity's Fall from an earlier ecological state and with it the notion of original sin. Blaming Christianity for ecological sins and trying to define a new spiritual ground by projecting a perfect world is a problematic endeavor because it is ahistorical. It cancels out the progress that was made in overcoming paganism and promoting a heliocentric astronomy. Steven Pinker describes how Galileo challenged the "theory of the moral order of the universe" which was called the "Great Chain of Being" (2002, 137). The Chain of Being did not only show people their place in the universe, it also justified the earthly "proper stations" in social hierarchies. It is in its anti-humanism, where radical environmentalism is left with little safeguarding against authoritarianism.

Although "ecology" is one of the most frequently used terms in ecocriticism, mostly the term either remains undefined or is defined in the sense of Deep Ecology as a stable, cooperative, and nurturing unit. Scientists have questioned this romanticized ecology, and for Dawkins an ecosystem such as a forest is "an anarchistic federation of selfish genes, each selected as being good at surviving within its own gene pool against the background of the environment provided by all the others" (1998, 221-222). Abbey's notion of ecology is much closer to Dawkins than to Deep Ecology: "Always looking and listening, these deer. [...] All their energy goes into survival—and reproduction. The only point of it all—to go on" (1991c, 57). Abbey's evocation of a Darwinist nature should not be read as a defense of social Darwinism: in its very amorality it indicates a humanist liberation from nature's Great Chain of Being.

Science cannot only create a sense of wonder, but can, through Darwinism, challenge anthropocentrism. Friedrich Nietzsche describes this challenge: "Formerly one sought the feeling of the grandeur of man by pointing to his divine origin: this has now become a forbidden way, for at its portal stands the ape, together with other gruesome beasts, grinning knowingly as if to say: no further in this direction!" (quoted in Dennett 1995, 333). Science-based anti-anthropocentrism is most clearly developed in Abbey's literary model Jeffers. He coined the term "inhumanism," which should not be misread as anti-humanism but as a form of anti-anthropocentric humanism. Jeffers' "inhumanism" is not an

attempt to counter humanist ideals in the human sphere: instead inhumanism counters metaphysical aspirations. For Jeffers the greatest inhumanists were Copernicus and Darwin. “The wild fence-vaulter science” (Jeffers 1965, 24) plays a crucial role for the inhumanist critique of metaphysical human importance. Jeffers advises: “With clear eyes explore the pit” (1965, 68), and this exploration, although it bereaves humanity of its special role, also defines it and its distinction. Scientific practice is both a creation of knowledge through an exploration of the world and an exposure of that knowledge to the external world. Its “inhuman” aspect lies in this exposure: knowledge (like that the earth is the center of the universe) is exposed to the external world. Belief systems are put to the test: “Spinning demons that make an atom, / These break, these pierce, these deify, praising their God / shrilly with fierce voices: not in a man’s shape” (1965, 24). In *Abbey* it is the desert where the inhuman quality of nature is most clearly felt:

Where is the heart of the desert? I used to think that somewhere in the American Southwest, impossible to say exactly where, all of these wonders which intrigue the spirit would converge upon a climax—and a resolution. Perhaps in the vicinity of Weaver’s Needle in the Superstition Range; in the Funeral Mountains above Death Valley. [...] Not so. I am convinced now that the desert has no heart, that it presents a riddle which has no answer, and that the riddle itself is an illusion created by some limitation or exaggeration of the displaced human consciousness. (1992a, 243)

## 5.6 Science and postmodern criticism

Science and postmodern criticism look back on a long history of hostility and misunderstanding, but also some attempts to find a common ground. At times the hostility has developed into what has been called science wars, and books such as Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont’s *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* and Paul Gross and Norman Levitt’s *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science* are illustrations of this claim. Although the above mentioned authors simplify the postmodern position into epistemological relativism (that most postmodernists share, but to varying degrees), there is certainly a problem connected to this form of relativism, illustrated by Pinker’s reading of George Orwell’s *1984*: Pinker shows that the “philosophy of the regime is thoroughly postmodernist” (2002, 426) and quotes the monologue of O’Brien when he tortures Winston:

You believe that reality is something objective, external, existing in its own right. You also believe that the nature of reality is self-evident. When you delude yourself into thinking that you see something, you assume that everyone else sees the same thing as you. But I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes; only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. (Orwell, quoted in Pinker 2002, 426)

Not only does the inaccessibility of an external reality not safeguard against abuses of power, it furthermore dismantles existing safeguards, as Pinker argues:

O'Brien's lecture should give pause to the advocates of postmodernism. It is ironic that a philosophy that prides itself on deconstructing the accoutrements of power should embrace a relativism that makes challenges to power impossible because it denies that there are objective benchmarks against which the deceptions of the powerful can be evaluated [...] Without a notion of objective truth, intellectual life degenerates into a struggle of who can best exercise the raw force to "control the past." (2002, 426-27)

In the relativism of some postmodern strains there exists a paradox: postmodern relativists delegitimize existing power structures, but the result may be that justifications for resistance to that power are delegitimized as well.

Whereas many ecocritics, possibly due to the obvious tangibility of their field, prefer a realist approach to external reality, some have jumped the postmodern bandwagon, however with different results. Sue Ellen Campbell, whose essay "The Land of Language and Desire" can be found in the seminal *Ecocriticism Reader*, discusses the similarities of Deep Ecological and postmodern environmental criticism and identifies several areas of commonality. The first common denominator is activism: "Both theorists and ecologists (I'll use the term for short) are at core revolutionary. They stand in opposition to traditional authority, which they question and then reject" (1996, 127). Later she defines the areas of that authority, or "The Establishment" with the common nemeses of radical ecocriticism, logocentrism, phallogentrism, patriarchy, and technocracy and states that "[f]or both theory and ecology, it is axiomatic that knowledge and power, ideas and actions, are inseparable" and agrees with Sandor Goodhart, who claims that "Western humanism at large" (1996, 127) is at stake. One might ask how a movement that defines itself through radical skepticism swiftly equals questioning and rejection and uses terms such as "axiomatic" to describe itself. Campbell further points out that both Deep Ecology and postmodernism are marked by a "shared critique of objectivity" and that "nearly everyone [in literary theory] agrees that all readings are 'situated'" (1996, 129). Campbell's language betrays a certain

authoritarianism, seen in the statement that all theorists share her relativist views. Campbell further distinguishes her strand of thinking from the academic Yale deconstructionists and claims that “theorists see what they do as intensely moral” (1996, 131). One may wonder about the political implications of an order, “replacing the humanist notion of a centered self with the idea of an uncentered network” (in Campbell’s paraphrase of Lacan) where “everything is connected, nothing is isolated” (1996, 132).

Glen A. Love points out that, whereas humanists are “attracted to the most arcane fields of physics, they have for the most part curiously ignored the life sciences, especially evolutionary biology” (1999, 74). The most fashionable field is physics, especially quantum physics, relativity theory, chaos theory, and the uncertainty principle. These fields are chosen for their semantic resemblance to fashionable postmodern claims. In ecocriticism one can also find this superficial use of physics. Campbell launches an attack on objectivity, motivated by an attitude that is shared by Deep Ecology (“ecology”) and postmodernism (“theory”):

Along with the questioning of authority comes a shared idea of objectivity. (Authority always pretends to be objective.) Theory and ecology agree: our preconceptions are always subjective and we are always involved. Relativity theory and quantum mechanics are surely the root of these beliefs. “According to quantum mechanics,” Gary Zukav writes in *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*, “there is no such thing as objectivity.” (1996, 128-129)

Campbell’s combines the problematic side of a Deep Ecology inspired activism and idea of ecology based on affective engagement with postmodern relativism, in other words, the most problematic aspects of each of the critical approaches.

Another example for an ecocritical application of postmodern ideas is Eric Darier who is, ironically, frustrated by the skepticism of science: “natural categories [...] can be discussed *ad nauseam* by scientific experts and counter-experts without any definite, absolute certainty” (1999, 235). Forgetting his earlier claim that science is an essentialist discourse, Darier now criticizes science for its indecision and inability to lead to environmental decisions. The frustration he expresses is identical with the frustration of right-wing politicians over the slowness of the democratic process:

Faced with credible-sounding experts and scientific studies presented by advocates of a proposed development, environmental groups are forced to play a tactical game of

presenting counter-experts and counter-studies. Because of the degree of inherent uncertainty in any scientific argument, the final decision rests on either the legitimacy of the scientists or the broader state of relations of power. (Darier 1999, 235)

Darier's impatience with the long processes of finding scientific knowledge and decision-making through democratic institutions is troubling. Whereas he on the one hand criticizes the whole category of "God, gods, and scientific truth," he is also frustrated by the openness of scientific exploration and democratic decision-making. The reason for Darier's impatience is not so much his postmodern relativism as it is his activist attitude; in a paradoxical move he both attacks science for being an authoritarian discourse and criticizes it for not providing authority for environmental opposition.

Terry Eagleton points out the problem that arises when an external reality is relativized to the point of cultural insignificance:

You must not ethicize, politicize and historicize to the point where you forget about humanity's roots in a recalcitrant otherness which we share with stoats and asteroids. [...] It is true that there is no value or meaning without culture; but culture depends for its existence on material forces which have no meaning or value in themselves. (2003, 287).

Nevertheless, not all postmodern thinkers wholly subscribe to either relativism or the primacy of activism and try to define a true middle ground between science (true because referring to a science that is not affectively engaged) and postmodern thought. William Cronon describes the challenges of an ecocritical postmodernism that shares the subject of its study, nature, with science. He sums up the intention of his book:

One of the challenges we've faced in this book has been trying to reach two audiences that are likely to draw quite opposite conclusions from our work. On the one hand, we need somehow to persuade scientists and environmentalists who assume "nature" to be natural, wholly external to human culture, that there is something profoundly important and useful in recognizing its cultural constructedness. On the other hand, we need no less to persuade humanists and postmodernists that although ideas of nature may be the projected ideas of men and women, the world unto which we project those ideas is by no means entirely of our own making: there is more to the world than just words.

Nature is a mirror onto which we project our own ideas and values; but it is also a material reality that sets limits [...] Oddly enough, I think science and postmodernism, which so often seem to be at odds with each other, share a commitment to the idea that we must struggle always to see the world clearly. (1996, 458)

Cronon's position could be labeled a moderate form of postmodernism since it accepts the accessibility of external reality and the idea of reality congruence ("a material reality that

sets limits”). This moderate postmodernism which both accepts the cultural constructedness of the concept of nature and an external reality that limits these constructions could be useful for ecocriticism. Cronon searches for models in which it is possible to “see the world clearly;” such models have already been developed, for example by the sociologists Elias and MacCannell.

Whereas Cronon accepts the idea that an external reality interacts with constructions of reality, scientists, from their different starting point, have accepted that reality as humans see it is constructed. Dawkins states that “the brain, assuming that the world doesn’t change capriciously and at random, uses the information to construct an internal virtual reality in which the continuity is restored” (1998, 261) and that “we animals inhabit a virtual world, constructed from elements that are, at successively higher levels, useful for representing the real world—which is exactly as it should be if our constrained virtual reality software is any good. It is very good and the only time we notice it at all is on the rare occasions when it gets something wrong” (1998, 275). Pinker addresses the problem of representation: “We are organisms, not angels, and our minds are organs, not pipelines to the truth. Our minds evolved by natural selection to solve problems that were life-and-death matters to our ancestors, not to commune with correctness or to answer any question we are capable of asking” (1997, 561). Also Dennett speaks of an “inner environment [...] [that] must contain lots of information about the outer environment and its regularities” without “constructing a replica world” (1996, 117-118). These views share several conceptions: first there is an outer reality and human beings interact with that reality. Second, this reality is ordered and regular, not chaotic. Third, the order of the external reality is translated into a structural order in our brain, similar to Norbert Elias’ notion of reality congruence. Fourth, the brain is a product of evolution and served human survival during evolutionary history. Since human beings share evolution and also share to a large degree an external reality, it can be expected that the structures that translate that reality into the brain are not fundamentally different, i.e. that human beings share a large portion of their cognition and conceptualization of the world. Postmodern skepticism and scientific reason are not opposed but are two sides of a medal, as Miguel de Unamuno points out: “Skepticism, uncertainty—the position to which reason, by practicing its analysis upon itself, upon its own validity, at last arrives” (1954, 106). In this respect Cronon may be right that both science and skepticism try to “see the world clearly.”

## 5.7 Conclusion

Despite some theoretical dead-ends such as a Deep Ecology inspired ecocriticism and postmodern epistemological relativism, a true middle ground between realism and postmodernism seems possible, accepting both a cognitive rather than affective view of science (in particular biology) and the idea of social construction of reality. Cronon sees such a middle ground in principle possible, and it has been realized in the models of Elias and MacCannell, in the form that an external reality does not construct its own representations but interacts with cultural constructions in congruent ways. The project of science is situated at the intersection between an external reality and cultural construction, and this is why it is essential for both ecocritics and nature writers.

As ecocritics do, nature writers such as Whitman and Abbey sometimes demonstrate ambiguity about the role of science. However, both writers accept the role of science for the reality congruence of their work, as Whitman calls scientists the “lawgivers of poets” and Abbey demands that poets have their “feet planted in concrete data.” Scientific reality congruence is not only compatible with an appreciation of nature but can be regarded as the source of a sense of wonder. A sense of wonder is generated by a mechanism that concomitantly familiarizes and de-familiarizes the reader with the physical environment. Although Abbey does not go as far as Whitman celebrating technology, not only is Abbey’s conceptualization of science compatible with modernism, but so is his depiction of natural spaces.



## 6. The Modern Desert of Edward Abbey

### 6.1 Introduction

The radical environmental movement frequently displays a negative attitude towards the elements that are associated with modernization such as rationalism, industrialization, and urbanization. Abbey's rhetoric at times appears to be anti-modern, and his personal involvement in the radical environmentalist movement (he admitted having participated in environmental sabotage, which he called "fieldwork" (Temple 1993)) seems to confirm the view of Abbey as an anti-modernist. However, it is possible to read Abbey as a modern writer. He does not go to nature to get away from civilization, on the contrary, what he finds in nature is essentially an urban experience. His experience of nature is not built on anti-modernism, and he sees his rational and skeptical worldview confirmed in nature. Here I will explore Abbey's relationship to radical environmentalism on the one hand and elements of the Western tradition—reason, the city, and modernism—on the other and discuss how these influence Abbey's aesthetic perception and experience of nature.

### 6.2 Abbey and radical environmentalism

It has become a radical environmentalist cliché to blame Western civilization in general and Cartesian dualism in particular for the state of the environment. Many critics see Abbey as partaking in this criticism of Western culture and claim that he attempts to heal the "Cartesian rift" through spirituality. According to Tom Pilkington, Abbey demonstrates the "impasse that Western [...] philosophy, with its emphasis on individualism and rationalism has reached" and that he "attacks the root system of the Western philosophical tradition: Platonic-Cartesian dualism" (1974, 25). One way to overcome individualism and dualism is a holistic world-view, as it is realized in biocentrism. Jack Loeffler too sees Abbey as a biocentrist who "perceived everything to be part of the whole" (1993, 47) and would experience nature by "open[ing] himself to the flow of Nature and absorb its message" (1993, 47). In a similar vein James McClintock claims that Abbey is a biocentrist and contrasts him to Jack London:

Jack London never took to the biocentric position that Abbey has assumed—that all nature, whether animate or inanimate, is equal or superior to humans. This is the center of Abbey’s brand of religious feeling. One of the “strong truths” Abbey conveys is the egotism of anthropocentrism and the release found in biocentricity, the recognition that human life is not the centerpiece of existence and that the wilderness of nature offers us the chance to learn redemptive humility. (1989, 45)

Ann Ronald speaks of the “numerous examples of sacrality” (1988, 103) in Abbey’s texts. Don Scheese places Abbey into the “Thoreauvian tradition of antimodernism” (1996a, 317) and calls him the “secular prophet of the modern religion of environmentalism” (1996a, 318). Not all critics share the view that Abbey is an anti-modernist who looks for alternatives to Western rationalism in biocentric and holistic nature spirituality. Paul T. Bryant sees Abbey as a “moderate realist” who “does not display the romanticism or the sentimentality so often associated with extreme environmentalism” (1989, 39) and for whom “wilderness is a necessary part of civilization” (Abbey quoted in Bryant 1989, 38). In order to understand how the biocentrism of radical environmentalism clashes with modern values, one has to examine the philosophical roots of the movement.

Radical environmentalism has been influenced by Arne Naess’ philosophy of Deep Ecology. His influential book is *Økologi, Samfunn og Livsstil* (1976), translated into English as *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, is nothing less than a program to save the planet, and just a quick glance at the index shows how it can – and cannot – be saved. There is not a single reference to “city,” “city planning,” or “urban” in the index, but there are eight references to the term “local.” Naess’ programmatic vision of a future ecological society is rural:

*Decentralization*—The more centralization, the larger the economic and administrative units, the more fragmentary the self-determination of the individual components will become.

*Local communities*—Stable, close human relationships that provide safety and warmth can only be found in relatively small groups. The “larger society” lacks a deep daily community. Small communities, especially local communities, are the bearers of such a sense of togetherness. It is necessary to aid local communities and to re-establish them in urban areas. [...]

*Development of rural areas* [“*distriktspolitik*”]—Shifting of centers from the cities to rural areas. Reduction of “larger society,” this means the central machinery, the huge traffic arteries, piling up of administrative, industrial, and educational centers in a small area. [...]

*Self-sufficiency*—“self-done is well done” [...] (1976, 17, Naess’ emphasis, my translation).

It is clear that, according to Naess, the city cannot be saved but must be dismantled. Not only does the organization of the city contradict an ecological imperative; what is furthermore targeted is what the city stands for culturally:

Struggle against the *self-domestication* of humankind, the tendency to convert oneself into a domestic animal. – Studies of domesticated animals and animals in small zoos have shown that animal species create new types of society and behave differently under new artificial and environmentally poor conditions. One finds passivity, shifting to brutality and incidental aggression, a tendency towards tyranny, promiscuity, dissolution of the family, numbing of the senses, degeneration of muscles and coordination of movements, and so on. It appears that there are similar tendencies in industrialized countries. (1976, 19, Naess' emphasis, my translation)

In this comparison of humans with animals Naess appears to agree with Abbey who states that “[w]e need wilderness because we are wild animals” (1991c, 229). There is a decisive difference, however, namely that Naess wants to dismantle the city whereas Abbey sees the wilderness as a necessary contrast to city life.

Naess furthermore points out that large institutions are problematic from a deep ecological perspective: “A university of the size of the University of Oslo, with 20,000 to 30,000 students is incompatible with an ecologically responsible politics” (1976, 198). In the ideal local communities where “all know each other directly and the population is stabilized” (1976, 195), cultural refinement is unknown: “[e]ntertainment and culture are local to a relatively high degree and mark the working day” (1976, 195), and school and education’s primary role is to transmit “knowledge for the professions that are needed” (1976, 196). What Naess proposes is nothing less than a dismantling of modern institutions and a return to a pastoral life where higher learning is an unnecessary luxury.

One could ironically state that Naess’ solution for environmental problems is a radical version of Norwegian “distriktpolitikk,” expanded to the entire world. “Distriktpolitikk” is the official Norwegian policy of developing rural areas and keeping them settled, partially because it is felt that national identity is linked to rural settlement. Prescribing this for other countries is a curious form of cultural imperialism, and one might ask how developing countries that see their economic future in the cities react to such ideas. Naess universalizes a pastoral cultural ideal, the same ideal that ironically has led to urban sprawl in many countries of the First World. But Deep Ecology’s cultural themes of anti-

modernism, anti-urbanism, and anti-intellectualism are older than “distriktpolitikk,” they are found in what Manfred Schneider (1997) sees as a recurring cultural theme, the longing for the simplicity and stability of the barbarian in a world that is perceived as chaotic and complicated. This longing can dismantle civilizations but does not lead to a carefree utopian society. Abbey does not fit into this authoritarian and anti-modern vision of radical environmentalism. Whereas Abbey celebrates the instability of both nature and civilization, it is Naess’ aim to build a stable society. Abbey is a transplanted Easterner without local roots and without a strong sense of the local community. For him nature is a space of experience, not a ideological ground for constructing a pastoral society.

### 6.3 Abbey and reason

As mentioned earlier, the basis for Abbey’s aesthetic appreciation is science, and this is why he feels ill at ease with the biocentric aim of re-infusing the earth with spirituality. Another important aspect of Abbey is that he defends the prerequisite for scientific discourse, reason:

I wish to [...] hold up the ragged flag of reason. Reason with a capital *R*—Sweet Reason, the newest and rarest thing in human life, the most delicate child of human history. Reason without technology, if that seems best; reason without science, if that seems necessary. By “reason” I mean intelligence informed by sympathy, knowledge in the arms of love. (1991a, 127)

Although Abbey in this quotation uses a definition of “reason” that is ambivalent, and although he sees science in a potential conflict with reason, he advocates a rational world-view. The solution to the ecological crisis is to be found in the Western tradition, particularly in the Enlightenment concept of reason. Reason is antithetical to the holistic spirituality that has become fashionable in some environmentalist circles.

Ann Ronald claims that sacrality, “the belief in the landscape as energy as God” (1988, 105) is a central element in Abbey’s descriptions of the desert and uses the following Abbey quotation as proof of her claim: “Genealogies: From these rocks, struck once by lightning gushed springs that turned to blood, flesh, life. Impossible miracle. And I am struck once again by the unutterable beauty, terror, and strangeness of everything we think we know” (quoted in Ronald 1988, 105). It is clear that words like flesh, miracle, and terror

have religious connotations, but they can also be seen outside of a religious or spiritual context. I think that Abbey's texts do not express sacrality but rather a sense of wonder that is based on reason (here referring to the process of evolution), not religion. In response to Ronald's claim it could be said that not every expression of wonder or awe implies sacredness. Abbey is awed by the material reality of the desert rather than by any energy beyond that reality, by a "chunk of quartzite" rather than "make believe wood nymphs" (1991c, 87).

Abbey's writing has gained a new relevance at a time when the Western tradition is under attack by religious fundamentalism, environmentalist spirituality, and postmodern<sup>27</sup> thought. There are elements in Abbey such as playfulness, irony, ambivalence, and contradiction that justify a postmodern reading. Quigley (1998b) speaks of Abbey's "most salient theme: joyous and eternal resistance to power" (1998b, 296), and sees Abbey's contradictory style in a positive manner, as "a way to break down human-constructed systems [and] a way of letting the laughter and the vastness of the cosmos sweep in" (1998b, 310). I agree partially with Quigley, but maybe not at the crucial point, namely Abbey's breaking of human-constructed systems. Whereas it is true that Abbey has an iconoclastic attitude, his criticism is not a groundless postmodern ground but is based on modern elements such as science and reason that are exempt from being laughed at.

Earlier I have described the tragic elements in Abbey, and, depending on the definition of tragedy, seeing him as a modern writer could seem to be a contradiction of that label. It is correct that certain forms of tragedy presuppose an aristocratic setting ill at ease with modern egalitarianism. However, existential forms of tragedy are more democratic and share a basic theme, as Eagleton observes: "If tragedy springs from the contradictions

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<sup>27</sup> There are many definitions of the terms modernism and postmodernism, and here I use a definition that is inspired by Marshal Berman. He sees modernism as an extension of the Enlightenment tradition and of a belief in rationalism and science. Although the rationalism of modernism allowed a centralization of power through central planning (for example in creating the modern city), the main characteristic of modernism is its unstable character, its inherent skepticism and its constant reevaluation of all values. In contrast to postmodernism, which sees itself as overcoming the monolithic and authoritarian character of modernism, Berman's definition of modernism is marked by epistemological instability, a quality that is also ascribed to postmodernism by other critics. If this instability is a modern characteristic, what remains for postmodernism is in fact anti-modernism, a posture of extreme skepticism, anti-rationalism, and relativism. Berman sees postmodernism not as a new modernism but as an anti-modernism that caricatures some modernist aspects. Here it has to be pointed out that modernism can either mean the relatively short literary and artistic period between realism/naturalism or it can refer to the ongoing cultural changes since the Enlightenment. I use the second definition of the term modernism as an ongoing process, as the ideas and values that develop in the modern age.

inherent in a situation—a large enough supposition, to be sure—then modernity is tragic in exactly this classical sense” (2003, 241). As the human condition presents an inherent contradiction, modernity “has been a revolutionary advance in human welfare, and [...] one long nightmare of butchery and exploitation” (Eagleton 2003, 241). Abbey’s critique of modernity is a critique from the inside, in other words, he criticizes certain aspects of modernity from a modern position. The inherent contradiction Eagleton refers to stems from the fact that human beings’ relationship to nature is played out simultaneously on a variety of levels: meaning that our human nature with its attempt to create meaning, the animal nature of our transient physicality, and our participation in the eternity of existential nature, cannot be reconciled. However, human nature is not devalued by what Quigley calls the “vastness of the cosmos,” i.e. existential nature, it is merely shown its limits as well as the impossibility of extending the creation of human meaning to existential nature.

#### 6.4 Abbey and the city

When it becomes clear that Abbey, however self-contradictory and ambivalent, accepts the terms of reason and science, it is less surprising that he even accepts the order of the city. If one sees Abbey as a pastoralist, however, the following quotations seem to be out of place:

Oslo’s a striking town. Straight lines and bold effects. Signs of design, an architectonic mind at work. [...] I’ve always maintained that nothing is more contributory to urban beauty than form, design, shape—in a word, planning. (1994, 67)

Now the Swedes are obviously good housekeepers. Everyone looks healthy enough, well fed [...] most of them are well dressed, nobody in rags, nobody peddling cigarettes on the street; automatic machine-type vendors everywhere, a good sign of economic well-being. (1994, 62)

[L]oneliness is not enough. We must save the city. It is essence and substance of us all—we cannot lose it without diminishing our stature as a nation, without a fatal wound. (1991c, 101)

Even a small town such as Moab, Utah can be perceived as a city, if only the contrast to ordinary life is large enough. In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey describes a trip to the town as a relief from his isolation working in Arches National Park:

After a week in the desert, Moab (pop. 5500 during the great uranium boom), seems like a dazzling metropolis, a throbbing dynamo of commerce and pleasure. I walk the

single main street as dazed by the noise and neon as a country boy on his first visit to Times Square. (Wow, I'm thinking, this is great). (1992a, 40)

As he enjoys the contrast between desert and town,<sup>28</sup> Abbey enjoys the contrast between two lifestyles. On his trip to Moab he imagines his future: "The better part of each year in the wilderness and the winters in some complementary, equally agreeable environment—Hoboken perhaps, or Tijuana, Nogales, Juarez ... one of the border towns" (1992a, 42). Desert and city are complementary for Abbey. Although Abbey is frequently seen as a pastoral anti-modernist, his texts are ambivalent enough to paint another picture of him, both modern and urban. It would be easy to dismiss the paradoxes in Abbey's writing as pure play and thus to strip them of social significance. I think there is an integrated way to explain his rationality and his condemnation of certain kinds of science, his love of the wilderness and of the city as well as his anarchism and his acceptance of planning and design if one abandons his image as a defender of Mother Nature.

Abbey's essay "Telluride Blues" shows his ambivalent feelings towards development. When a little backward mining community with its "rundown, raunchy, redneck, backwoods backwardness" (1991c, 122) is converted into a ski resort, a conflict arises between the new urban settlers and developers, many of them from the countercultural movement of the 1960s—"[I]n came the hippies then" (1991c, 123)—on the one side and the native rural population on the other. Not surprisingly Abbey initially deplores the development and sides with the native population, although he is a double outsider: he sides with the native population, but he is not one of them, neither is he a hippie.<sup>29</sup> He keeps an ironic distance from both camps: "But something has gone wrong with the Colorado cowboys. Although they continue to wear the funny hats and the tight snap-button shirts, they don't seem to like to fight so much anymore." Later in that paragraph Abbey refers to the advent of the sexual revolution in Telluride: "Now even cowboys can

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<sup>28</sup> A similar contrast between spaces is described by Herman Melville in his description of the Galapagos Islands ("The Encantadas"): We had been broad upon the waters for five long months, a period amply sufficient to make all things of the land wear a fabulous hue to the dreamy mind. Had three Spanish custom-house officers boarded us then, it is not unlikely that I should have curiously stared at them, felt of them, and stroked them much as savages serve civilized guests" (quoted in Lauter et al. 1990, 2436). After months on the sea, the ship loses its heterotopian qualities, qualities that are now perceived in the land.

<sup>29</sup> Although Abbey feels like an outsider in Telluride, he is not a stranger to the Southwest. In the essay "Notes from a Cold River," describing a rafting trip in Yukon, Abbey recounts a conversation he has with one of the participants: "'What makes you an authority on the Southwest, Abbey,' some punk kid says to me over the campfire. 'Why do you ask?' 'I was born there,' he says. 'How old are you?' 'Thirty-one.' 'Well, I made my home there in '47, I says. 'So I've lived there longer than you, sonny.'" (1991b, 77). Although the Southwest is his physical home, he feels an alienation in it that also extends to many of the inhabitants. Distinction is a pervasive trait in Abbey's personality.

get laid” (1991c, 123-124). The developers win the conflict, and the reader expects Abbey to rant against the degradation of his favorite spot. However, Abbey does not end the essay in an angry tone—he points out that he returns every summer and enjoys the transformed place.

The freaks, long-hairs and hippies [...] now own and operate most of the shops, restaurants and other small businesses within the town. They have also taken over the town council and the local Chamber of Commerce and are determined to prevent—somehow—the transformation of Telluride into another Aspen. Two things have not changed: Chez Pierre still offers the best French dinners on the western slope of the Rockies; and Telluride remains this writer’s favorite mountain town. I go there every summer and have failed four times now (out of sloth, ineptitude and fear) to climb nearby Mount Wilson, 14,247 feet of rotten rock and icy rotten snow. I plan to fail to climb it again next year, thereby setting a new world’s record. (1991c, 130)

Abbey’s stance is ambivalent: he is not against development as such but against some forms (“another Aspen”) and keeps an ironic distance from both the cowboy and the hippie lifestyles. Rather than the invoking an idealized pastoral past—whether a lost harmony with nature or the simplicity of frontier life—Abbey celebrates change, a change that brought new values and new people out to the West: “These young people [...] make up the entire editorial staff of the newspaper. They pay themselves a monthly salary of \$300 each—enough for rent and beans and shoes. [...] They are good people—a new breed of westerner” (1991c, 167-8). Ann Ronald does not see the ambivalence in Abbey and interprets his collection of essays (*The Journey Home*) that contains the above mentioned essay differently:

Most chapters [...] refer at least indirectly to the twentieth century’s rape of the West, and many attack the problem directly. Telluride, Yosemite, Black Mesa, Colstrip, Glen Canyon—he catalogues the landscapes changed irrevocably by science, industry, and government, all in the name of progress. (1988, 105)

Ronald is caught in an anti-modern perception of progress. As he is not against cities, Abbey is not against the urban transformation of the West. As a transplanted Easterner he approves of the changes that Peter Coates describes as “the shift over the past quarter of a century from the ‘Old West,’ rooted in the extraction of natural resources such as copper and quicksilver, to the ‘New West’ of cappuccino, ski lifts, mountain bike rental stores, aromatherapy shops, wolf and buffalo revivals, and mining heritage sites” (2003, 164). Arno Heller points out who is responsible for the artistic and literary production of the new West: “not the locals, not the people who lived in those areas permanently produced these



works, but in most case individuals from outside—mainly from the big cities on the East or West Coast” (2003, 185). The new West is dominated by urban values. Also MacCannell argues that the closer one lived to nature, the further apart one was from real life in the community, and that this status of nature is being reversed by modern tourism: “Modernity is transforming *nature* from a cruel alternative to community life into a place of play” (1999, 80, emphasis MacCannell’s).

Abbey describes the class implications of the economic changes in the West: “While the actual working cowboy disappears, [...] the make-believe cowboys flourish and multiply like flies on a pecan pie” and points out that “cowboyism as a cult grows in direct ratio to the disappearance of cattle herding as an occupation.” These new cowboys are described as “Mr. and Mrs. Cattleman couple in authentic matching Western costume—the husband with sunburnt nose and belly bulging over a steerhorn buckle heavy enough to kill a horse with, and his wife, a tall tough broad in gabardines and boots with a look on her face that would make a Comanche blanch” (1992a, 110). Abbey does not have any hope of saving these disappearing lifestyles and comments that the “originals are nearly gone and will soon be lost forever in the overwhelming crowd” (1992a, 111). Even though Abbey shows more sympathy for the old than for the new cowboys, he does not see any way to return to the past, to the cruel world of cattle herding and mining. What he deplors here is not change to a modern world but the romanticized appropriation of a rural working class lifestyle by an urban middle class in search of authenticity.

During his seasonal work in Arches National Park, described in *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey works as a cowboy twice. He takes a few days off from work and helps a local farmer collect his cows from the canyons. Although he is able to do the work and communicate with the farmer and his cowboys, there is a crucial difference between the cowboys and Abbey, expressed in the following scene:

As we loaded the horses into the truck for the return to the ranch I asked Mackie how he liked this kind of work. He looked at me. His shirt and the rag around his neck were dark with sweat, his face coated with dust; there was a stripe of dried blood across his cheek where a willow branch had struck him when he plunged through the brush after some ignorant cow.

‘Look at yourself,’ he said.

I looked; I was in the same condition. ‘I do this only for fun,’ I explained. ‘If I did it for pay I might not like it. Anyway you haven’t answered my question. How do *you* like this kind of work?’

'I'd rather be rich.'

'What would you do if you were rich?'

He grinned through the dust. 'Buy some cows of my own.' (1992a, 141, emphasis Abbey's)

Although Abbey performs the work of a real cowboy, looks like one and speaks like one, he is aware of the fact that his being a cowboy is a spare time choice rather than a lifestyle. Abbey understands his distinction from the other cowboys and does not try to hide it. What makes him function as a cowboy is his rural working class past, a past he has left behind. In other words, his being a cowboy is not a search for a romantic past but an exploration of his own past, a past that he is glad to have left behind. Whereas his colleague Mackie would opt for a similar lifestyle if he were rich, Abbey has opted for the freedom of voluntary relative poverty, an attitude typical for the educated class.

Another example of Abbey's simultaneous distinction and connection to people is his relationship to visitors to Arches. Where he first describes his often ironic answers to the visitors' questions he is

feeling somewhat guilty and contrite—for they are, most of them, really good people and not actually as simple-minded as they pretend to encourage me to pretend us all to be—I visit them again around the fires and picnic tables, help them eat their pickles and drink their beer, and make perhaps a trace of contact by revealing that I, too, like most of them, come from that lost village back in the hills, am also exiled, a displaced person, an internal emigrant in this new America of concrete and iron which none of us can quite understand or accept or wholly love. (1992a, 235)

What connects Abbey and these visitors is not primarily their admiration for nature: it is a shared past marked by modern displacement. Abbey neither embraces this displacement nor does he reject it: his phrase "none of us [can] wholly love" expresses his ambivalent acceptance of modernity. What distinguishes him from the visitors is his reaction to this change, namely his lifestyle of voluntary poverty which most of his visitors do not share. The desert is a modern heterotopia where the temporary and the permanent exiles meet.

Abbey is an advocate for the preservation of wilderness, but his arguments are not the fashionable ecological ones. Rather he sees the wilderness as a space that makes adventure possible: "adventure not only in the physical sense, but also mental, spiritual, moral, aesthetic and intellectual adventure. A place for the free" (1991c, 88). Since Abbey's definition of wilderness is not exclusively linked to natural spaces, it should not surprise us

that he was able to find elements of adventure and aesthetic pleasure in cities. For some time he lived in Hoboken/New Jersey, an industrial city on the Hudson River, within eyesight of Manhattan:

Down on River Street just past the gothic gables of the Christian Seamen's Home began our own little Bohemia, where the otherwise omnipresent odor of sewer gas, burning coffee beans and the Hudson River was sweetened by the smell of marijuana and smoking joss sticks. Under the vacant eyes of condemned tenements lived the Peace People, the Flower Children, in happy polygamous squalor. [...] Anything Haight Ashbury had we had too. [...] The character of the population was mixed, a typical American polyglot boiling pot of Italians, Irish, Puerto Ricans, Poles, Jews, Germans, and Blacks. [...] Perhaps I liked best the sunflowers along the railroad tracks [...] There was a bitter, forlorn yet stubborn beauty everywhere you looked in Hoboken. Even the smog of heavy summer evenings played a helpful part, enhancing the quality of light and shadow on old brick walls, lending to things only a block away the semblance of magic and mystery. (1991c, 93-95)

Abbey celebrates the city for its aesthetic experience but also for its diversity and adventure. This quotation seems to be in contradiction to the Oslo quote, where thoughtful planning impressed him. Hoboken seems to be admirable because there is no plan, because the cityscape decays. However, even though Hoboken appears chaotic, it is chaos that exists in the framework of an original infrastructure, on other words, design and planning. It is, on the other hand, tragic that planning and design can also destroy the sense of diversity, liveliness and aesthetics of a city. Such a destructive design would be, in the case of Hoboken, urban renewal. Abbey is not an aesthetic anarchist who is against any type of design, nor is he an anti-urbanist. His ideal city, however, is the city unaffected by inner-city expressways and suburbanization. It is a city where people of different races and classes meet and live together, not one that is compartmentalized into suburbs.

Abbey's ideal of a city that retains heterotopian spaces and is characterized by a mixed population resounds Frederick Law Olmsted's idea for creating city parks:

Consider that the New York Park [Central Park] and the Brooklyn Park are the only places where [...] you will find a body of Christians coming together, and with an evident glee in the prospect of coming together, all classes largely represented, with a common purpose, not at all intellectual, competitive with none, disposing to jealousy and spiritual or intellectual pride towards none, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasures of all others, all helping the greater happiness of each. You may thus often see vast numbers of persons brought closely together, poor and rich, young and old, Jew and Gentile. (Olmsted quoted in Hiss 1990, 46)

The city parks, according to Olmsted, are heterotopian spaces where the competitive logic of the surrounding society does not apply and therefore allow a non-competitive togetherness in the enjoyment of a common natural space that defines the park experience. The parks are not an escape from a community but a temporal escape from competition and segregation, in other words, rather than allowing a flight from society, these spaces allow a new perspective and redefinition of social values. They create a modern community in the same sense as earlier churches have created an equal community of sinners and believers; now people mix and enjoy each others presence in the heterotopian spaces.

### 6.5 Abbey and modernism

In order to understand Abbey's relationship to the modern city, it is necessary to define the concept of the modern city and of modernism, and one of the most inspiring works in this field is Marshall Berman's book *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. For Berman modernism is best expressed in Karl Marx' phrase that provides the title of the book. Modernism is marked by constant societal change, change of values, of economic realities, of beliefs, and living conditions. Modernism is, above all, a break with the past. Abbey has learned this central modern view from his father and notes it in his journal: "Tradition? My father taught me something different—love of independence, justice, the future. Hatred of the past. The past, we thought, is pure evil" (1994, 116). Abbey and his father hoped for change because it could improve their material situation; a longing for the past would mean a rural life that is as impoverished as the one Abbey describes in his first novel, *Jonathan Troy*. Abbey does not idealize the past or cling to a pastoral lifestyle because this would prevent him from changing his life. The French writer Michel Houellebecq provides an sarcastically exaggerated illustration of the same anti-pastoralism that motivates Abbey; Houellebecq describes the rural life of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

You are at one with nature, have plenty of fresh air and a couple of fields to plough (the number and size of which are strictly fixed by hereditary principle). Now and then you kill a boar; you fuck occasionally, mostly with your wife, whose role it is to give birth to children; said children grow up to take their place in the same ecosystem. Eventually, you catch something serious and you're history. (2000, 24)

Both Abbey's and Houellebecq see rural life in anti-pastoral and modern terms, as static, predictable, and claustrophobic. Here I do not agree with David Oates who claims that the

main theme in Abbey is the (pastoral) mourning, dwelling “in grief and its suburb anger,” of a Paradise Lost: “For these are Abbey’s official emotions, they are the emotions of Paradise Lost” (2003, 42).

For Berman it is in the city where modern life with its insecurities and freedoms, a life that is both exciting and threatening, can be experienced. In terms of architecture it was the broad city street that made the urban experience possible. The city is an experience of diversity, of the meeting of different classes and peoples, of the mutual intrusions of private and public spheres, and of the tensions between communality and anonymity. It is this modernism of the city street, of a public and exciting life that Abbey describes in Hoboken. In order to achieve a buzzing and exciting city, planning is necessary, and Berman points at the visions of the first creators of the large city boulevards such as Haussman in Paris. These places were carefully planned so that later they could be experienced as lively. Therefore there is no contradiction in Abbey’s celebration of both the planning of Oslo and the anarchistic melting pot of Hoboken. The question that should be asked is not whether or not Abbey is a modernist but what kind of modernist he is.

Not all kinds of urban planning lead to an equally exciting and urban city. Berman describes how the architect Robert Moses destroyed Berman’s own part of New York, the Bronx in the 1950s, which before was a lively melting pot of immigrants. The problem, according to Berman, was the development of car culture and the movement of people into the suburbs. Two aspects of this development have to be pointed out specifically: the suburbs compartmentalized the various classes and ethnicities of the old city rather than bringing them together, and as a result life lost much of its public character. The car transformed activities such as shopping, once a neighborhood experience, into a compartmentalized and anonymous activity, which finds its logical conclusion in today’s strip malls that have even less public space than traditional malls. Compartmentalized and private, life in the city after the war became less urban, although cities were growing. This compartmentalization and lack of public life jeopardizes the development of a democratic society because it destroys the sense of community. In terms of urban design it was the expressway that made the compartmentalized city possible. In Hoboken Abbey defends the old modernism of the streets against the threat from urban renewal, the modernism of expressways.

Berman too is a defender of the old modernism of the streets:

[W]e must strive to keep this “old” environment alive, because it is uniquely capable of nourishing modern experiences and values: the freedom of the city, an order that exists in a state of perpetual motion and change, the evanescent but intense and complex face-to-face communication and communion, of what Baudelaire called the family of eyes [...] [T]he so called modern movement has inspired millions of dollars’ worth of “urban renewal” whose paradoxical result has been to destroy the only kind of environment in which modern values can be realized. (1983, 317-318)

An alternative to the expressway modernism of urban renewal is, according to Berman, to reinfuse the decayed streets with life, to rebuild the modernism of the street. He points out that artists often take the leading role in resuscitating run-down city environments: “Their initiatives showed that obscure and decaying old places could turn out to be—or could be turned into—remarkable public spaces; that urban America’s nineteenth-century streets, so inefficient for moving twentieth-century traffic, were ideal media for moving twentieth-century hearts and minds” (1983, 321). Abbey was pessimistic about the fate of Hoboken (“if urban renewal has not yet destroyed it all” (1991c, 93)), but Hoboken today appears to be one of the success stories that Berman has hoped for. The 2004 City of Hoboken Master Plan cites the type of destructive urban renewal that Abbey refers to above: “Urban areas were transformed by ‘urban renewal’ in the 1950s and 1960s, as older buildings were torn down and streets removed to be replaced by superblocks and by large buildings surrounded by parking. This type of redevelopment was limited to very small areas of Hoboken, leaving intact many other neighborhoods” (2004, 3). Hoboken sees itself today as a “vibrant, livable, mixed uses community that is popular among people from all walks of life” (2004, 1) and planning will “mandate mixed use development, including live/work space, artist housing, and ground floor cultural uses, and will require provision of public benefits like open space and cultural facilities” (2004, 2), furthermore “walking and bicycling between Hoboken and adjacent municipalities” (2004, 11) is encouraged. The fate of Hoboken appears to be closer to that of Abbey’s Telluride than to that of Berman’s Bronx. Abbey had reasons to be pessimistic as the city council report shows, but it seems as if the idea of city street modernism is still alive.

If one sees Abbey as an anti-modernist and anti-urbanist romantic nature-lover, his city descriptions seem to be out of place, and consequently they are often disregarded. I would argue, however, that they represent the key to understanding not only his relationship to the

city but also to nature. Abbey is a modernist of the nineteenth century, of the city-street variety. Several of the elements that he cherishes in the city are also important for his understanding of natural places: the exercise of democracy, the importance of the public, and the experience of change, excitement, and danger. He encourages the type of transformation of the West in the spirit of city street modernism that Telluride represents and criticizes the modern commercial expressway tourism of Aspen.

In Abbey's street-modernism view, cities should bring people together and serve these people. The expressway city can develop into a Moloch where people serve the city; in his journals Abbey quotes Ginsberg (whose poem "Howl" he calls "one of the best poems written by an American"): "Moloch whose heart is a cannibal dynamo" (1994, 146). In such a Moloch, which is perhaps best visualized in Fritz Lang's film "Metropolis," humans have come to serve the city machine. The difference between the modernism of the streets and expressway modernism is therefore not only a difference between compartmentalized and non-compartmentalized and public and private spaces, it is also a difference in the distribution of power. The expressway city or Moloch is dominated by a centralized power structure that puts little emphasis on the individual. On the other hand, in an early modern urban environment people dominate the city. Abbey described Hoboken as one such place; San Francisco, which he visits in 1967, is another:

Gawd what a sweet town. The first time I think I've ever really *loved* a city. A city. I Edward Abbey, hater of cities, have fallen in love with a city. And with its people—but then, city and people, how to tell one from the other? The wave from the water? The dancer from the dance? City of light, of pastel fogs, of silvery smog, city of hills—like the hanging gardens of Babylon! And city of love. Never in my live so many pretty girls in one place—and so many bold, brave handsome boys. You look in vain for a sick, corrupted face. (Now comrade, you exaggerate. Aye! But not by much.)

Color everywhere. Defiance, sweetness, pity, anger. A breakout. Shattered prisms litter the streets. Bach and Beethoven soar above the powerline poles. And the girls. And the beautiful bearded young men. And the fine old ladies. And the gentlemen. (1994, 212, emphasis Abbey's)

It is clear that Abbey does not see the city of Ginsberg as Moloch, on the contrary, it appears as a counter-design to the city of expressways, as a proof that city street modernism is still possible today. San Francisco is also chosen by Ernest Callenbach as a capital for the utopian state of *Ecotopia*, a novel that combines urban and ecological visions. Abbey celebrates the city as a public meeting place, not as a machine that compartmentalizes and determines modern life. His feeling for the design of the city and

for other people is based on the ideal of the city street, and the above quoted phrase “City and people: How to tell one from another” indicates that the city is more than architectonic design and also more than the sum of its people. A design that serves people by creating public spaces engenders modern life, a life that is marked by exhilaration and freedom.

### 6.6 Abbey’s search for urban nature

The expression “urban nature” can be read in two ways; Abbey occasionally describes the natural environment in urban areas, but more frequently he seeks the urban element in natural spaces. There is a connection between Abbey’s appreciation of the city of public streets and his love of the wilderness. Whereas it is often argued that Abbey sees the city as a part of modern dehumanization and sees natural spaces such as wilderness areas as an escape from them, I suggest that Abbey defends a vision of older “city street” modernism against the newer “expressway” modernism. This older city street modernism can, of course, be celebrated in the city—Abbey, however, manages to incorporate this urban vision into his conceptualization of nature. Although many of the qualities of the 19<sup>th</sup> century city are lost in most modern American cities, they can still be experienced in natural spaces. It may seem to be a paradox, but what Abbey celebrates in the wilderness is to a large degree an urban experience.

One of the parallels between city street modernism and natural spaces is their openness and public character. Abbey frequently stresses how little equipment and how little preparation is necessary to experience natural spaces. One of his best known trips is his boat journey down the Glen Canyon, and he is one of the last people to see that canyon before it is flooded. Whereas it was easy and cheap to float in a rubber boat down the river (Abbey does not even carry a life vest), the same location today, which is Lake Powell, requires much more machinery in order to enjoy it: “Unless you can afford to rent or buy a houseboat or cabin cruiser, such as you see at the marinas of Lake Powell, this lake is not for me or you. Powell is a playpen for the wealthy.” Abbey then contrasts the expensive recreation of Lake Powell with the way Glen Canyon once could be used:

[A] once lovely wonderland of grottoes, alcoves, Indian ruins, natural stone arches, cottonwood groves, springs and seeps and hanging gardens of ivy, columbine and maidenhair fern—and many other rare things. These were delights formerly enjoyed,



easily and cheaply, by thousands of Boy Scouts, Campfire Girls, and others floating down the leisurely river in anything they wished—rowboats, canoes, kayaks, rubber rafts, old inner tubes. (1988, 88)

His conclusion is not that Lake Powell is too crowded, on the contrary, it locks out a part of the population:

The inescapable conclusion is that no matter how one attempts to calculate the cost in dollars and cents, a float trip down Glen Canyon was much cheaper than a powerboat tour of the reservoir. Being less expensive, as well as safer and easier, the float trip was an adventure open to far more people than will ever be able to afford motorboat excursions in the area now. (1984, 102)

Even though the region has more visitors than ever before, access to recreational activities has become less equal, and here Abbey shows that the use of natural spaces has a class aspect. Abbey also makes clear that, although the lake is used more than Glen Canyon ever was, this is not a sign of democratization of society, rather it is a sign for the higher mobility of a privileged part of the population. Glen Canyon and Lake Powell also show that, in regard to natural spaces, one cannot have it both ways, affordable and expensive recreation, because the latter destroys the former. The disappearance of Glen Canyon furthermore is also a curious case of sight obliteration. MacCannell defines the case that a sight becomes a victim of its fame (i.e. its markers) as sight obliteration (1999, 126), one example in the case of Gausta mountain mentioned above. In the case of Glen Canyon this functions the other way round: Glen Canyon, the “canyon that nobody knew” was so undeveloped that there was too little resistance against its flooding. Glen Canyon also shows that the number of tourists is not a problem *per se* for the preservation of a natural space.

Like the expressway has segregated the city, commercial development has compartmentalized natural spaces and, in the above mentioned example, locked out a part of the population. The lake is, in contrast to the river, no longer a public space that is shared commonly by different groups of the population. Seen symbolically, the city of the expressway and the lake stand for stagnation, whereas the city street and the river stand for freedom of movement. MacCannell argues that commercialization destroys tourist sights, not always by physically altering them but by removing them from the public sphere:

Commercialization is pressing in on sightseeing from all sides. Still, at the heart of the act, the final contact between a tourist and a true attraction, such as the White House or

the Grand Canyon, can be pure. The tourists pay for travel, food, hotels, motels, campground spaces, camping equipment, cameras, film, film processing [...] but they do not pay to see these sights. [...] A defining quality of a true attraction is its removal from the realm of the commercial where it is firmly anchored outside of historical time in the system of modern values. (1999, 156-157)

In other words, expressway modernism with its compartmentalization and commercialization cannibalizes on the values of city street modernism, a modernism that is defined by a common experience of public spaces. Furthermore, as MacCannell explains, it is not primarily the fact that a natural space is accessible or that there exist commercial interests in regard to tourism (hotels or outdoor stores), what finally destroys the sight for a tourist is that the sight itself is subject to commercial logic. The problem of Lake Powell for Abbey is twofold: on the one hand he can never forget that the lake buries Glen Canyon, on the other the lake cannot be experienced without motorized means. One may speculate how Abbey may have seen the lake if it had not flooded Glen Canyon and if it had been developed in a way that only permits simple forms of tourism, if it had been surrounded by hiking paths and limited the use of its surface to “rowboats, canoes, kayaks, rubber rafts, old inner tubes”.

The problems of Glen Canyon started with its development; it is, however, not development as such that is problematic, it is the undemocratic and anti-egalitarian consequences of the development that Abbey criticizes, in other words, the betrayal of modern ideals through irrationalism and greed. Abbey is not a Luddite because he is against development—he is a city street modernist who sees his ideals—one of them the idea of public space and free and democratic access to these spaces—jeopardized by expressway modernism. Berman makes the point that not everybody who is against development is a Luddite. The developers presented the expressway as the only possible modern world: “to oppose them and their works was to oppose modernity itself, to fight history and progress, to be a Luddite, an escapist, afraid of life and adventure and change and growth” (1983, 313). The problem with an anti-modernist position is that it is ineffectual because, as Berman points out, modernism is highly appealing, even to the victims of modernization: “the vast majority of modern men and women do not want to resist modernity: they feel its excitement and believe in its promise, even when they find themselves in its way” (1983, 313).

In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey points out the parallels between natural and city spaces. Both are threatened by the expressway: “The automotive combine has almost succeeded in strangling our cities; we need not let it also destroy our national parks” (1992a, 52). According to Abbey, natural spaces are not threatened by people, but motorized tourists are “the chief victims of the system” (1992a, 51). The logic of industrial tourism is the same as that of the expressway, and Abbey proposes changes to the national parks that would reverse the development, similar to Berman who proposes a revival of the city. The main problem for both city and natural spaces is the car, and Abbey proposes solutions how to manage the parks without cars:

Let the people travel light and free on their bicycles—nothing on the back but a shirt, nothing tied to the bike but a slicker, in case of rain. Their bedrolls, their backpacks, their tents, their food and cooking kits will be trucked in for them, free of charge, to the campground of their choice in the Valley, by the Park Service. (1992a, 53)

Abbey does not speak as a protector of nature here but as an administrator of natural spaces. His main concern is the experience of human beings. He shows alternatives to existing expressway developments and answers possible complaints such as problems for children and old people. Abbey wants to develop natural spaces, for example in terms of building more trails (1992a, 54). Abbey’s style of development does not exclude humans from natural spaces; on the contrary, it makes it possible for more people to experience nature. He points at the shift in experience:

Once people are liberated from the confines of automobiles there will be a greatly increased interest in hiking, exploring, and back-country packtrips. Fortunately the parks, by the mere elimination of motor traffic will come to seem far bigger than they are now—there will be more room for more persons, an astonishing expansion of space. (1992a, 54-55)

Abbey’s main focus is not on nature but on the experience of natural spaces; to make this experience possible for a larger number of people, he proposes a reorganization of the parks. Through these changes the parks will grow—not in actual size but in the experience of their users. According to MacCannell a modern society is not so much defined by its work relations or by its local features, it is defined in its common experience of displacement in tourism. This communality needs spaces and sights, be it streets or national parks. Ironically the greatest enemies of the coherence of modern society is a trend inside modernity itself, the trend towards the compartmentalization through the expressway and the devaluation of the symbolic significance of sights through commercialization.

It is a paradox that the wilderness of nature writing is a space where no human presence is perceived. The real wilderness areas, on the other hand, are human spaces, as Phillips notices:

They are overrun with hikers, bikers, whitewater rafters, and rock climbers. This is scarcely surprising, since in the United States wilderness areas are intended to serve as venues for recreation. The majority of Americans think of the woods, the rivers, the oceans, the mountains, and the deserts as places to have fun, not as places where we might discover a more productive way to live with the land. (2003, 233)

Wilderness areas are contested spaces, and a conflict exists between the more meditative and the more recreational uses made of them. In his essay “God’s Plan for the State of Utah: A Revelation” Abbey humorously depicts the problem of opposing interests in land use. Abbey lets a messenger from God decree an end to mining and the development of tourism: “The director gives you two years. No more. He has decided that the State of Utah shall be a clean-air refuge for sick tourists from Indiana” (1991c, 109). In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey argues against the use of the West for cattle and sheep farming. He exclaims “We need more predators” and, echoing John Muir, speaks out against “the sheepmen who run their hooved locusts on the public lands” (1992a, 31). When Abbey argues for more predators, he also argues for the interests of tourism; the conflict over sheep or predators is also a contest of different human interests.

What Abbey advocates is a form of modern tourism. Erve Chambers points out that it is the business of tourism “to bring into close contact people of widely different means, class, ethnicity, and religious and cultural backgrounds” (2000, 32). This city street aspect of Abbey can be seen in many of his hiking and rafting trips. Wilderness experience does not form a contrast to city life but is a form of extended urban experience. The question now arises what differentiates Abbey’s tourist experience of the wilderness from going, for example, to Disneyland. One answer is, as I discussed above, the city street aspect; another aspect is that of authenticity of experience. In an age of postmodern criticism the term “authenticity” has a false ring to it since it refers to extra-cultural essences, but, as Chambers demonstrates, it can be used in a different way, referring to “conditions in which people have significant control over their affairs, to the extent that they are able to play an active role in determining how changes occur in their social settings” (2000, 98), in other words, power and control. Whereas Abbey describes a new form of local cultural autonomy

in Telluride, or in small-scale tourism such as in river rafting, the commercial development of Aspen or Lake Powell threatens this autonomy. The different types of tourists also influence authenticity, as Chambers argues: “Several tourism researchers have suggested that low-budget tourists have a more positive economic impact on the areas they visit than is often thought. They tend, for example, to rely much more on the local economy, seeking inexpensive meals and lodging that are more likely to have been provided by local entrepreneurs” (2000, 38). Abbey is not against tourism in the Southwest, and that stance would be self-contradictory since he, through his writings, has attracted many tourists to the area. Abbey’s writings must be understood as manuals describing how to develop the area and how to behave in it.

It could be said that a certain form of small-scale tourist industry and writers such as Abbey form a symbiosis—Abbey attracts tourists to the Southwest, and tourists or potential tourists will also be his readers. Tourism and literature have cooperated earlier such as during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when “[t]he railroad also sponsored trips to the Southwest for popular writers and intellectuals, who returned home to produce articles that helped rationalize travel to the region as a properly modern and transformational experience” (Chambers 2000, 24). In this respect it is also interesting that Abbey frequently wrote for magazines and coffee table books and was well aware of the fact that his writings attracted tourists; this is why he sometimes gave nonexistent names to existing places that he especially liked or wanted to remain unknown. Abbey’s motto “keep it like it was” rings hollow here since his writing helped to transform the Southwest. The real question is not whether or not the Southwest should be developed; the question is how and with which style of tourism.

The city of the streets allows diversity and a richness of experience that is lost in the expressway world. Abbey transfers this dimension of aesthetic experience into nature when he compares Glen Canyon, the “lovely wonderland” with its lush and diverse nature to the “silent sterile shores and debris-choked side canyons” (1984, 98) of Lake Powell. Whereas the modernism of the streets promised to expand human perception and created an aesthetically more diverse and more exciting world, expressway modernism homogenized and sterilized the street. The excitement of shopping in the small shops of New York’s Little Italy, for example, gave way to the predictable and standardized experience of the mall; and due to the car and the lack of coziness of the malls, actual human contacts are

reduced to a minimum. Modernism has enriched the aesthetic dimension of life, and later it has impoverished it. Berman who analyzes the work of the Russian author Evgeny Zamyatin discusses the conflict between the both modernisms:

The dominant motif in Zamyatin's crystalline new world is ice, which symbolizes for him the freezing of modernism and modernization into solid, implacable, life-devouring forms. Against the coldness and uniformity of these newly crystallized structures, and their newly rigidified ruling class, Zamyatin's hero and heroine of the future invoke a nostalgic vision of "the avenue of their 20<sup>th</sup>-century days, a deafeningly jangling motley, confused crush of people, wheels, animals, posters, trees, colors, birds." Zamyatin feared that the "new" modernity of cold steel and regimentation was extinguishing the "old" modernity of the spontaneous, vibrant city street. (1983, 247)

The nostalgic longing for modernist ideals appears to be paradoxical, but here again it is clear that modernist ideals are threatened by modernization itself. I have demonstrated how Abbey and Berman deplore the decrease of human contact, the standardization that diminishes aesthetic experience, and the loss of modernist ideals such as the public space and egalitarian access to it.

The driving force behind the modern elements of egalitarianism, public life, and aesthetic diversity is change:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation, distinguishes the bourgeois period from all earlier times. All fixed, fast-frozen relationships, with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men. (Karl Marx, quoted in Berman 1983, 95)

Marx's metaphor of melting could give a new meaning to the metaphor "melting pot," not as a homogenizing factor, but an arena of change where old structures constantly melt to create new ones. The city street is such a melting pot. The egalitarian access to public spaces, changing power structures, the fascination of new ideas and fashions, an undetermined life, and an aesthetics that cherishes both the freedom and the danger of change can be lived here. Two examples of such places are Abbey's Hoboken and San Francisco of the late 1960s. Berman interprets the revolt of the 1960s as a revolt against the ossification of the expressway modernism that had paralyzed American social life. Although Abbey himself was not a part of the hippie movement, he cherished their transformative power.

It is the element of change that is central for Abbey's experience of natural spaces. He did not flee the melting, buzzing city in order to experience rootedness and stability in nature, it was the other way round: Abbey fled the ossified expressway Moloch or "ant hill" in order to experience its lost modern qualities in the wilderness. The wilderness is therefore in a sense more "urban" than the city. "Wilderness" for him denoted a public space that was still "melting," that challenged him, physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Therefore wilderness did not have to be "out there," it could also be experienced in a city:

"Wilderness is and should be a place where, as in Central Park, New York City, you have a fair chance of being mugged and buggered by a shaggy fellow in a fur coat—one of Pooh Bear's big brothers. To be alive is to take risks; to be always safe and secure is death" (1991c, 230). Abbey makes it clear that wilderness is not exclusively an actual space, it is a quality of experience. Although this quality can most easily be experienced in a natural space, not all natural spaces (overdeveloped National Parks such as Yosemite) offer the wilderness experience nor is it impossible in all urban spaces. In his essay "Freedom and Wilderness," where Abbey most clearly defines his concept of wilderness, he begins with a description of Hoboken before he turns to natural spaces: "The other kind of wilderness is also useful." (1991c, 228). Wilderness in Abbey refers to a quality of experience rather than to untouched nature.

The main quality of the modern experience, change and the melting away of one's preconceptions, danger, freedom, and exhilaration, shares many of its main qualities with Abbey's experience of wilderness. He often depicts people living in natural spaces and defending their right to do so, but these lifestyles do not present general societal alternatives for the population. Abbey sees the wilderness from an urban and modernist viewpoint, as temporary escapes for many or as long-term escapes for few:

What makes life in our cities at once still tolerable, exciting, and stimulating is the existence of an alternative option, whether exercised or not, whether even appreciated or not, of a radically different mode of being out there, in the forests, on the lakes and rivers, in the deserts, up in the mountains. Who needs wilderness? Civilization needs wilderness. The idea of wilderness preservation is one of the fruits of civilization like Bach's music, Tolstoy's novels, scientific medicine [...] (1991c, 229-230)

Excitement and stimulation are the qualities that are cherished in the city street vision of the modern city, and Abbey sees these qualities in the wilderness.

## 6.7 The “best of both worlds”

During his season in Arches National Park, described in *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey explains his relationship to technology, using the example of his refrigerator:

Raised in the backwoods of the Allegheny Mountains, I remember clearly how we used to chop blocks of ice out of Crooked Creek, haul them with team and wagon about a mile up the hill to the farmhouse and store them away in sawdust for use in the summer. Every time I drop a couple of ice cubes into a glass I think with favor of all the iron and coal miners, bargemen, railroaders, steelworkers, technicians, designers, factory assemblers, wholesalers, truckdrivers and retailers who have combined their effort [...] to provide me with this simple but pleasant convenience without which the highball or the *Cuba libre* would be poor things indeed. (1992a, 96, emphasis Abbey’s)

After praising technology for making his life more pleasant, he goes on to point out that he drinks his drink outside, “out in the light and the air and the space and the breeze to enjoy it. Making the best of both worlds, that’s the thing” (1992a, 96).

Technology not only makes life more pleasant but can furthermore be aesthetically appealing: “The windmill with its skeleton tower and creaking vanes is an object of beauty as significant in its way as the cottonwood tree, and the open tank at its foot, big enough to swim in, is a thing of joy to man and beast, no less worthy of praise than the desert spring” (1992a, 126). The problem, according to Abbey, is not human presence in the desert but non-sustainable development. Cities such as Phoenix or Tucson are built on non-renewable water supplies, and the logic of growth for growth’s sake endangers both nature and humans. Abbey uses the picture of an “iron glacier moving upon us” (1992a, 127) to illustrate his concern over uncontrolled expressway development in the desert.

In his camper in Arches, Abbey lived a more comfortable life than Thoreau at Walden Pond. Whereas Thoreau had little more than a stove in his cabin, Abbey’s camper has “all the indispensable conveniences: gas cookstove, gas refrigerator, hot water heater, sink with running water [...], storage cabinets and shelves [...] Quite luxurious for the wilds. There’s even a shower stall and a flush toilet with a dead rat in the bowl” (1992a, 4). Abbey does not attempt to live his life as simply as possible and welcomes the appliances that make his life more comfortable. What he objects to is industrial development that interferes with the



experience of natural spaces. Furthermore what is important for Abbey is that he is in control of technology, not vice versa. Describing the advantages and disadvantages of his generator he explains that the machine is useful for creating the artificial light that he needs for writing but that the light and noise shut him off from the natural world. There is no need to choose between the two states because “the exchange is temporarily convenient and can be reversed whenever I wish” (1992a, 13) using a simple switch.

Leo Marx points out that there is a long tradition in America of reconciling wilderness and civilization in the pastoral “middle landscape.” Abbey is torn between the two forces, the urban and the wild, but he does not try to reconcile them: “I’d like to have the best of both worlds. The wilderness and urban civilization” (Abbey, quoted in Solheim and Levin 1996, 141). Abbey’s way of balancing the two worlds is not to merge them into a pastoral middle landscape, but to have them both:

Unlike Thoreau who insisted on one world at a time I am attempting to make the best of two. After six months in the desert I am volunteering for a winter of front-line combat duty—caseworker, public warfare department—in the howling streets of Megalomania, U.S.A. Mostly for the sake of private and selfish concerns, truly, but also for reasons of a more general nature. After twenty-six weeks of sunlight and stars, wind and sky and golden sand, I want to hear once more the crackle of clamshells on the floor of the bar in the Clam Broth House in Hoboken. I long for a view of the jolly, rosy faces on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and the cheerful throngs on the sidewalk of Atlantic Avenue. Enough of Land’s End, Dead Horse Point, Tukuhnikivats and other high resolves: I want to see somebody jump out of a window or off the roof. I grow weary of nobody’s company but my own—let me hear the wit and wisdom of the subway crowds again, the cabdriver’s shrewd aphorisms, the genial chuckle of a Jersey City cop, the happy laughter of Greater New York’s one million illegitimate children. (1992a, 265-66)

City and wilderness experiences are complementary and add a dimension of contrast to each other. Abbey is an aesthetic extremist who shuns the middle landscape and finds a balance between two extreme landscapes. Both landscapes, however, are part of a basically modernist aesthetics; what Abbey finds in the wilderness is the original city experience. In his idea that contrast of experiences rather than the search for an ideal middle landscape defines a valuable modern experience, Abbey resounds Frederick Law Olmsted’s definition of the city park experience: “We want a ground to which people may easily go after their day’s work is done, [...] where they may stroll for an hour, seeing, hearing, and feeling nothing of the bustle and jar of the streets, where they shall [...] find [...] the greatest possible contrast with the restraining and confining conditions of the town” (Olmsted quoted in Hiss 1990, 44).

There are two ways one can experience excitement in the wilderness. One is that the wilderness offers a contrast to urban life, and the excitement stems from the transition or change from urban to wild. This perspective is typical of the tourist who seeks repose from his hectic urban life through a temporary relocation to a natural space. In this conventional conceptualization nature is seen as the static and calm antipode to the hectic city, and the only excitement comes from the change or transition to a natural space. In nature itself, however, there is nothing to sustain that excitement and boredom will set in after a short time. I would argue that Abbey does not conceptualize wilderness and other non-urban spaces in that way. He does not present nature as an urban antipode but conceptualizes nature as a space where excitement does not only stem from contrast, the change into the natural space, but is experienced in nature itself. The public space of nature becomes a preserve of the ideals of city street modernism that are threatened.

Change is the superordinate term for a variety of modern experiences: danger and freedom, excitement, instability, skepticism and rootlessness. Abbey's modern mode of experiencing nature conflicts with that of radical environmentalism. Abbey used the visibility of environmental organizations, and he agreed with many of their practical aims (such as the preservation of wilderness areas), but he had a different conceptualization of nature. He used the radical environmental movement because it shared his opposition to the expressway world, albeit for different reasons. Abbey was aware of his general perception as a radical environmentalist and complained that the critics only saw his Deep Ecology side and ignored "the other ninety percent, thus misrepresenting my books and falsifying my life" (1994, 350). Rather than change, for Deep Ecologists nature is an antipode to change, marked primarily by providing stability. Whereas Abbey celebrates the modern qualities of nature, these qualities are usually ignored by environmentalists who, according to Dawkins, "see all of life as a sort of mutual-support encounter group" (1996, 266). Abbey's nature is not stabilizing and soothing, it is dangerous and disruptive.

Leo Marx argues that "[t]o describe America as a hideous wilderness [...] is to envisage it as another field for the exercise of power," and that "survival in a howling desert demands action, the unceasing manipulation and mastery of forces of nature" (2000, 43). This analysis is correct for the Puritan City upon a Hill-mentality, but as I argued in the chapter on Calvinism, there were other Puritan views. But what Marx does here is to present us

with a choice: we either see the land as a garden which needs maintenance or we see it as a wilderness, in which case culture will feel the need to subdue it. Both cases entail a domestication of wilderness through its control. The concept of heterotopia could be a way out of this dilemma because it defines wilderness as a cultural but only partially controlled space and sees the lack of control as a culturally desirable quality, making it possible to retain “the best of both worlds.”

## 6.8 Heterotopia

Leo Marx states that both the pastoral and the primitivist ideals “seem to originate in a recoil from the pain and responsibility of life in a complex civilization—the familiar impulse to withdraw from the city, locus of power and politics, into nature” (2000, 22). The “flight from the city” theme is a common one in the American imagination and caused “a contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life (with the result that we neglect our cities and desert them for the suburbs)” (2000, 5). Marx hints at the destructiveness of the primitivist and pastoral dreams, and it could be asked whether Abbey helped foster this contempt of the city and the growth of the suburbs. Part of the answer to that question is found in Marx’ discussion of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*:

What finally enables us to take the idea of a successful “return to nature” seriously is its temporariness. It is a journey into the desert and back again—“a momentary stay against confusion.” On the island Prospero regains access to sources of vitality and truth. (2000, 69)

It is wilderness as a heterotopian space, as a space inside civilization that makes life in the cities tolerable. Wilderness is a temporary retreat into nature, a nature that can be experienced as Eden or a place of existential terror. Describing and celebrating that wilderness, as Abbey does, is not suggesting an alternative to life in the cities, it is, on the contrary, an integral part of city life.

Leo Marx describes the ambivalence of Thomas Jefferson who

praises the noble husbandman’s renunciation of worldly concerns, but he himself wins and holds the highest political office in the land; he is drawn to a simple life in a remote place, but he cherishes the fruits of high civilization—architecture, music, literature,

fine wines, and the rest; he wants to preserve a provincial, rural society, but he is devoted to the advance of science, technology, and the arts. (2000, 135)

What Jefferson and many contemporaries seek is a “middle state,” a rural order “neither wild nor urban as the setting of man’s best hope,” a state that reconciles the progressivist and the primitivist positions (Marx 2000, 100-101). The 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, has seen both a rural vision and a middle state become escapist. Abbey accepts the cultural dominance of the city, but what he tries to do is save the primitivist wilderness vision inside the order of the city. He seeks the “best of both worlds,” not in the form of a compromise (a middle state) but in the form of a preserved cultural tension between the spaces of wilderness and the city, spaces that ultimately are both civilized, but where the wilderness allows the heterotopian experience of distance and crisis. Rather than trying to find a middle state or to denounce one space in favor of the other, Abbey is aware that, as in Marx phrases it in his discussion of *The Education of Henry Adams*, “‘the two kingdoms of force [...] had nothing in common but attraction’: one represented by the Dynamo, the other by the Virgin” (Marx 2000, 347). Abbey’s vision rejects the Jeffersonian search for a homogenized middle state, and entails a more polarized idea of cultural forces. This is why he once stated that he wants to urbanize fifty percent of America and keep the other fifty percent as wilderness.

For Abbey wilderness is an integral part of civilization. Even the remotest wilderness area is by definition a space created by public interest, as in the description of Dead Horse Mesa, “a flat-topped uninhabited island in the sky which extends for thirty miles north and south between the convergent canyons of Green and Colorado rivers. *Public domain*. Above the mesa the sun hangs behind streaks and streamers of wind-whipped clouds” (1992a, 11, my emphasis). Here a public natural space makes the experience of isolation possible. The question for Abbey is not whether a natural space is beyond the reach of civilization or not: what is important is to which degree natural and cultural spaces are controlled, to which degree their experience is homogenized, and to which degree they are open for individual signification and marking. Although Abbey describes Arches as a remote natural space, he also shows that this space is maintained. He describes his duties such as patrolling the roads and trails, the distribution of toilet paper, or answering the questions of tourists (1992a, 40).

Abbey criticizes the control and homogenization that industrial tourism entails and demands that natural spaces be exempt from the logic of the market economy. Industrial tourism, according to Abbey, homogenizes differences, as he exemplifies with Navajos:

The natives must learn to accustom themselves to the spectacle of hordes of wealthy, outlandishly dressed strangers invading their land and their homes. They must learn the automatic smile. They must expect to be gaped at and photographed. They must learn to be quaint, picturesque, and photogenic. They must learn that courtesy and hospitality are not simply the customs of any decent society but are rather a special kind of commodity which can be peddled for money. (1992a, 107)

Abbey criticizes the treatment of natural spaces as “The Natural Money Mint” (1992a, 50) and the slogan “parks are for people” which he dubs as “parks are for people-in-automobiles” (1992a, 50). Behind the industrial development Abbey sees the assumption that most Americans, “exactly like the managers of the tourist industry, expect and demand to see their national parks from the comfort, security, and convenience of their automobiles” (1992a, 50). In order to counter this development, Abbey sees his role as an educator, showing how much experience is lost through industrial development: “So long as they are unwilling to crawl out of their cars they will not discover the treasures of the national parks and will never escape the stress and turmoil of those urban-suburban complexes which they had hoped, presumably, to leave behind for a while” (1992a, 51). Abbey is hopeful that his educational effort is going to convince some who “have given up the struggle on the highways in exchange for an entirely different kind of vacation—out in the open, on their own feet, following the quiet trail through forest and mountains, bedding down at evening under the stars, when and where they feel like it, at a time when the Industrial Tourists are still hunting for a place to park their automobiles” (1992a, 51). Whereas he sees industrial tourism as his enemy, Abbey sees the industrial tourists as victims of a development that makes self-determined vacations difficult.

What Abbey fears most are the tendencies towards control and homogenization of the expressway world, and what he demands is that heterotopian spaces remain uncontrolled and can thus make diverse experiences possible. Abbey argues that natural spaces such as wilderness areas can function as psychological refuges, even if they are not used by everyone: “I may never in my life get to Alaska, [...] but I am grateful that it’s there. We need the possibility of escape as surely as we need hope; without it the life in the cities would drive all men into crime or drugs or psychoanalysis” (1992a, 129-130). Contrast can

not only be experienced between the city and natural spaces, it is also possible between different natural spaces. During Abbey's work in Arches National Park, located in the desert, he longs for the relief of the cooler mountains in summer: "The knowledge that refuge is available, [...] makes the silent inferno of the desert more easily bearable" (1992a, 129). Modern life can be endured through the existence of heterotopian spaces. Whereas for city dwellers natural spaces such as deserts or mountains are heterotopian, for someone living in the desert, city and mountains are such heterotopias.

Whereas Foucault sees heterotopian spaces as spaces that exist at the fringe of a dominant society and Chaloupka and McGregor Cawley use the term for natural spaces, I argue that heterotopian spaces are not only marked by a different degree of social control, but that the diminishment of social control stems from the possibility of moving between the spaces (whether or not one exercises that option). In other words, heterotopian spaces are the "other"<sup>30</sup> spaces—spaces that allow a relief from dominant culture for some time. For most modern humans nature is such a heterotopian space as they live urban existences. However, when living in natural spaces, cities can become heterotopias, and when living in the hot summer desert, the cool mountains are seen as heterotopian relief. The essence of the idea of heterotopia should be seen both in the lack of control and the option to experience contrast through shifting from one space to another.

Abbey explains how the external reality of the desert is translated into cultural and individual experience. The desert is an interesting space because its signification is only to a lesser degree pre-determined by cultural markers. Whereas the desert as a material entity is one of the most permanent landscapes on the planet, its signification is fluid. In other words, whereas the site or external reality of the desert is, relatively speaking in regard to the human life-span, immutable, its existence as a marker is open for negotiation and creation. An example of this duality is found in *Desert Solitaire*, where Abbey states that if "Delicate Arch has any significance it lies [...] in the power of the odd and unexpected to startle the senses and surprise the mind out of their ruts of habit, to compel us into a reawakened awareness of the wonderful" (1992a, 36-37). Abbey describes the "shock of the real" (1992a, 37), meaning that exposure to an unstructured external reality relativizes both previous knowledge and demands the creation of individual markers. The desert is a

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<sup>30</sup> The article where Foucault presents the idea of heterotopia is called "Of Other Spaces" (1986).

reminder that much of external reality is unmarked: “A weird , lovely, fantastic object out of nature like Delicate Arch has the curious ability to remind us [...] that out there is a different world, [sustaining] the little world of men as sea and sky surround and sustain a ship” (1992a, 37). Abbey’s texts are an invitation to mark and experience that external world, and his sense of wonder derives from the unstructuredness of that world.

### 6.9 Abbey and people

One important element for understanding Abbey’s attitude towards natural spaces is his relationship to the people whom he encounters there. Only very few of his main characters are solitary, and only on a few of his trips is Abbey alone. The people who accompany him and his main characters can be divided into three groups: close friends, locals (Indians, farmers, cowboys), and casual acquaintances. I will in this context ignore the first group and focus on the two latter groups because here Abbey’s modern attitude can be examined. A pastoral writer would be expected to search for people who live closest to the land, whereas a modern traveler might rather look for the casual encounter. Considering that his literary focus is on the Southwest, it is remarkable that Abbey only occasionally writes about the local Indians. He does not romanticize Indians and does not regard the Indian way of life as an alternative to Western civilization. Discussing whether Indians in Alaska could move back to their old way of life Abbey states:

Unimaginable. They’ll all move to the slums of Fairbanks, Anchorage and Seattle, join the public-welfare culture, before consenting to such romantic humiliation. Can’t blame them; until the coming of the white man the natives spent half their lives on the edge of starvation. Famine was common. Now, despite alcoholism, violence, suicide, their population is growing. (1984, 190)

This could be written off as a latent racism or a conceptualization of wilderness that has no place for actual human inhabitants, similar to what happened when Yellowstone was made a National Park (where Indians were at first included and later removed because they did not fit their image). However, I argue that his harsh portrayal of Indians stems from the same source as his treatment of other local inhabitants of the desert, namely a refusal to romanticize a rural lifestyle.

In his essay “Defense of the Redneck” (1991a), Abbey’s ambivalence towards the local population is visible. Abbey, who comes from a poor rural area (his father was a logger and small farmer) and calls himself “a hillbilly, a redneck, and a barbarian,” was also a military policeman in Naples, Italy, traveled and studied in Europe, had a degree in philosophy and lived in a city for most of his life. One key to understanding his ambivalence lies in his biography. Born on a marginal farm, he left his rural home and earned his living as a writer and went into the world. This trajectory he shares with many others who experience the flight from the rural areas as a personal liberation, however, a liberation gained at the price of a split identity. Abbey does not negate his origins and assumes the identity of a redneck. Being a redneck is a part of him, and he occasionally acts out that part. In the abovementioned essay he visits a bar (one of the kind an urban “tree hugger” is advised not to visit), but even before he enters he is already reacting to the anti-environmental bumper stickers. In the bar he discusses the aesthetic value of nature with Calvin, a local patron:

I argued with him, but it was a waste of time. Like most rednecks, rural or urban, he could see nothing of interest in the world of nature unless he was trying to shoot it or set a hook in its throat or trap it and skin it. [...] I suggested to Calvin that we go into Nogales and pick up a couple of women. Calvin shrugged. ‘Ah haint too interested in girls,’ he mumbled. Then he gave me a shy, sly, sidelong look: ‘but you oughta see mah gun collection.’ (1991a, 164)

Abbey’s redneck pose is genuine in that it is part of his personal history, but a part he has grown out of and escaped from, and the visit to the bar serves both as a reminder of what is a part of him and why he does not want this part to be the only part. He is able to communicate with Calvin in the bar, but Abbey’s irony gives away his education and urban values. Irony allows Abbey to create a distance between himself and the real and fictional characters. But since these characters also display one of Abbey’s own sides, he creates an ironic distance from himself. As Leo Marx points out, Thoreau too had “no use for the cant about the nobility of the farmer,” (2000, 258) despite having tried farming himself (in “The Bean Field” in *Walden*). What both Thoreau and Abbey criticize is the materialism of the farmer: “I respect not his labors, his farm where everything has its price, who would carry the landscape, who would carry his God, to the market, if he could get anything for him; who goes to the market for his god as it is...” (Thoreau in Marx 200, 258). In a similar vein, Abbey criticizes the (over-)grazing of public lands by private farmers.



In the essay "Cowboys and Indians" (1992a), Abbey describes taking part in a cattle roundup as a cowboy. Although he functions perfectly as a cowboy and gets on well with his colleagues, the fact that this experience is more of an experiment and not a way to earn a living and that he writes about it distinguishes him from the cowboys. He describes them with respect, but there is nothing romanticizing in his description of a marginal and wretched lifestyle. As in "In Defense of the Redneck," his voice has elements of identification with the people he describes, but also of ironic distance. A text that is marked by biting irony is the polemical essay "Free Speech: the Cowboy and his Cow," where he attacks ranchers during a speech at the University of Montana in Missoula:

The rancher (with a few honorable exceptions) is a man who strings barbed wire all over the range; drills wells and bulldozes stockponds; [...] poisons coyotes and prairie dogs; [...] supplants the native grasses with tumbleweed, snakeweed, povertyweed, cowshit, anthills, mud, dust, and flies. And then he leans back and grins at the TV cameras and talks about how much he loves the American West. (1988, 17-18)

Although Abbey is in part a redneck himself, he neither romanticizes actual life in rural areas, nor does he see rural culture or economy as a viable alternative to the city. In this quotation irony has developed into sarcasm, a sarcasm that is effective because Abbey in part identifies with the rancher. If he were an urban tree hugger, his speech would not have had the same effect. Abbey consciously uses his reputation as a redneck for political effectiveness; a kind of *agent provocateur* who subverts from the inside.

Most of the people Abbey encounters in the desert and on other wilderness trips are strangers. This is not surprising, as anyone who has been on a long hiking trip knows: going into lonely places is a social event. Although one does not meet many people, the likelihood that one will talk to the people one meets and the likelihood of meeting someone sharing the same interests is higher than in a city. This phenomenon can be witnessed in any national park or wilderness area beyond day-trip range of a tourist spot. Social encounters in nature can also be planned, and Abbey's numerous organized rafting trips with strangers depict a jolly and social atmosphere. The loneliness of the landscape intensifies the social character of the journeys. Furthermore the contacts are often casual (a rafting trip has a predetermined end), resulting in a carnival-like detachment from the usual social context. What Abbey experiences in the wilderness is the excitement of the modern city, its floating character - in both senses of the word. It could be said that many writers have looked for the wilderness in the city (such as Upton Sinclair in *The Jungle*), but

Abbey has also looked for the city in the wilderness. In the novel *Black Sun* the protagonist, Gatlin, tries to escape the city and its emotional confusion, only to ironically meet even greater challenges to his psychological stability in form of a tragic love. In the city it would have been easier to protect himself psychologically through diversion, as his friend Ballantine demonstrates. The experience of wilderness in Abbey, be it with other people or alone, is not an escape into a better world, it serves to intensify his social life.

Only in a few texts does Abbey depict genuinely solitary characters; one is the brave cowboy (in the novel of the same name, reappearing in other novels as the character Jack Burns). This figure, although being on the side of the environmentalists, is not a role model because he clings to an outmoded way of life. According to Tom Pilkington, “Burns’ quixotic behavior, which might have been tolerated in the loose law-and-order frameworks of the nineteenth-century American West, occurs in a context of twentieth-century legal and social restraint” (1974, 19). A similar outdated figure is the horse in the essay “The Moon-Eyed Horse” in *Desert Solitaire* about an escaped horse that lives a solitary life in a side canyon and that Abbey set out to catch as part of his cowboy work. One might expect Abbey to describe the horse’s act of resistance to the round-up as heroic, but instead he depicts the horse’s life as tragic. Abbey speaks to the horse: “Are you crazy, maybe? You don’t want to die out here, do you, all alone like a hermit? In this awful place...” (1992a, 147). Abbey attempts to bring the horse back to civilization by telling it about the advantages of a civilized life: “how long since you’ve stuck that ugly face of yours into a bucket of barley and bran? Remember what alfalfa tastes like, old pardner?” (1992a, 145).

For Abbey only a temporary retreat from society is desirable. As Paul T. Bryant points out, the fact that the horse is gelded shows that the “anarchic drive for complete freedom, a traditional western theme, is essentially sterile” (1989, 41), as is the total withdrawal from society. Jerry A. Herndon also states that the horse’s solitary life is not a model:

It becomes apparent rather quickly that Abbey’s fascination with old Moon-Eye is based on something more than the literal horse itself. That something, I suggest, is the fact that the worthless old renegade has achieved a union with the natural world and a total solitude and freedom which Abbey, at least a part of Abbey, would like to achieve for himself. It is thus the idea the horse represents—an uncompromising commitment to freedom—and not the horse itself which intrigues him. But though Abbey is attracted by the horse’s independence, he is appalled by it too. (1981, 99)

Herndon points at Abbey's ambivalence towards his solitary characters but makes it clear that they do not represent an alternative to modern society. Instead they should be seen as two of Abbey's thought experiments, similar to Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond that was meant as an experiment, not an alternative.

#### 6.10 Abbey and the experience of instability

For Abbey the desert is a "place of many surprises, some terrible." Whereas some environmentalists celebrate the stable quality of nature as an antithesis to hectic urban life, Abbey stresses nature's instability: "The world dissolves around us, hour by hour. Whole ranges of mountains come and go, mumbling of tectonic vertigo. Nothing endures, everything changes, and all remains the same. I could be wrong about this" (1991b, 130). His last ironic remark suggests that, although his observation is a truism, nature is predominantly conceived as static (versus a dynamic universe). Dissolution is not only a feature of external nature but can affect the human body. In the essay "Dead Man at Grandview Point" (1992a) Abbey describes an episode from his experience as a ranger when he is called to help searching for a lost tourist who eventually is found dead in the Grand Canyon. The professional manner the search and recovery of the body are carried out indicate that death often occurs in the desert. One of the examples of the instability of nature is seen in *Black Sun*. The romantic opening of the novel, "Each day begins like any other. Gently. Cautiously" (1982, 13) is ironic since nothing in this novel remains the same; Will's fate is neither gentle nor cautious. He experiences how Marx's depiction of modernity, "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face with sober senses the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men" (quoted in Berman 1983, 95), is applied to his personal life.

#### 6.11 Abbey and existentialism

With regard to nature, the existential theme can function in two ways. Often the unstable and threatening quality of nature is used in an affirmative way. When Jesus ventures into the desert, his belief is first questioned and later affirmed; Mary Rowlandson likewise experiences questioning and affirmation in the wilderness. As opposed to the existential

theme that instrumentalizes instability to reach affirmation, there also is a tendency to foreclose the search for affirmative truths. Abbey's brand of existentialism remains skeptical towards final answers and uses to "keep things stirred up" rather than to find affirmation.

Natural spaces are essential for Abbey because there one is able to create a distance from ordinary existence. Thomas Kastura paraphrases this concept of nature that is derived from Nietzsche: "Nature becomes an abstract space for testing, where there are no irritations: no comfort through religious promises of salvation, no declarations of meaning through Enlightenment's epistemologies, no humiliations through emotions such as pity or bourgeois humanist morality" (Kastura 2000, 38, my translation). This nature shares its qualities with nature as wilderness as seen in the Bible or Rowlandson—with the difference that it is negative rather than affirmative. For Abbey there is no deeper meaning to be found, and he challenges affirmative notions as expressions of human desire and self-importance as when he criticizes Peter Matthiesen's characters in *The Snow Leopard*: for "finding themselves."

### 6.12 Abbey and travel

Modern existence is marked by change that is perceived as uprootedness and instability. However, the elements of change, of instability vs. stability and of rootedness vs. uprootedness are by no means exclusive to modernity. Abbey links the elements of change further back in history, to possibly the oldest of cultural conflicts, between a nomadic and a sedentary lifestyle: "The chief reason so many people are fleeing the cities at every opportunity to go tramping, canoeing [...] [is] a chance for the rediscovery of our ancient, preagricultural, preindustrial freedom" (1991b, 120). Abbey complains that humanity gave up "the free, spacious, egalitarian, adventurous life of the hunting-gathering societies" (1991b, 116). Aldo Leopold makes a similar statement, declaring that in the wilderness he feels himself "back in the Pleistocene" (quoted in Carroll 2002, 42). Abbey's ideal of nomadic culture, however, is not a return to a presumed better and older lifestyle, it is the incorporation of nomadic elements into modern life; "fleeing the cities" is a temporary flight as in a vacation. The theme of a temporary nomadic existence is not new in Western

culture as Kastura points out, and goes back to the early medieval pilgrims and their ideal of spiritual enlightenment through askesis (2000, 35).

Abbey's askesis in the desert is not so much physical as it is an aesthetic one, intensifying his physical existence through the barrenness of the desert. For Abbey there are two distinct nomadic modes of experiencing the desert. First, he re-lives the nomadic experience of humanity. This re-living of nature as a nomadic experience is chosen deliberately and is pleasurable, both in its more primitive and more advanced forms and can therefore not be compared with the historic experience—nevertheless it is an experience that enriches modern life, even if it is not really an escape from it. The second mode of nomadic existence is less temporary; it is a growing aspect of modern life itself, of work migration and other insecurities of late capitalist life. Abbey himself participated in a migratory work pattern, combining seasonal summer work as a fire lookout with winter work in the city (e.g. as a welfare case worker in New York City). He cherished the experience of being rootless because it added perspective to his life. He could look at the city with the eyes of a lonely fire lookout, and he could perceive the forest with urban eyes.

Abbey's aim in life could be labeled as 'progress' in its Middle English meaning of 'journey.' The two nomadic modes, that of temporary escape and that of modern rootlessness make it possible to question the over-materialistic and static sedentary lifestyle. This journey further leads to a spiritual growth through the new perspectives it provides. But the nomadic journey has another implication, that of egalitarianism. Since earthly possessions had to be carried around, and since survival was more precarious, there was a greater degree of egalitarianism and need for sharing in nomadic societies. As Bruce Chatwin points out, there is a nomadic core in the three monotheistic religions, and the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hadj, stresses the egalitarian element among Muslims (1987, 223). Chatwin claims that the story of Cain and Abel thematizes the transformation from a nomadic into an agrarian society. Abel the shepherd is murdered, and his death prefigures that of Christ (who was a traveler too) (1987, 214). In this light Abbey's texts can be seen as reflections on old nomadic themes that have been transmitted mainly through the Judaeo-Christian heritage<sup>31</sup> and also as a reflection on the nomadic aspects of modern industrial life. The journeys are equalizers because limited possessions and free

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<sup>31</sup> For the Israelites the journey through the desert of Sinai is a central element of their identity; also the life of Jesus is a continuous journey.

access to travel not only re-create a historical experience but they are also in accordance with the egalitarian ideals of city street modernism.

Abbey's idea of a temporary return to a nomadic lifestyle can hardly be called radical, as many sedentary societies have conserved some nomadic traits, and the most modern of these is tourism.<sup>32</sup> Yet not all forms of tourism make the nomadic experience possible. As I have demonstrated above, certain uses of nature are less egalitarian than others, and therefore the simplest and least commercial forms of use should be encouraged. In terms of the nomadic lifestyle it can furthermore be argued that commercial or highly pre-structured forms of tourism prevent one from experiencing the nomadic quality of the journey. This is the same paradox as in city development: the modern age first makes traveling possible and then it destroys perceptions of change, freedom, and adventure through the development of a more and more commercial tourism industry. Both arguments, the egalitarian and the nomadic one, call for a simplicity and unstructuredness in the experience of natural spaces.

### 6.13 The aesthetics of the desert

As in modernist art, Abbey's perception of desert aesthetics is marked by a reduction of forms to the abstract. But as in the use of the existential theme, this reduction to the abstract, as for example in the often-described silence in the desert, is not an end-point but a narrative transition. The desert is not a space where meaning is absent, it is a space of open signification, "a land of many surprises." Abstraction becomes a tool, not for reducing the desert to its essential meaning but to extend the range of possible meanings. Kastura examines the element of abstraction in the perception of polar landscapes, and it could be argued that the aesthetics of the desert is similar to the landscape of ice. Kastura paraphrases Kandinsky who saw the color white as

the ideal of modernism, expressing the desire to free oneself from all concreteness and reduce reality to the abstract. [...] The color white is the symbol of a world where all colors have faded. It has the same effect on our soul as total silence which is not the silence of death but overflows with living possibilities. (2000, 58-59, my translation)

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<sup>32</sup> Other nomadic elements in sedentary societies are the medieval pilgrimage, the still existing medieval German tradition of "waltz," where young artisans wander through the country to perfect their expertise. Another example is the Norwegian tradition of "friluftsliv" (open air life) that stresses simplicity and is still very popular. One could also include the year of travel that many American students afford themselves after college.

The abstraction in the aesthetics of the desert is a sign for open signification. In *Black Sun* Abbey describes such an abstract desert where Will and Sandy spend the day:

Above, or below, or beyond their reflections lay the deep and flowing sky, empty of all but a trace of cloud and the glow of the approaching sun. Sunlight shone through her hair as the racing sun rose behind their shoulders, cleared the shadow of the rock, and burst with a flare of fire into the center of the mirror—a blinding and terrible beauty which obliterated everything but the image of itself. (1982, 152)

The desert plays an ambivalent role for Will and Sandy's relationship. On the one hand the clear light (like the whiteness of the ice) and open space liberates their relationship from social constraints. On the other hand, the very lack of material structure where "everything but the image of itself" is obliterated signifies instability. The heterotopian desert has liberated them not only from social restraints but also from any certainty regarding their relationship. The ambivalence of the desert is caused by the very lack of structure and can be seen as openness or as instability.

Abbey's aesthetics of the desert conflicts with environmentalism. Kastura describes the ideology of Greenpeace and other eco-movements since the end of the 1970s as marked by an irrational desire for a lost harmony between human and nature through myths of regression (2000, 63). In Abbey's brand of environmental literature, however, harmony cannot be found in the past but is one of several projections into the future. An example of this is Abbey's meeting with a mountain lion: "and someday, possibly, one of our children's children will discover how to get close enough to that mountain lion to shake paws with it, to embrace and caress it, maybe even teach it something, and to learn what the lion has to teach us" (1991c, 238). This vision is expressed in the future tense and is not a re-discovery of something lost, i.e. a regression to a natural state, but it is a possible cultural development, in other words a cultural option, not a natural moral imperative.

Since the abstraction of the desert allows a greater openness, it should not be confused with the pastoral theme of simplicity. Kastura describes how some travelers to the polar regions want to abandon the difficult, ungrateful, and unfinishable project of the Enlightenment and rather experience something that needs no explanation (2000, 83). Here Kastura's definition of the Enlightenment project is similar to Berman's idea of city street modernism. Whereas travelers with a pastoral mindset seek stability and simplicity in

deserts of ice or sand, Abbey's perception of the desert accentuates its modern aspects. In other words, the pastoral tradition of perceiving desert landscapes is a reaction to the projects of Enlightenment and modernism, whereas Abbey's aesthetics accentuates the modern qualities of the desert. Whereas the material quality of the site is stable, the marker of the desert is undetermined.

#### 6.14 Abbey's distinction between civilization and culture

Abbey does not long for a simpler life or a more stable world, even though the temptation of stability is common in a modern world, as Berman explains: "People who find themselves in the midst of this maelstrom are apt to feel that they are the first ones, and maybe the only ones, to be going through it; this feeling has engendered numerous nostalgic myths of pre-modern Paradise Lost" (1983, 15). Many of the environmental utopias are marked by stability—but this stability parallels the order that is created by the ossifying centralizing forces inside modernism.<sup>33</sup> One expression of Abbey's mistrust of stability and criticism of ossification is his distinction between civilization and culture.

In his essay "Episodes and Visions" Abbey recounts an instance when he was accused of being 'against' civilization and science. He reacts with surprise because he sees himself as an admirer of science, giving a long list of scientists from Thales to Einstein. He then specifies that he is not against science, which he equals with knowledge, but against misapplied science, "the worship of technology" (1992a, 244). In order to clarify his ambivalent relationship to modern life he contrasts the two concepts, civilization and culture, and gives them opposing meanings. Abbey identifies civilization with "the finest threads of art and idea [...] the brotherhood of great souls and the comradeship of intellect, a *corpus mysticum* [...] based not on power or institutions but on isolated men" (1992a, 245). Culture he identifies as an "inert mass of institutions and organizations which

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<sup>33</sup> One could argue that the fetishizing of stability that unites both environmentalists and expressway modernists can explain the curious compatibility between certain strands of environmental thought and an ossified modernism in the form of fascism. Both environmentalism and fascism are marked by the desire for stability, and they mask their enmity towards change and the insecurities of modern life in the original sense through utopian rhetoric of 'the simple life', which means change towards a predefined goal. See Luc Ferry and Anna Bramwell for a discussion of the historical roots of environmentalism and its sometimes embarrassing allies.



accumulate around and tend to drag down the advance of life” (1992a, 246). He then presents a list of examples of this distinction:

Civilization is Giordano Bruno facing death by fire; culture is the Cardinal Bellarmino, after ten years of inquisition, sending Bruno to the stake. [...] Civilization is uprising, insurrection, revolution; culture is the war of state against state or of machines against people, as in Hungary and Vietnam [...] Civilization is the wild river; culture, 592,000 tons of cement; Civilization flows; culture thickens and coagulates. (1992a, 246)

The metaphors of the last example demonstrate Abbey’s view of modern life. He argues that flow, change, and revolution are the true expressions of the human spirit that are threatened by ossification through institutions. His definitions of culture and civilization mirror that of the expressway and city street modernisms and are connected to his aesthetic perception of nature (wild river versus stagnant lake).

It could be asked how effective his distinction between culture and civilization is. I would argue that it is not very illuminating because it creates the impression that the ossifying elements in society, culture, form a clearly identifiable body and a tradition different from civilization, thus falling into the same demagogical trap as discussed in Abbey’s view of ‘us’ and ‘them’ scientists. Abbey does not see that the forces of ossification stem from the same sources as the forces of change. The situation is more complex and has more shades of gray than Abbey makes us believe.

Abbey’s simplistic distinction between civilization and culture entails a reversal of the established use of the terms. The sharp distinction between these terms goes back to Immanuel Kant whose view can be paraphrased as “culture means spiritual depth and creativity, while civilization would be reduced to the utilitarian and instrumental” (Aiftnic 2005). Abbey’s definition does not correspond to Kant’s distinction between the material and the spiritual; Abbey’s criticism of a metaphorical machine points towards a rejection of the material in favor of a spiritual enlightenment. In an American context the terms have a different meaning. Civilization refers to “a deep and abiding concern for the structure and organization of life in society.” This organization “assumes from the start that institutional patterns are crucial” and “speaks in terms of social order” (Susman 1984, 66-67). The forces of social control that Abbey identifies as culture have usually been described with the term civilization. On the other hand, the term culture in American thought is, according to Warren Susman, a liberal critique of the idea of civilization and is “[i]nterested in the

maximization of individual pleasure and the achievement of individual grace and fulfillment” (1984, 70). Matthew Arnold defines culture in a similar way:

The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time; who have laboured to divest knowledge of all that was harsh, uncouth, difficult, abstract, professional, exclusive; to humanise it to make it efficient outside the clique of the cultivated and learned” (Arnolds, quoted in Cockshut 1973, 168).

Abbey’s definition of civilization is similar to the individualism, humanism, and idealism of the definitions of culture above. What is interesting in Abbey’s use of the terms is not primarily the distinction as such; as discussed above it is a polemical simplification and a reversal of established uses—what is crucial is that he does not mention nature. Both civilization and culture have a human focus, and Abbey defends one aspect of humanity (freedom, individuality) against another (control, ossification). The highest ideal of a society is human freedom—which is threatened by both human and natural order.

Abbey’s positions are often paradoxical because he holds conflicting viewpoints. On the one hand he advocates limits to industrial development, on the other hand he sees freedom as the highest ideal. The problem is that limiting development would need what Abbey defines as culture. Abbey is outspoken and engaged in his writing, but, as in the distinction between civilization and culture, his polemical positions are simplistic. Civilization and culture, whether they are defined in the traditional way or in Abbey’s way, are not parts of opposing ideologies but are closely interconnected. Abbey’s polemical simplification is also visible in his treatment of public space (he wants to have more public space but does not question private land ownership) and his anarchism. Abbey is a modern writer, but in his polemics he tends to identify elements of planning and structure with the forces of ossification.

#### 6.15 The status of private and public land in Abbey

There is a blind spot in Abbey’s descriptions of natural spaces, and that is private land. Unlike his defense of a heterotopian openness of spaces that he demands for both city and nature, Abbey limits his descriptions of and demands for the use of natural spaces to public

lands, leaving out vast tracts of private land. In this limiting sense he is a Western writer, because only in the West there are large tracts of public lands that are accessible. He has virtually nothing to say to someone who, for example, complains about the pattern of settlement in more populated areas that make it impossible to even have a walk without driving dozens of miles to the next recreational area. Abbey hardly ever travels on private land, nor does he criticize the fact that private land is generally not accessible to the public in the US. This is surprising since the openness of the land plays such an important role for him. Abbey never advocates a type of private land use that is less restrictive, as for example that of Scandinavia, where the “*allemennsretten*” (literally “all men’s right”), a tradition related to the Common Law allowing the public to move and camp on private land, or that of other parts of Europe where privately owned woodland and farmland is accessible. Abbey must have known these traditions since he had traveled extensively in Europe, including Scandinavia. The reason for this omission could be that Abbey’s individualism prevents him from proposing such changes of policy.<sup>34</sup>

Although he does not question the status of private land in American culture, Abbey questions it in regard to Indian history:

Since the land belongs to the tribe no individual within the tribe is legally empowered to sell any portion of it. Periodic attempts are made, therefore, by false friends of the Navajos, to have the reservation broken up under the guise of granting the Indians ‘property rights’ so that they will be ‘free’ to sell their only tangible possession—the land—to outsiders. [...] Retaining ownership of the land, the Navajos have been able to take maximum advantage through their fairly coherent and democratic tribal organization of the modest mineral resources which have been found within the reservation. (1992a, 104-105)

It remains unclear why Abbey is able to identify individualism in terms of property rights as a main threat for Indian culture but does not thematize it for American culture in general.

On a trip to the Catskill mountains Abbey complains that “[a]ll I saw were Private Property Keep Out This Means You signs” (1991c, 228). Despite his complaint, however, he never questions the status of private land. In the West he takes accessibility for granted and, after pointing out that the openness of the wilderness is one of the greatest attractions of the land, exclaims: “Come on in. The earth, like the sun, like the air, belongs to everyone—and

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<sup>34</sup> A similar indication that Abbey remains caught in American individualism is his unquestioning approval of private gun ownership.

to no one” (1991c, 88). On the issue of land ownership Abbey has little to say except slogans.

Tom Lynch identifies individualism as the main weakness in Abbey’s writing: “Abbey’s wilderness ideology is firmly rooted in the mythology of the frontier” which “leads him to decry the destruction of his wilderness and the freedom it represents even as he unwittingly abets that destruction by espousing an anarchic individualism that makes him deaf to the stories and songs embedded in the landscape and to the ecologically responsible communalism such stories celebrate” (Lynch, quoted in Philippon 2004, 262). Abbey remains oblivious to the fact that the kind of communal land use he advocates is based on a limitation of property rights, especially if one lives in an area with little public land. Here Abbey’s individualism conflicts with his environmental concerns. The unresolved conflict between individualism and the necessity of communal control is not limited to Abbey’s writing but has been a theme in American culture since Puritan times, as Warren Susman notes. Puritanism has an ambivalent relationship to the law; on the one hand Puritanism highlights self-restraint and control, on the other it focuses on “individual liberation from man-made law in the name of the newly found conscience” (1984, 41). Abbey’s position on the law is riddled by a similar ambivalence: on the one hand he preaches anarchism, and on the other he demands environmental protection through laws and regulations.

David Oates provides us with a different angle on Abbey’s individualism, claiming that Abbey’s main theme is *Paradise Lost*, a loss that came inevitably over sinful humanity. Although civilization is unworthy of Paradise, “Abbey himself gets off the hook. In Abbey’s formulation of this myth, the solitary individual explorer gets to be Adam. He’s that old American archetype, the mountain man, the Marlboro man, the rugged individual. The rest of us are citified, effeminated, fallen—tourists” (2003, 43). Although I do not agree with Oates that the pastoral *Paradise Lost* theme is behind Abbey’s individualism, I agree that it is the most problematic element of his writing, particularly since it goes unexamined: “Crude individualism is what Abbey cannot see, the most American thing about him, leading him to blandly to assume that somehow he is a ‘social atom,’ detached and whirling on a solitary course” (Oates 2003, 43). Two different things have to be distinguished here: on the one hand there is an element of individualism pervading all of Abbey’s writing, that makes him blind, for example to see the problems of the status of private land in the US. On the other hand there is a hyper-individualism in Abbey which is

used, despite what Oates claims, consciously. First of all the rugged “Marlboro men” in his writing are fringe characters, living in a dead end as discussed above at the case of the Moon Eyed Horse. Second, the “hairy-knuckled screw you persona[e]” (Oates 2003, 43) that Abbey describes have hyper-masculine characteristics (therefore Oates’ characterization of “us” as “effeminate”), meant to appeal to the blue-collar sector of the working class. According to Oates, Abbey sees himself as “He’s working class. He’s crude. He’s Adam” (2003, 43). I think here Oates over-emphasizes the Marlboro-man side of Abbey’s public persona but rightly sees its motivation in a class appeal that will be discussed in the next chapter.

#### 6.16 Anarchism and modernism

The question remains of what kind of political viewpoint could coexist with Abbey’s concern about cultural ossification he expresses in his statement “I love America because it is a confused, chaotic mess—and I hope we can keep it this way for at least another thousand years” (1991c, 230). Abbey called himself an anarchist. His position seems paradoxical: in the anti-federalist manner he is against central control, but he also calls for more protection of federal lands and for better organization of the National Parks. He wants the effectiveness of central planning, but he fears central control. Here the Federalism vs. Anti-Federalism debate is enacted within the paradoxes of a single writer. But the Federalist/Anti-Federalist conflict is also visible in modernism: central planning is responsible for both the openness of the street and the closure of the expressway world, and Abbey’s anarchism can be seen as a stance against the expressway world. It is a weakness of Abbey’s position that he never consistently developed a position of defending central planning against that expressway. His anarchistic rhetoric sounds impressive but is ultimately ineffectual. Abbey is often seen as a romantic reactionary who employs a vision of Jeffersonian agrarianism against the expressway world. As I have shown, this is a narrow reading, but one has to admit that Abbey never develops a consistent strategy in defense of his modernist ideals. Abbey’s modernist vision is not so much obscured by environmentalism as it is by his adherence to Jeffersonian anarchism. Arne Naess expresses a similar dilemma when he discusses ecology as ideology: “Roughly speaking, supporters of the deep ecology movement seem to move more in the direction of nonviolent anarchism than toward communism” but states that environmental and social problems such as

overpopulation and wars call for “some fairly strong central political institutions.”

Furthermore Naess makes the somewhat contradictory statement that “the higher the level of local self-determination, the stronger the central authority must be in order to override local sabotage of fundamental green politics” (1998, 97). The political ambivalence of Abbey and Naess seem to be symptomatic of a movement that is caught between centralist and decentralizing and between anti-authoritarian and authoritarian impulses.

Abbey’s anarchism is essentially an Anti-Federalist position. In many of his novels, such as *Fire on the Mountain*, *The Brave Cowboy*, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, and *Hayduke Lives!*, he depicts heroes who struggles heroically against a central political power. In 1959 Abbey wrote his M.A. thesis on anarchism and the morality of violence, and some of the problems with the anarchist position can already be detected here. First of all, anarchism has a limited class appeal, and Abbey refers to Bakunin’s view that “The political philosophy of Godwin and Proudhon was the most radical expression of middle class liberalism; it represented, essentially, the hopes and fears of small property owners—farmers, artisans, the independent producers” (1959, 20). Abbey then points out that Bakunin combines “the libertarianism of Godwin and Proudhon with the socialism of Marx, thus making it possible for anarchism to appeal not only to isolated intellectuals but also to the newly-created multitudes of unhappy factory workers” (1959, 21). Abbey’s Jeffersonian anarchism is based on his own social position—growing up on a farm and being an “isolated intellectual” himself.

Abbey struggled with the justifications for violence throughout his life. Whereas in his M.A. thesis he claims that violence cannot be justified, in his later life he makes the distinction between terrorism (against people) and sabotage (against things) and thus justifies the violent acts of, for example, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. However, in the sequel *Hayduke Lives!* it becomes obvious that the two types of violence cannot be separated so easily when Hayduke kills an agent in self-defense. In his thesis Abbey asks whether or not “political violence might be justifiable even though it is fore-doomed, now and always, to failure” (1959, 70). In this early statement Abbey questions an important aspect of his later work.

Another problem is that of ends and means in a political struggle: “The question of ends and means, and the perversion of ends by the means, remains as crucial as ever” (1959, 66).

Abbey was always more interested in the means, while the ends, or a political vision, remain shady. It could be argued that Abbey wanted the ends to remain invisible; what he was interested in was the struggle, not a victory. He saw the ideas of anarchism and also environmentalism as vehicles to keep the struggle going, but he was skeptical about the ends of such movements. Referring to Sorel, Abbey sketches a view that could be called Abbey's own political and artistic view: "The struggle itself, with its concomitant expressions of heroism and devotion to a cause, is what matters" (1959, 58). The outcome of such a struggle may be unsuccessful, but that is not what matters: "It is even possible, in this connection, for temperaments of a certain type to find, in rebellion and violence, the certainty of defeat more appealing than the possibility of a victory. Once again we approach the domain of a political martyr" (1959, 71). Hayduke is such a martyr (therefore the ironic reference to Jesus in the title of the novel *Hayduke Lives!*), he is all means and no ends.

The main point of Abbey's anarchism is not a return to a rural society or a utopian social order; it is to preserve a societal openness that he sees threatened through processes of homogenization and totalization. What he is afraid of is that homogenization will override individual interests and justify oppression. "For the orthodox communist, for the Nazi, and even for the middle-class moralist of what is called the 'free world,' it is permissible, under certain though varying circumstances, to sacrifice others for the cause—whatever it may be" (1959, 52). Abbey expresses his response to this idea in his motto "never betray a friend for an idea." The basic ingredient of Abbey's anarchism is individualism.

Abbey's anarchism is a tool against homogenization and not a coherent political vision. It is not an alternative to existing political systems, but only a corrective for these orders. Therefore it can be said that he does not break with Western or American political values. Abbey has been an inspiration for environmentalists, but his work cannot be seen as a political handbook as he offers no answers to how conflicts can be solved in complex societies. The stress on individualism and Anti-Federalism may even be counter-productive for environmental causes as they undermine his ideals of city street-modernism.

### 6.17 Conclusion: Constituting modernity

Abbey is neither a pastoralist nor a Nature Writer, nor does he fully belong to the tradition of descriptive nature writing. It could be said that his major literary achievement is his development of nature writing into a modern genre and to bring it closer to travel writing. The main characteristic of the modern age is, according to MacCannell, that human beings experience their daily existence as unstable and inauthentic, that is as defining their identity to a lesser degree than in pre-modern times. Although modernity destroys an identity that is based on the daily life of people, it creates its own identities and communalities, for example through tourism. Coming from an inauthentic life in the suburbs, the tourist can participate in the reality of a touristic sight, be it Paris, Yosemite, or Tuscany. Although the act of the creation of cultural markers is individual, there exist cultural common grounds, for example visible in many travel guides. In other words, tourism is a fundamentally ambivalent enterprise: On the one hand it is an expression of modern alienation, a consequence of loss of identity in daily life and the search for it elsewhere; for this search people engage in a form of ritualized displacement through travel. On the other hand tourism constitutes a new modern identity through creating communalities: It creates common cultural markers worldwide, and the experience of touristic displacement is a shared one. Abbey creates a new identity for himself when he states that, although he comes from the Appalachians, sees the desert of the Four Corners region as his “true home” (Temple 1982).

However, there is a threat against the creation of modern communality. Berman describes how the expressway world destroys communal spaces such as neighborhoods and city streets, and how it betrays the ideals of modernism. MacCannell makes a similar argument when he identifies commercialization as the main danger for the creation of communality through tourism: “The dividing line between structure genuine and spurious is the *realm of the commercial*” (1999, 155, emphasis MacCannell’s). A commercial structure is not perceived as creating modern communality because it lacks authenticity. MacCannell uses the example of Rome to make his point: “Millions of dollars changed hands at hotels, restaurants, souvenir stands, guided tours, etc. Rome was the attraction, but did Rome itself charge admission? No.” (1999, 195). Despite its involved business, Rome remains a genuine touristic destination exactly because it allows the creation of a city street environment where tourists from all social classes and with diverse interests meet. It



remains, metaphorically speaking with Abbey, a Glen Canyon and has not become a Lake Powell yet.

There is another aspect regarding the question of why people travel or, more specifically, why they go to natural spaces. As explained above, travel has the potential to create a modern identity, so it is a constituting factor for modernity, albeit jeopardized by the equally modern expressway and commercialization. In addition, however, touristic spaces serve as temporary escapes from the modern world, an escape into a space that is marked by a lesser degree of control, a heterotopia. There is no real contradiction between the creation of modern communality on the one hand and the escape from the modern world on the other: a modern world of the city street variety allows temporary escapes into spaces that it has incorporated but does not fully control: heterotopian spaces that are not separate from the modern world but remain distinct nevertheless. Abbey expresses the need of a heterotopia for the modern world when he claims that “civilization needs wilderness,” wilderness here representing a non-commercialized city street heterotopia.

Abbey’s conceptualization of the desert as a modern city-street heterotopia has influence on his aesthetic perception. The desert is not a stable counter-world but is dynamic and marked by open signification, a “land of many surprises.” When Abbey’s friend, the painter John de Puy remarks that Abbey’s descriptions of the desert are visual like paintings (Temple 1993), then one can imagine Abbey painting his “world of words” in an abstract manner, providing a frame to fill in individual signification. Also other elements in Abbey’s writing fall more into the category of modernism than into pastoralism. His existentialism and anti-spiritual attitude negate a stable conceptual ground, and anyone who believes to find stability in nature may share the fate of Will in *Black Sun*. Abbey’s writing has a political aspect insofar as he wants to preserve the heterotopian quality of natural spaces. However, due to his strong individualism Abbey expresses why natural spaces should be saved, but not how.

## 7. The Right to Nature: Social Class in Edward Abbey

### 7.1 Introduction

Elements of social class in Abbey's writings can be found his use of the form of the novel, as well as in his language, humor, and his stance towards the environmental movement. Environmentalism is not a class neutral movement; Barbara Ehrenreich claims that it "came out of the professional middle class" (1989, 158) and is, according to William Tucker, based on "the ideas of aristocratic conservatism translated onto a popular scale" (1982, 32). In a similar vein, Peter Quigley identifies an elitist bias against the working class in environmentalism and links it to the anti-modernist desire for "natural" order and stability: "The desire for unity, the fear of the masses, and their popular tastes, the desire for coherence and order, all hover around the apparent concern for the environment" (1999, 184). Although Abbey has an oppositional view on staple environmental themes such as biocentrism, he sees himself as a part of the environmental movement but tries to integrate a working class perspective into it. In contrast to the biocentric tendencies of environmentalism he focuses on human interests and does not see nature primarily as an entity apart from culture but as a cultural space where different interests intersect.

Abbey describes environmental conflicts not only as conflicts between interest groups (such as environmentalists against road builders) but also as class conflicts inside various groups. David Mazel states that "literary environmentalism [cannot] be seen as a self-evidently pure and 'good' resistance to an external and 'bad' force that 'exploits' the environment" (2000, 21). In *Hayduke Lives!* the contested character of nature is foregrounded. On the one hand there is the conflict between "good" environmentalists and "bad" developers. On the other hand, Abbey shows that there are class conflicts on both sides of the environmental struggle and that the classes do not perceive and use natural spaces in the same way. Abbey does what Mazel demands from environmental literature, namely creating an "intersection and interlocking of discourses—and the often divergent ways of knowing the world for which individually they speak" (2000, 21). The interlocking of conceptualizations and interests in *Hayduke Lives!* creates a multi-faceted situation which does not provide simple answers. Abbey agrees with the aims of the

environmentalists, but he also treats their middle-class views with irony and even sympathizes with the working class views of the developers.<sup>35</sup>

## 7.2 Abbey's working class background

Several of Abbey's texts have a proletarian appeal, and due to his background this appeal is generally credible. Abbey grew up on a poor Appalachian farm but left his home early and with it his social class. He was lucky to be drafted into the army and sent to Italy as a military policeman right after the war had ended. After his discharge the GI Bill allowed him to study philosophy at the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. During his studies he spent one year at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland and traveled extensively in Europe, writing about his travels in his journals. All this was hardly within the normal reach of a young working class man or young farmer of his time. Abbey saw himself as a writer early, and even during his studies in Europe, while writing his first novel, he presented himself as one. After his studies he worked part-time as a fire lookout in the Southwest and as a welfare case worker in New York, published some moderately successful novels, and taught English at university. Particularly until his breakthrough with *Desert Solitaire* in 1968, he could be labeled what Paul Fussell calls the x-class: educated, relatively poor, but without the status anxiety of the middle class.<sup>36</sup> Abbey understands his class ascendancy and sums up his family history: "After centuries of striving at least one member of the Abbey Clan (Allegheny Mountain branch) has succeeded in climbing to the uppermost rungs of the lower class" (Abbey 2005, xvii). Abbey's upward mobility is a key to understanding his work. He assumes a working class pose in order to educate his readers to follow him in the change of views that his ascendancy entailed.

Abbey's father "pursued many different working-class jobs, as he would continue to do all his life" (Cahalan 2001, 7). He was also active in the IWW, and "his working class

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<sup>35</sup> Here I do not use the term "middle class" in the popular all-encompassing American usage referring to, for example people who did not go to college and hold low-paid jobs as "lower middle class." Instead I follow Michael Zweig's terminology to call that class in the US the "working class." Paul Fussell defines the classes in a similar way but uses the term "proles" instead of what he sees as the British euphemism of the "working class."

<sup>36</sup> A sub-group of the class that Fussell calls "x-class" is known as *nouveaux pauvres*, the class of impoverished aristocrats who maintain style and distinction despite their lack of material resources. The codes of this class are illustrated in Alexander von Schönburg's book *Die Kunst des Stilvollen Verarmens* (2005).

defiance rubbed onto his son” (Cahalan 2001, 7).<sup>37</sup> Abbey stated that his “father was a Wobbler” (quoted in Temple 1982). In the semi-autobiographical first novel *Jonathan Troy* (published in 1954), Jonathan’s father explains his union background to his son:

The Union I am talking about is the I.W.W., the Industrial Workers of the World, the One Big Union. They called us the Wobblies back in Oregon. We were really gonna do big things then, organize every working man into this one big union, give everybody a gun and then take over the factories and the shipyards and the lumber companies and damn near everything and run everything for the benefit of the working man and not for some fat capitalist back in New York City. (1950, 74)

Echoes of his father’s anti-capitalist views can be found scattered throughout Abbey’s work, but in his last novel, *Hayduke Lives!*, Abbey focuses on the working class again. However, it has to be pointed out that Abbey was not a union man, despite his family background and despite his sympathy for the labor movement. The reason is that Abbey was not a worker but an intellectual, and in that respect the unions represented an environment that kept him ‘in his place,’ whereas he wanted—and managed—to break out. This too can be seen in *Jonathan Troy*. Jonathan’s father tries to get his son into the union but is met with reluctance. The father tries to convince Jonathan: “The labor movement needs smart young men who aren’t afraid of anything and who know exactly what they’re doing and why they’re doing it” (1950, 76). Jonathan, however, is reluctant: “Well, it won’t get me” (1950, 77). Jonathan is not hostile towards the union movement per se, his problem with it is that it represents the way of life of the father he wants to get away from. Jonathan shows his ambivalence: “He knew that by his attitude of largely feigned indifference he had hurt something in his father, and this power he had gave him no small amount of pleasure and satisfaction, but, at the same time, his own heart suffered” (1950, 77). Jonathan, like Abbey, has sympathy for his father’s cause but he does not want to be a worker or a farmer.

In *Jonathan Troy* Abbey depicts life on the farm as poverty stricken as when Jonathan describes the weekend shopping trips of the local farmers:

In the late afternoon the scowling farmers would herd their dreary wives and smeary, stricken children back into the Model A and grind off to their dark and dismal homes, leaving the city for the night to the city kids and the lodge members, to the city crowds and the city lovers. (1950, 16-17)

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<sup>37</sup> Abbey only occasionally mentions his mother who was a schoolteacher—but in his dedication to learning he is more akin to his mother than to his father.

Passages such as this one fit poorly into the context of pastoral environmental literature, but they illustrate the rifts in Abbey's personality and writing, the rift between classes, but also between the urban and rural ways of life. Abbey cannot bridge this rift, and a return home is impossible. The impossible return home is his main theme in what Abbey regarded as his "fat masterpiece," the aptly-titled novel *Fool's Progress*.

Although Abbey inherited his father's defiance, father and son have different political leanings. Whereas his father opts for collective political action, his son, despite his sympathy for the ideals of the union, is an individualist. Abbey's solution consists in leaving the Appalachians and social ascension, in which respect he is an embodiment of the American Dream. Jonathan Troy and his father discuss the future and his father responds to his son's wish to join the army:

'Do they play baseball in the Army?'  
'Sure.' 'Is that what you're gonna do?'  
'Maybe. I don't know for sure'  
'You'll probably stay right here.'  
'Why?'  
'Because farmers never go very far from home. They like to stay near---'  
'I told you I'm not sure I'm gonna be a farmer!' (1950, 42)

Jonathan does not want to be a farmer, nor does he share the political vision of his father who wants to build up a new union. There is a parallel between Jonathan Troy and Abbey's point of view. Both Jonathan and Abbey are defiant and fearless and reject the father's way. The reason for this rejection of the father is that both farm work and union activism would stand in the way of their personal quest for social improvement.

Abbey's dislike of farming can be seen from an early age onwards, and his brother recalls that "Ned shirked work at every opportunity. He believed that manual labor was beneath him" (quoted in Loeffler 2002, 16-17). Abbey "seemed interested only in nature, reading, and writing" (Cahalan 2001). Although there are parallels between Jonathan's and Abbey's fathers, Abbey's father came closer to his son's restlessness, as Abbey describes in an autobiographical essay:

We envied our city cousins with their electric lights, indoor toilet, hot and cold running water, new car, neighbors only living a hundred feet away; and the poolroom and movie-picture show only a few blocks down the street. When the war came and an

opportunity to escape, we left—in a hurry. Without regret. My father, not keen on farming himself—he preferred the logging business—sold our farm. (Abbey quoted in Cahalan 1997)

Abbey's love of nature is not unconditional. What comes first for Abbey are his interests, desire and experience, and he sees nature through these individual filters. One can compare Jonathan Troy's view—that is, the view of the adolescent experiencing the limitation of rural life—with the depiction of the Appalachian landscape of Abbey's childhood where nature is perceived as a space of adventure:

In childhood the wilds seemed infinite. Along Crooked Creek in the Allegheny Mountains of western Pennsylvania there was a tract of forest we called the Big Woods. The hemlock, beech, poplar, red oak, white oak, maple, and shagbark hickory grew on slopes so steep they had never been logged. Vines of wild grape trailed from the limbs of ancient druidical oaks—dark glens of mystery and shamanism. My brothers and I, simple-minded farmboys, knew nothing of such mythologies, but we were aware, all the same, of the magic residing among and within those trees. (1991c, 223-24)

The hills of his childhood, that he so fondly remembers as spaces of adventure in his essay “Shadows from the Big Woods” are described differently in *Jonathan Troy* because they here represent an obstacle to his personal development and his upward social mobility:

Away from his father, breathing well in the knowledge that he was actually leaving Tacoma and the oppressive hills that surrounded it (the hills had never seemed oppressive to him before, but now they did; small hills, covered with wild grass and corn fields and ragged woods, they were now crouching around the little town, smothering it, shutting out, he might have guessed, two-thirds of the sky), Jonathan Troy strode buoyantly over the earth and measured the rim of the cup that held them in. He had walked this ring of hills many times before, alone and with others, but never with such a sense of liberation and triumph. (1950, 78)

The explanation for the difference between the quotations is that the autobiographical Abbey of the first quotation remembers his life as a child, whereas the semi-autobiographical Jonathan is an adolescent. Childhood has a different perspective on the landscape, as the English poet Jeremy Hooker points out:

In England a humanized nature takes the place that wilderness holds in America; but it is a humanized nature within which wildness or the nonhuman is discoverable. One of the main places in which English writers and painters have found this is home ground, the territory known intimately in childhood. It is here that they have perceived the boundless in the bounded; found creative power in minute particulars; seen visions in ditches. (1998, 2)

What Hooker calls “ditch vision” does not primarily depend on inherent qualities in the landscape, but on the interests of the individual. The same landscape can be a space of adventure or be perceived as oppressive.

During his adult life the forested landscape of the Appalachians remained alien to Abbey. The fact that this landscape represents what he moved away from helps to explain the above-mentioned oppressive depiction of a forest in *The Brave Cowboy*, and his ambivalence towards forests: “The high forest has its charms, but I think I love most the timberline regions. The taiga, the tundra, and the tarn. Here the trees are few and scattered, growing close to earth. The world opens up and one begins to understand what we’re doing up here” (1991c, 219).

As described in *Jonathan Troy*, Abbey’s strategy for escaping his class is leaving the poverty-stricken surroundings of his childhood. The change of landscape from forest and hills to the desert also marks his upward mobility. A key moment for Abbey is his being drafted into the army. He had a few months before he had to go, and these he spent traveling through the West like a hobo. It was especially the Southwest that attracted him, a landscape that was not only free of oppressive hills and trees but was also much more open in terms of class (see discussion below).

By the time he joined the army, the war in Europe was already over, and Abbey enjoyed being a military policeman in Europe. The army has played an interesting role in the softening up of social boundaries. In the two world wars it functioned as an engine for racial integration since soldiers of different races fought together (especially when they were fighting a racist regime in WW II). In a similar fashion the army blurred class boundaries: not so much because soldiers of different classes fought together, but because through the GI Bill the army provided a college education for a section of the population that earlier would have had no access to higher education. As for many other young men, education made it possible for Abbey to aim high in life. What is peculiar about Abbey is that he did not want to join the suburban middle class but aspired towards a lifestyle that resembled that of the leisure class. Abbey’s choice of major at university, philosophy, was suited to distance him from his working class origins. Thorstein Veblen discusses the role of different types of knowledge in the formation of class:

By those whose habits of thought are not shaped by contact with modern industry, the knowledge of the unknowable is still felt to [be] the ultimate if not the only true knowledge. Learning, then, set out by being in some sense a by-product of the priestly vicarious leisure class; and, at least until a recent date, the higher learning has since remained in some sense a by-product or by-occupation of the priestly classes. (2002, ch. 14)

Philosophy is a subject that has no direct practical use (like religion, the “knowledge of the unknowable”) and therefore carries the highest status among academic subjects (the other extreme would be a subject like engineering, which is purely practical). Veblen also points out that “higher learning, in its incipient phase, is a leisure-class occupation (2002, ch. 14). It should be pointed out that at the time when Abbey went to college, the idea of mass higher education was still in its infancy, so going to college at all was more of a class marker than it is today. Education, even though a marker associated with the leisure class, is not exclusive to that class. Members of other classes can educate themselves, and for them education is a means for class ascension. However, as Veblen points out, these upwardly mobile students tend to gravitate towards the more practical or cognitive subjects:

The chances of an occurrence of a strong congenital or acquired bent towards the exercise of the cognitive aptitudes are apparently best in those members of the leisure class who are of lower class or middle class antecedents – that is to say, those who have inherited the complement of aptitudes proper to the industrious classes. (2002, ch. 14)

The fact that Abbey studied philosophy may not have guaranteed him a stable middle-class income, but it made sure that his class ascension in terms of status was secured. Whereas “modern science may be said to be a by-product of the industrial process” (Veblen 2002, ch. 14), the “classics, and their position of prerogative in the scheme of education to which the higher seminaries of learning cling with such a fond predilection serve to shape the intellectual attitudes and lower the economic efficiency of the new learned generation” (Veblen 2002, ch. 14).

Even though Abbey may have been “acquiring knowledge which is of no use” (Veblen 2002, ch. 14), this learning represents an ascension to the leisure class, more exactly to a class that Paul Fussell calls the “x-class.” Veblen calls members of this class the “poor scholarly types.” The x-class is marked by a low income but at the same time by high status through education, by an absence of class anxiety, and by a pattern of consumption that could be described as doing without or living cheaply with interspersed elements of



conspicuous consumption. This means that even not owning a TV set could be a class marker (Abbey's enactment of this was to shoot his TV, an act that he later fictionalized in *Fool's Progress* when Henry Lightcap shoots his refrigerator). The German aristocrat Alexander von Schönburg claims:

No other medium favors stupidity and herd mentality as much as television. No other medium is responsible for so much brutality and banality and for so much waste of time. Not so long ago one had to know Latin to belong to the educated upper class. Today it is enough to do without television. (2005, 153, my translation)

The act of abandoning television can be seen as an attempt to increase or to maintain one's status in modern times. Certain goods have become so widely accessible that it takes an effort not to use them, and this effort is linked to increased status.

The advantage of belonging to the x-class is a relatively large degree of independence and a high status profession. Abbey felt these advantages when his studies brought him to Europe (to Scotland and Norway, among other countries), where he enjoyed his status as a young American author. It was also an advantage that the high status of his profession made him successful with women (although his unstable life and low income made family life difficult). When he studied in Europe, Abbey was aware of his privileged status:

"Tomorrow I am off to Austria and the Tirolean [sic] Alps. Nothing to do but ski skate and eat for two weeks. What a wretched life I lead. What have I ever done to deserve this? [...] If I am to have so much I must have more" (1994, 38). During his year in Edinburgh, Abbey traveled extensively in Europe at a time that had not yet discovered mass tourism. Even today, as Fussell points out, "what the middle class most envies in the classes above is their trips abroad" (1983, 109).

While he was in Europe, Abbey was writing his novel *Jonathan Troy*, a novel about a young man breaking out of the confinement of a poor rural life. Abbey was furthermore able to elevate his status through being an intellectual. When skiing in Finse, Norway in 1952, he met the Norwegian supreme court justice Ferdinand Schjelderup and his wife and was invited as their guest: "The justice muttered a few words to the hotel manager and I was instantly transformed from a common vagrant into a guest of honor" (1994, 72). Abbey recounts that they were talking about a variety of "fascinating topics" during a meal and "[a]fter coffee and an hour or so of talk about American politics and Norwegian scenery, we went up to the Schjelderups' room for a few stiff slugs of upper-class cognac

and more talk” (1994, 72). On another occasion, Abbey learns about the sexual advantages of being an intellectual. In an Austrian hotel he meets a young woman:

A very attractive girl, Penelope; wherever she went she was surrounded by lust-eyed men (including myself) [...]. Though she spoke French fairly well, and some Deutsch, I was her only English-speaking friend in Saint Anton. I was the only man with whom she could converse on topics more complex and profound than skiing, the weather, surface politics, sex and home life. So that, eventually, when she surrendered to the vital force and the adventure of being away from home and far from Mother, it was with me that she went to bed. (1994, 60-61)

When Abbey experiences this, he is only a few years away from the poverty he describes in *Jonathan Troy*. Although he is not rich (and travels cheaply), his education has elevated him to what Fussell calls the “x-class” and describes as an “unmonied aristocracy” that is marked by “freedom from supervision” (1983, 180). According to Fussell, members of the x-class have often fled from their parents and dedicate themselves to art, writing, or creative work (1983, 179). The x-class does not suffer from the status anxiety of the middle class and seems to say “I am freer and less terrified than you are” (Fussell 1983, 181). This is also visible in the use of language: “X-people are freely obscene and profane, but tend to deploy vile language with considerable rhetorical effectiveness, differing from the proles by using *fucking* as a modifier only now and then and never dropping the *g*” (1983, 185 emphasis Fussell’s).

The fact that the x-class is a variant of the upper or leisure class leads to the phenomenon that it displays less status anxiety and other-directed behavior of the type best illustrated by Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Since the x-class is more removed from the industrial process, it does not have to be as anxious as the middle class, and there can be parallels between the members of the working and the x-classes. Abbey always stresses how cheaply he lives, from his “cheap workingman cigars” to cheap beer and old cars. The fact that a simple lifestyle leads to greater economic independence without loss of status was the centerpiece of Thoreau’s Walden experiment. The function of Thoreau’s exclamation “simplicity, simplicity” is maintaining or acquiring a leisure class status with limited material means. Also in the x-class there is conspicuous consumption, but what is spent most is time, not money. The members of the leisure class can afford to spend time. This may not be so apparent today, in a time of mass unemployment, but one has to see Abbey’s work as a fire lookout (which demanded almost no real work) against the background of the economic boom of the 1950s when better paid career options would

have been easily available. Also the work as a fire lookout, even if it may look like a dead-end position, has status. First of all, government work in general has status (according to Veblen the fields “government, war, sports, and devout observances” (2002, ch. 3) are class markers), and second the fire lookout job allowed Abbey to pursue another career, that of a writer (which would fall into Veblen’s category of “public merrymaking” (2002, ch. 1). The opening of *Black Sun* (“Each day begins like any other. Gently. Cautiously. The way he likes it” (1982, 13)) is not only a pastoral hyperbole, it is furthermore a class marker, indicating the conspicuous consumption of time, a luxury in a world where the day begins with the sound of an alarm clock.

In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey points out that he works for the government:

I like my job. The pay is generous; I might even say munificent: \$ 1.95 per hour, earned or not, backed solidly by the world’s most powerful Air Force, biggest national debt, and grossest national product. The fringe benefits are priceless: clean air to breathe [...]; stillness, solitude and space; an unobstructed view every day and every night of sun, sky, stars, clouds, mountains, moon, cliffrock and canyons; a sense of time enough to let thought and feeling range from here to the end of the world and back. (1992a, 39)

This work provides status not in terms of income or career opportunities but in terms of relative freedom from market forces. His underpaid job allowing a large degree of freedom and control marks Abbey as a member of the x-class. One has to remind oneself that Abbey’s season in Arches National Park is actually work and not leisure time. Abbey is not alone in his attitude and mentions a permanently employed colleague who “is happy enough with his present situation so long as he is free to spend at least part of his time outside the office; the two things he dreads most, as a Park Service career man, are promotion to a responsible high-salaried administrative position, and a transfer back East to one of the cannonball parks” (1992a, 9). The status that such low-key government positions provide lies in their leisurely quality and in the degree of control. This kind of status is different from both that of the booming market economy of the post-war era but also from the emerging counterculture. Abbey wore a uniform, not long hair.

Besides the x-class connotations of his work as a park ranger, there is an additional reason not to pursue regular work, as Nietzsche suggests. He discusses his various strategies against existential depression and lists one as “mechanical activity.” The results of this activity are often falsely interpreted as “the blessings of work” (1984, 335-336, my

translation). In such a perspective, both working and coming close to the “bare bones of existence” would be a contradiction in terms for Abbey since, according to Nietzsche, work is a defense mechanism against existential doubt, an element that is important for Abbey’s aesthetic perception of the desert.

After he had become a successful writer, Abbey stopped working as a ranger. He lived in Tucson, Arizona which he describes as: “a grim and grimy little-big town, swarming with nervous policemen, dope dealers, resolute rapists, and geriatric bank robbers” (1991b, 38). At other times Abbey’s description of Tucson is more ambivalent: “My wife and I and my daughter live (for the moment) in a little house near the bright, doomed city of Tucson, Arizona. We like it here. Most of the time” (1991b, 61). As Abbey could choose where to live, it is remarkable that he choose Tucson and not, for, example, the more fashionable Taos, New Mexico. Abbey had lived in Taos in the 1950s, when it was a mainly Spanish-speaking rural area and not the fashionable artists’ resort that it had become later. Abbey probably would not have liked the pretentiousness of Taos, preferring the lower-class Tucson, which could be seen as the Hoboken of his later life.

There is a correspondence between Abbey’s career preference and nature. In *Desert Solitaire* he describes the landscape he is going to work in as a ranger, “a desert place, clean, pure, totally useless, quite unprofitable” (1992a, 29). Abbey’s leisurely work corresponds to the uselessness of the desert. Abbey here reverses the Puritan work ethic and takes up an aristocratic ideal of remoteness from the production process. This ideal not only determines his career choice (or his choice not to participate in the mainstream labor market) but also his aesthetic perception.

Abbey belongs to the x-class mainly because he managed to maintain control over his working situation. Being in control defines, according to Reeve Vannemann and Lynn Weber Canon (1987) the higher classes. Typically for the x-class, Abbey traded high status and being in control against a relatively low income and a life of Thoreauvian simplicity. The work he pursued (author, university professor, government work) carried high status, and he did not have to feel class anxiety. Due to a financial crisis Abbey worked in blue-collar jobs a few times (Loeffler 2002, 49), but this did not mean a class regression for him since the employment was temporary. However well he functions with his blue-collar colleagues, the class difference is clearly visible in Abbey’s description of such a job.

Abbey spent his days “sitting at a bench winding fiberglass around transformer coils, laminating the cores, winding coils, jig-boring in modified specs, wedging one coil inside the other, testing” (Abbey quoted in Loeffler 2002, 49). For Abbey his co-workers were

ignorant, foul-mouthed, pleasant, genial, dirty-minded, unambitious, lazy, completely uninterested in their work, concerned mainly with home, family, sex, bowling, cars, payday [...] There they were, the Joe-Six-pack sextet, whose tempos were directed by the vacuous tattoos of Muzak that was piped in and out of your mind’s ear—unless you were used to Beethoven, Shostakovich, or Stravinsky, at which point the vapid melodies lingered uninvited like synthetic syrup, deadening sensitivities, edging you ever closer to mediocrity or perhaps even some form of low-level insanity. (Abbey, quoted in Loeffler 2002, 49-50)

Loeffler points out that “Abbey didn’t resent his fellows or dislike them, nor did he denigrate them. As a syndicalist, he was their champion. He always defended the right of the working man to dignity and adequate recompense” (2002, 50). There are several points that can be made about Loeffler’s description. First it is clear that Abbey functioned well and felt relaxed among his blue-collar colleagues. The reason is that he knows this environment and class from his own family. However, it is also clear that he does not belong to that class anymore; he is neither unambitious, nor does he like muzak or bowling. His description is that of an outsider from a class so different that there is no status anxiety involved. Third Loeffler contrasts the environment of the factory and the open space of the desert. It is not only the absence of nature, it is also the absence of control over his life in the factory that makes Abbey long for the Southwest, which is more suited to a member of the academic x-class. Fourth Loeffler points at the root of Abbey’s problem with unstable relationships. He wanted marriage and family, but he did not want responsibilities because these made it necessary to work and thus lower his class status. The relationships of his characters often resemble non-committal agreements (like the one between Gatlin and Rosalie in *Black Sun*) or are romantic but unstable (as the relationship between Gatlin and Sandy in *Black Sun*). Veblen describes the problem of family and class:

The conspicuous consumption and the consequent increased expense, required in the reputable maintenance of a child is very considerable and acts as a powerful deterrent. It is probably the most effectual of the Malthusian prudential checks. The effect of this factor of the standard of living, both in the way of retrenchment in the obscurer elements of consumption that goes into physical comfort and maintenance, and also the paucity or absence of children, is perhaps seen at its best among the classes given to scholarly pursuits. (ch. 5, p. 4)

Abbey could only live in a higher class through living a very basic lifestyle that was unsuited to maintaining a family and destabilized his relationships.

### 7.3 Elements of working class culture in Abbey's texts

Many of Abbey's characters belong to the blue collar sector of the working class, and Abbey appears to target readers of that group in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Hayduke Lives!*. Although only a minority of the working class works in blue-collar jobs today, "the basic attitude and values developed in such jobs are still very important in the general working-class culture [...]; this importance is vastly out of proportion to the number of people actually involved in heavy work" (Clarke 1979, 190). Because of the cultural predominance of the blue collar sector, the novels may target a wider working class readership.

Defining the social classes is a difficult enterprise as there are many different categorizations. There are, however, two main approaches in the definition of class, one is defining class through power relations (as Karl Marx did), and the other is based on a system of signs and codes (as Thorstein Veblen did). Both approaches complement each other and are relevant for an analysis of the discussed novels. In the United States there is furthermore a reluctance to discuss social relations in terms of class. Although the working class appears to be invisible today, there has been a long working class history in the US: "In the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, the United States had a vibrant working class culture: theater, magazines, and a whole literary world dedicated to working class life" (Zweig 2000, 62). Vanneman and Weber Cannon argue that there is a considerable working class in the US today and that it distinguishes itself both from the middle and the capitalist classes. The authors define class in terms of power differences that are "defined by the social relations of domination and subordination" (1987, 40). Michael Zweig defines class in the same way: "For all their differences working class people share a common place in production, where they have relatively little control over the pace or content of their work" (2000, 2). Another definition of class is based on a system of signs and codes. Two important works here are Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (first published in 1899) and Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinctions*. In *Class* Paul Fussell updates and popularizes Veblen's definition of class codes. Veblen's

definition of class has an economic and historical basis, but class distinctions are perpetuated by a system of signs and codes. Veblen describes the system of self-perpetuation: “The possession of wealth, which was at the outset simply valued as an evidence of efficiency, becomes, in popular apprehension, itself a meritorious act. Wealth is now itself intrinsically honourable and confers honour on its possessor” (2002, ch. 2). In order to be seen as honorable, wealth has to be displayed, and Veblen calls this display “conspicuous consumption.”

The working class has been traditionally conflated with its blue-collar segment. However, the terms blue collar and working class have different meanings. Working class is the superordinate term, and blue collar is a segment of it. In the last decades this segment of society has seen a decline, as most working class jobs are now in the service sector: “The relative decline of blue collar factory employment and the rise of white collar service jobs is supposed to show that the working class is history” (Zweig, 2000, 10). The purpose of Zweig’s book, however, is to show that the decline of the blue-collar sector does not mean the decline of the working class. The working class has changed but nevertheless still exists because power relations have not changed. Even though Abbey’s characters are not exclusively blue-collar, I would argue that he appeals to this sector of the working class. One characteristic of the blue-collar segment is that it has been traditionally dominated by men and by male values and behavior. Zweig points out that “Women are still grossly underrepresented in the more skilled blue collar jobs that traditionally have been held by men” and that “[i]dentifying the working class with factories may foster the notion that ‘working class’ means men, or even just white men” (2000, 31). The type of blue-collar workers that Abbey depicts in *Hayduke Lives!* are skilled workers, foremen, and farmers, and these groups traditionally include disproportionately high numbers of men (Bourdieu 1984, 136) (percentage of men among farmers, skilled workers and foremen in France, 1975, 88.4, 86.5, 94.1, respectively).

In academic, and particularly in humanist discourse, the working class is often subsumed in the race/class/gender approach, which defines class as underprivileged. But following the humanistic discourse it becomes obvious that the race, class, gender-approach mainly focuses on women and minorities, and only very seldom on class. Zweig points at the problem of this narrowing of focus in the race, class, gender-approach: “In these formulations, white men are stripped of their legitimate standing among those who suffer

wrongs in the capitalist society. This type of politics is a recipe for alienation among white men, dividing the working class and creating needless hostility towards the justifiable demands of women and minorities” (2000, 54). Much of this anger is visible in the language of Abbey’s male working class characters, and in some of their hostility towards women and minorities.

There are strengths and weaknesses in Abbey’s depiction of the working class. The strengths are that Abbey gives individual faces to a largely invisible class, that the characters, partially due to Abbey’s own working class background, are believable, that Abbey sees his literature as having a social and political purpose, and that he problematizes the encounter of the largely middle class environmental movement with the working class. One of the weaknesses is that he focuses on the (male and white dominated) blue-collar types and only occasionally acknowledges the existence of people in the service sector (Rosalie in *Black Sun*, a single mother living in a trailer home is an exception), although it must be stated that there still was a strong blue-collar sector in Abbey’s time. With his exclusion of women and ethnic minorities Abbey may have reflected the realities of the blue-collar sector, but he did not live up to his own standards as a writer. According to Cahalan Abbey understood art as Brecht and Marx did, as a tool to shape reality rather than to mirror it (2001, 59).

One reason for Abbey’s focus on the blue-collar sector could be a romantic appeal. As mentioned above, the cultural influence of that sector outstrips its economic influence. The disappearance of the traditional factory workplace is followed by its romanticizing, visible for example in the presence of dark and oily factory environments and muscular and dirty working class men in advertising. It is possible that Abbey reaches people who want to read about a romanticized class rather than the social-service reality of that class. But even members of the service sector may feel themselves represented by blue-collar depictions.

#### 7.4 Radicalism and the working class

*The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Hayduke Lives!* are radical books, radical in the sense of their promotion of illegal forms of resistance. Since its publication in 1975, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* has been a source of inspiration for radical environmentalism and aided the



foundation of the organization Earth First!. In *The Monkey Wrench Gang* Abbey advocates ecologically motivated sabotage, and *Hayduke Lives!* is more confrontational than its predecessor in terms of the methods it advocates in sabotage and direct action. There can be little doubt that Abbey “really means it,” i.e. that his work can be understood as an advocacy of radical environmental actions. According to Philippon: “the large number of scenes of sabotage in the novel may seem to be a weakness from a literary perspective, from a technical perspective they are clearly a strength” (2004, 248). Philippon reports that several of the actions in the novel were carried out in reality later on and claims that Abbey “ultimately [...] will be remembered most for his identification and popularization of ecosabotage” (2004, 249). However, the radicalism of Abbey’s texts lies in the methods of resistance and in how far an individual can go to oppose what he or she perceives as a destructive system. It does not refer to the grounds for that resistance. I would argue that Abbey moves stylistically, politically, and socially well within the conventional discourses of modern Western society in general and the United States in particular. It is exactly this lack of ideological radicalism (as, for example, in biocentrism) that marks his writing.

Radical environmentalism emerged from the countercultural movement of the 1960s (or New Left<sup>38</sup>) and it shares with its predecessor the notion that the problems of modern society are of extraordinary scale and can only be corrected with a radically new ideology, eschewing what is seen the root of the problem, namely Western rationalism. The notion that environmental problems threaten the very existence of life on the planet and can only be remedied by the rejection of Western values is a staple argument, although it has been met with certain skepticism outside the radical environmental movement.

As the working class in Western countries tended to be skeptical of the radical ideologies of the countercultural movement of the 1960s (as the uneasy alliance between students and workers in the Paris commune of 1968 demonstrated), it was equally reluctant to embrace radical environmentalism for two reasons: first, early industrialization created the working class and, second, late industrialization and mass production democratized consumption and blurred class distinctions in terms of prosperity. A romanticizing of the pre-industrial

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<sup>38</sup> Another school of thought that emerged from the New Left is poststructuralism, which, according to Terry Eagleton, compensates for its political ineffectiveness with radical posturing: “Unable to break the structures of state power, post-structuralism found it possible instead to subvert the structures of language” (1983, 142). Both environmentalists and poststructuralists believe that current ecological problems are signs of a deep crisis and cannot be overcome with “technological fixes” but demand a rethinking of the foundations of Western culture.

world or denouncing of industrialism as such potentially endangers the existence or the relative prosperity of the working class. Rather than denigrating Western society and industrialization (and thus alienating the working class), Abbey attempts to demonstrate that not all of the aims of radical environmentalism (such as the preservation of wilderness) are incompatible with the existence or well-being of the working class, and that not all aspects of industrialization (such as globalization) improve the position of the working class. In other words, Abbey aims at creating a common platform for environmentalism and working class interests.

Even though Abbey keeps a distance from certain aspects of the environmental movement, he points out that he sees the movement as politically very important, namely as a revival of the I.W.W. In *Hayduke Lives!* the colonel explains why he regards environmentalism to be a threat to the political system: “Terrorists we can handle. Terrorism is right down our alley [...] But this other thing, this so-called ‘ecotage,’ we haven’t had to deal with anything like that since the A.G. wiped out the I.W.W. back in the twenties” (1990, 148). In the following paragraphs Abbey explains some of the history of the I.W.W. to the reader, mentioning that leaders of the American Labor movement were executed in Utah. What Abbey does in this conversation between the agents is to redefine the environmental movement, especially Earth First!, as a successor of the I.W.W., in other words, he defines it as a working class movement. This view contradicts the general perception of the environmental movement as middle class, as expressed by John Leo in *U.S. News and World Report*: “And issues of class are a factor, too. Environmentalists tend to be well-off, with the luxury of worrying about the snail-darter and the state of the global environment in 2050.” Leo also points out that environmentalism rose out of the 1960s agitation and that it is associated “with elite Democratic stances” (2001, 22).

### 7.5 Abbey’s role as an educator

Abbey’s semi-autobiographical characters are marked by restlessness, a restlessness that is, according to MacCannell, a mark of the educated class:

The growth of mind that is supposed to be the result of education can be exchanged for the attitudes that support the growth, an acceptance of change, an attachment to the temporary and a denial of comfort. A willingness, even desire, to live in semifurnished

quarters, moving often like a fugitive, holds the academic in its grip as an emblem at the level of an entire life-style of a restless spirit. (1999, 32)

This means that one of the motivations behind tourism, restlessness, is not necessarily a human universal but may depend on education (both in terms of general education and education of how to travel). It furthermore means that heterotopian spaces that support that restlessness are better suited for academic “fugitives” than excessively developed spaces. In his essay “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks” Abbey states that an experience of natural spaces becomes impossible if they are developed too much, as is the Navajo National Monument: “the road has been paved, the campground enlarged and ‘modernized,’ and the old magic destroyed” (1992a, 46). Whereas motorized traffic destroys the experience of spaces, better forms of use exist: “Thousands climb each summer to the summit of Mt. Whitney [...] multitudes of others wander on foot or on horseback through the ranges of the Sierras [...] Still more hundreds and thousands float or paddle each year down the currents” (1992a, 48-49). Not all of these nature users are experienced:

And most significant, these hordes of nonmotorized tourists, hungry for the taste of the difficult, the original, the real, do not consist solely of people young and athletic but also of old folks, fat folks, pale-faced office clerks who don’t know a rucksack from a haversack, and even children. (1992, 49)

Through the knowledge gained through his upward mobility, Abbey is able to educate his readers both culturally, towards simpler forms of nature use and more independent exploration, and practically, explaining the difference between a rucksack and a haversack.

Why should the use of nature be simple and non-motorized? MacCannell explains the difference between the mode of recreation and individual freedom: “One of the few remaining freedoms under advanced Capitalism [...] is to abjure commercialized entertainments, to continue to set our own touristic itineraries” (1999, 197). For Abbey the use of nature is also an act of resistance and he educates his readers towards an individual appropriation of nature instead of consuming prefabricated tours. The essay “The Great American Desert” contains a five point list of desert etiquette: The first four points urge the readers to use a cooking stove for preparing food (rather than building a fire), and explains what to do with garbage and how to behave at natural water pools (not bathe in them). The fifth point, however, encourages the reader to “remove and destroy survey stakes, flagging, advertising signboards, mining claim markers, animal traps” because the “men who put

those things there are up to no good and it is our duty to confound them” (1991c, 19). The reason for the advocacy of activism is that simple modes of recreation and commercial uses of nature cannot coexist easily in the same space.

There are certain obstacles in the way of the urban working class’ access to nature, but in principle these spaces are open to all classes, and here environmental literature could play an educational role. Throughout his work Abbey describes people of all classes using natural spaces and their different experiences. Some go to nature to have a spiritual experience, others to drink beer. Abbey shows that the use of nature is not limited to one type of behavior, i.e. to one type of appropriation and that different styles can compete in these spaces. A related educational text is Bill Bryson’s *A Walk in the Woods*, where he shows that going on a weeklong hike in bad weather is perfectly possible and enjoyable for two overweight, middle-aged, inexperienced, and ill-prepared men.

#### 7.6 The form of the novel

David W. Teague argues that traditional non-fictional nature writing has middle class connotations: “The field guide, the ramble, the backcountry journal, the travel narrative are all, from a generic perspective, very interesting to a certain demographic group, namely the educated middle class from which many college professors come” (in Branch 1994). Dana Phillips makes a similar argument, claiming that nature writing appeals “to the tastes of the above-average Joe and Jane, who are educated, have some disposable income, and may even own a weekend place at the lake or in the mountains where they, too, can take exhilarating little walks, just like nature writers do” (2003, 211).

As shown in my discussion of the genre of the novel in the introduction, it is significant that *Hayduke Lives!* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* are novels. The form of the novel with its human focus can be seen as counterproductive in the genre of environmental literature, and therefore non-fiction and poetry dominate that genre. However, the rejection of a human focus also entails an assumption that there is a single human interest common to all humans. The assumption of that monolithic human interest must raise suspicion among members of the working class for whom class distinctions have a stronger impact on their lives than the rather abstract human interests. In environmental literature’s very rejection of

the novel lies a class bias. Abbey points at the democratic and non-elitist character of the novel. The two above-mentioned novels have a human focus and are meant to entertain. Although Abbey knew that he was seen as an environmental writer, he saw himself as an entertainer. Entertainment is important with regard to social class because there is a greater need for release through entertainment in the working class (discussed below). *Hayduke Lives!* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* are the books where the aspect of entertainment is most pronounced.

### 7.7 Physical immediacy of experience

The environmental historian Richard White discusses the connotations of physical labor in an environmentalist discourse: “distrust of work, particularly of hard physical labor, contributes to a larger tendency to define humans as being outside of nature and to frame environmental issues so that the choice seems to be between humans and nature” (1996, 172). This means that physicality is seen as an obstacle to identification with an idealized nature. The reason is that physical labor transforms nature. However, the experience of the workplace by the working class “inverts the usual middle-class account of the satanic mill” (Clarke 1979, 190) and leads to identification with the work. In *Hayduke Lives!* Abbey describes the identification of a blue-collar bulldozer operator with his machine. The operator is talking with Erika, an environmentalist: “You are a nice girl, Erika, but please get your hand off that fuel tank cap, please. Takes two hands to unscrew it anyhow. Unless—‘ He held up one huge oil-grimed sinewy paw and grinned at her” (1990, 83). Both machine and operator are oily and powerful, and the operator identifies with his machine.

Since the environmental struggle is also a class struggle, anti-industrial rhetoric would not easily convince Abbey’s blue-collar readers who may be fascinated by their jobs, as Clarke explains: “how could anyone abhor this great masculine domain with its endless overtones of power and violence” (1979, 191). The working class does not take the dichotomy of the pastoral versus the satanic mill for granted as easily as the classes further removed from the production process. The “mechanical, sensuous and concrete familiarity with the tools of production” (Clarke 1979, 191) interferes with an identification with nature. Abbey does not try to question the pride of the above mentioned operator directly, instead he

problematizes the identification with the machine. The members of the environmental sabotage group discuss their enemy, a company that plans to mine uranium: “I’m afeerd of them nucular power people. They’re something different. They ain’t like ol’ Bishop Love and his comical Search and Rescue Team. They ain’t like him or us. They ain’t even human” (1990, 122). Whereas the single blue-collar operator may be able to identify with his real machine, it is more difficult to identify with the metaphorical machine of a multinational company because it entails a loss of control rather than being in control of a real machine.

In the chapter “Seldom’s Nightmare” of *Hayduke Lives!*, a member of the environmental sabotage group, the farmer Seldom Seen Smith dreams that he is abducted by a GEM (Giant Earth Mover). First the machine abducts him and then forces him to be its new operator and to watch as the old operator is disposed of:

[A] forceps-like instrument with teeth that dropped into the cab and snatched the struggling operator, straps, rivets and all, from the control chair. Arms and legs writhing in reflex terror, the operator was swung to maximum boom extension two hundred and twenty-two feet above the ground and freed, i.e., released, that is, dumped, directly into the path of the machine’s advance. (*Smunch!*). (1990, 67, emphasis Abbey’s)

The bulldozer operators find themselves in an ambivalent situation where they both feel in control of their powerful machinery but also like powerless parts of a metaphorical machine.

The fear of becoming part of a machine is expressed in *Hayduke Lives!*. During an environmentalist blockade Virginia watches how Bishop Love mounts a bulldozer and drives it “to the line of young people confronting her, forced them to realize, unanimously, suddenly, that they were charged, not by a human driving a machine, but by a machine driving a human” (1990, 91). Machines in Abbey are an ambivalent symbol of power and physical immediacy on the one side and powerlessness on the other, and as such are a source of both fascination and fear. Abbey’s writing is not directed against the fascination with machines so much as against the fear. In the *Monkey Wrench Gang* Doc tells Seldom that “[w]e are up against a mad machine, Seldom, which mangles mountains and devours men. Somebody has to try to stop it. That’s us. Especially you” (1976, 198). Abbey converts the fear of the machine (“Some humans can be reduced to robots”) into

empowerment through resistance and adds an optimistic tone: “But no amount of robot could ever manufacture a human being” (1976, 232). In Abbey’s environmental argument humanity distinguishes itself from nature through the power to transform nature, but the power structures that these transformations entail jeopardize human power and distinction. The holistic notion of becoming one with nature is a threat for the part of the population that is regarded as a resource.

### 7.8 Masculinity

According to John Clarke, there is a connection between the experience of manual labor and the assertion of male gender definitions: “The brutality of the working situation is partially reinterpreted into a heroic exercise of manly confrontation with ‘the task’” (1979, 196). Out of this reinterpretation a worldview emerges in which nature plays a passive role:

The very teleology of the process of work upon nature, and the material power involved in that, becomes through the conflation of masculinity and manual work, a property of masculinity and not of production. [...] And if the nature of masculinity in work becomes a style of teleology, completion and production, femininity is associated with a fixed state. (1979, 197)

For a traditionally male-dominated working class culture, nature is the object of its work, a work that provides identification, whereas the environmental imagery of Gaia or Mother Nature means a reversal of these values. In *Hayduke Lives!* Abbey thematizes how an appreciation of nature can be seen as interfering with male values when the local pro-development businessman Bishop Love is affected by doubt: “Love’s heart had softened, nearly failed, began to bleed for things like juniper trees and kit foxes and purple asters and desert turtles. A bad weak shameful period—menstrual, climacteric, you might say—in his life” (1990, 17). A similar interference with male values is seen when the participants at the Earth First! rally discuss the symbols of the movement: “The Sparklers and Twinklers demanded that Earth First! drop the clenched fist as official symbol. Said it’s too aggressive. Said it suggests spiritual negativity, crystal imbalance, harmonic divergence” (1990, 229).

The Sparklers and Twinklers walk out from the Earth First rally, but what follows is not an affirmation of the male symbol of the fist but a chaotic discussion of sexual symbols where

everything from a hand holding a daisy, a bloody stump, cock and balls with wings (“women wouldn’t go for that, they wanted something more feminine, more Gaia-like” (1990, 229)) to a female monkey wrench is proposed. The discussion ends in a “[b]ig argument about plumbing, pipe fittings, pipe wrenches, male and female connections, suction valves, bolts, nuts, left hand threads and right-hand screws” (1990, 229). This male-chauvinistic play is also seen in the fact that the desert landscape is sexualized and anthropomorphic: “They had to walk a quarter mile farther, around the towering phallic knob, along purple slope strewn with dangerous little geodes the size of ball bearings, down a narrow crevasse between two vast, plump, smooth symmetrical globes of stone (one with pimple)” (1990, 141). Abbey here ironically exaggerates his male perspective; in the very act of playful exaggeration lies the acceptance that gender connotations of nature are cultural markers, not qualities of an external reality. In *Hayduke Lives!* not only is nature depicted in sexualized terms, but so are the environmentalists. The activist Erika’s physique is described in minute detail, but a male activist is described in the same way: “Look at that one in the middle all hide and muscle, thinks he’s Arnold Schwarzenegger, look at the thing he’s got. In his hand. Four feet long if it’s an inch” (1990, 87-88). Abbey’s didactic purpose here is to counteract the perception of environmentalists as moralist and bloodless tree-huggers.

Despite his appeal to his male readers, Abbey also subverts notions of masculinity. A company supervisor is thinking about female bulldozer operators:

Good workers, those girls. Take the work seriously. Don’t drink, smoke dope. Really want the job. Put the screws on those rednecks once and for all, teach them a little humility, show them there’s nothing special about running big equipment. [...] That’s what the boys don’t believe yet. They’re in for a shock. (1990, 31-32)

Abbey shows that the male blue-collar world is disappearing. This is the endpoint of a historical development in which, ironically enough regarding today’s association of male blue collar work and heavy machinery, the invention of machines undermined the male blue-collar status. Richard White explains: “In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, blue-collar workers regarded physical work as a mark of manhood. They often saw the these machines that broke their connection with nature as emasculating them; they associated machines with women” (1996, 180).



In *Hayduke Lives!* a member of the sabotage group, the Mormon farmer Smith realizes the obsolescence of his values. When he visits Hayduke's cave in a remote canyon he pictures how life might be there: "If you could keep a nice woman here might not be too bad [...] build her a cabin, spade up a garden for her, run a ditch in, plant melons, keep her barefoot and pregnant, be just like old times. Only women don't care for that kinda life anymore. And never did, probly" (1990, 179). Abbey both appeals to and subverts the values of his readers and points at both the deception of a pastoral life and women's role in it. Richard White explains: "Women who did much of the backbreaking labor on American farms before electricity have never, to the best of my knowledge, grown nostalgic for the work of pumping and carrying water or cleaning clothes on zinc washboards or any of what Senator George Norris of Nebraska called 'the unending punishing tasks of rural life'" (1996, 182). Nostalgia, whether for a lost blue-collar world or for a lost rural world is neither a viable social perspective nor is it a solution to environmental problems.

### 7.9 Language and humor

Abbey complained that *Desert Solitaire*, which for most college students is their first contact with Abbey (Cahalan 2001, 263), was the only book that was used for excerpts in magazines and textbooks. For some time Abbey did not permit reprints from that book and instructed his agent: "tell them I have plenty of other books they can use" (quoted in Temple 1993). One can speculate why his other books created a lesser demand, but one reason could be their low-brow humor. In an interview Abbey stated that (in his novel *Fool's Progress*) "[t]here are a lot of things that will annoy a lot of people [...] Joking about sex, religious groups and ethnic groups. It's a habit of mine. I can't seem to help it" (quoted in Cahalan 2001, 252). It could be argued that *Desert Solitaire* appeals most to a middle class taste that is marked by an absence of low-brow humor and by a "softening of hard facts" (Fussell 1992) in language.

Thomas Dunk describes the language of the male blue-collar working class in a small Canadian town (here referring to a conversation about lob-ball, a ball game): "Language can be used to define social and cultural space. The abundant use of foul language is a means of symbolically expressing the fact that the game, the field, the back of the half-ton,

and the bar are all male spaces. 'Fuck' is employed as verb, subject, adjective, and adverb" (2003, 97). Abbey lets his character Hayduke use this language:

'It's me, Doc. Holy shit, you blind?' 'Is that you?' 'Fuck yes, who else.' 'You're dead.' 'Not yet I ain't' [...] 'Where'd you get that name? Casper Goodwood?' [...] 'It's easy, you pick out a fuckin' name, go to the right place, put down your bucks, pick up your new I.D. Anybody can be anybody in this fuckin' country if he has the dough.' (1990, 109)

Whereas Abbey both tries to appeal to working class readers and reconcile them with environmentalism, the traditional hostility of a working class view of environmentalism can be seen in the comedian George Carlin, employing a similar sociolect: "I'm tired of fucking Earth Day. I'm tired of these self-righteous environmentalists, white, bourgeois liberals who think the only thing wrong with this country is that there aren't enough bike paths. Trying to make the world safe for their repulsive Volvos" (2001, 96-97). The language of environmental literature is not class neutral, and its usual meditative style alienates the working class. A friend traveling in the American Southwest told me that she was chatting with a bus driver about books when he took out a copy of Abbey's *The Monkeywrench Gang*, which he kept in the bus, and recommended it as "the real stuff."

According to Dunk, working class humor relates to what Bakhtin calls the "'material of the lower stratum.' Penises, arses, excretion, vomiting, and farting are the subject of endless humorous commentary. [...] The emphasis on release contrasts with the importance of self-control in middle-class culture" (2003, 93). Such an emphasis on release is not commonly found in environmental literature, which focuses on restraint of human impact. As discussed below, the element of release also distinguishes middle and working class styles of recreation.

Clarke describes the characteristics of a blue collar type of humor in a male environment:

[An] aspect of shop-floor culture is the distinctive form of language use and a highly developed form of intimidatory humour. Many verbal exchanges on the shop floor are not serious or about work activities. Many are jokes, or 'piss-takes', or 'kiddings' or 'windups' [...] Associated with this concrete and expressive humour is a well-developed physical humour: essentially the practical joke. These jokes are vigorous, sharp, sometimes cruel. (1979, 193)

Dunk exemplifies these wind-ups that are characterized by ritualized male toughness while observing "the boys" at Thunder Bay:

As I turned to look around, I noticed two of the Boys who apparently had been standing behind me for some time. One of them, laughing, yelled at me, 'We must stink, eh?' He came over, grabbed my buttocks and said: 'That's nice.' The other one said to me, "I told you he is a fucking fag." 'Look who is talking,' came the reply, 'I feel sorry for your old lady [i.e. girlfriend]. Maybe I should go and visit her.' Go ahead, you wouldn't know what to do anyway.' 'Nah, after she had me she wouldn't want to go back to that puny thing of yours, then you'd be pissed off.' 'Listen to the bullshit!' he said and, turning his back to the other, he farted and pretended to throw his beer on the other one. (2003, 82-83)

Windups and graphic humor with an intimidatory tone characterize the talk between the agents Hoyle and Boyle and their informant, Oral Hatch, who meet in a hotel room in *Hayduke Lives!*. Oral, feeling insecure in the presence of the hard-boiled detectives, reports how he knocked unconscious a suspected member of the environmentalist group:

"Gave him a chop on the neck. Then— "  
"A job"  
"A chop. Karate chop. Searched him."  
"And found?"  
"He was queer, all right. Had chicken entrails in both front pockets." [...]  
"How do you know they were chicken entrails?"  
The young man sighed. "I know my entrails."  
"You must get pretty personal with chickens." (1990, 51)

When the men discuss the identity of the man whom Oral knocked unconscious in a public restroom, Hoyle and Boyle go on winding up Oral: "Maybe he was waiting in there for a chicken. What'd it say on the door? Hens? Roosters? Maybe he was a chicken molester. I hear they're the worst of all" (1990, 52). In reply to the question whether the suspect was alive or not, Oral states that he was alive since he was breathing and had a pulse. Hoyle again comes with an intimidatory and sarcastic remark: "You checked his pulse to see if he was breathing. Good technique" (1990, 52).

Hole and Boyle do not take Oral seriously because he is a caricature of the insecure lower middle class, dressed uncomfortably in a cheap suit (1990, 49) and restraining his language through euphemisms. He reports how he searched the garbage that was used in an environmentalist action:

"Fingerprints?"  
"Was all wet garbage, sir. Stuff from some supermarket dumpster—rotten fruit, rotten vegetables, bloody newspapers, soggy bags, plastic diapers full of baby doo-doo."  
Vulgar laughter.

“Doodoo, Oral?” inquired Boyle. “Or poopoo?”

Both men broke down into wheezing hysteria, Boyle rolling on one of the double beds. Hoyle convulsing deep in a sagging armchair. (1990, 149)

The working class characters Hoyle and Boyle mock Oral’s euphemism which, according to Fussell, is a marker of a “middle class desperate not to offend through language and thus be addicted to such conspicuous class giveaways as euphemisms, genteelism, and mock profanity” (1983, 151). In the above-mentioned example the intimidatory working class style of Hoyle and Boyle meets Oral’s non-offensive middle class euphemism. Another class giveaway in the quotation is that Hoyle and Boyle show no emotional inhibition whereas Oral tries to maintain self-control.

The preference for entertainment and the need for release can be coupled with anti-intellectualism. Dunk describes the cultural preferences of the working class in the Northern Canadian town Thunder Bay:

They have no interest in high culture, but they are captivated by the so-called low culture of the masses. Anything that is esoteric is elitist from their point of view. Thus mass culture is perceived as democratic because it does not exclude anyone, rather than an example of the degradation of culture in the modern world. (2003, 65)

Dunk also describes that the anti-intellectualism of this culture prevents members of the working class from enjoying what is considered to be high culture (2003, 90-91).

Furthermore the working class values common sense and anti-intellectualism because they are expressions of a higher valorization of manual labor. “Occupations on the mental side generally carry higher prestige, status, and wages than those on the manual side, yet in working-class culture the manual side is more highly valued” (2003, 136). The male dominated blue-collar sector with its privileging of manual labor and of the pride that is seen in the processes that transform nature clashes with the intellectual, meditative, and didactic style of environmental literature.

It could be argued that the dominant language of environmental literature, marked by reflection, meditation, and observation, dominates other voices in the sense that Pierre Bourdieu describes.

[t]he dominant language discredits and destroys the spontaneous political discourse of the dominated. It leaves them only silence or a borrowed language, whose logic departs from that of popular usage but without becoming that of erudite usage, a deranged

language in which the ‘fine words’ are only there to mark the dignity of the expressive intention, and which, unable to express anything true, real, or ‘felt’, dispossesses the speaker of the very experience it is supposed to express. (quoted in Szczelkin 1993, 31)

The genres of nature writing and environmental literature dominate the expression of the experience of natural spaces. Although the language of environmental literature may be assumed to be classless, the very idea of classlessness is a middle-class notion, as Paul Fussell (1983) points out.

### 7.10 Patterns of recreation

The idea to protect natural spaces has class roots. William Tucker describes the aristocratic origins of the National Parks:

The National Park Movement was an uppercrust cause, if only because only wealthy people had the time to spend lobbying Congress and the legislatures with no great economic gain at stake. Hunting was still very much a gentleman’s sport, and much of the impetus for preservation came from Easterners who visited the West for sport and recreation. Had they not acted, it is likely that many scenic wonders might have been scarred and exploited. (1982, 48)

Tucker’s last comment is interesting because it shows that the aristocratic roots of the National Parks do not delegitimize them, nor do they have to remain bound to one class. Democratization of consumption and the generally available means of travel have made the parks more class neutral.

Several outdoor activities such as river rafting attract the higher classes, as the author and river-guide Pam Houston describes:

When they stop for the night, the *stockbroker*, the *shamanic healer*, and the *actress* will work together like a chain gang unloading gear. The *psychologist* and the *computer brothers* will have the kitchen assembled and the salad made before the guide finishes pumping water out of her boat. It’s the last night on the river and they won’t even be talking about showers anymore. (1999, 69, my emphasis)

Abbey too describes the participants of a rafting trip as mainly belonging to the middle class: “the photographer from New York and his three beautiful teenage children, the lawyer from Chicago, the retired defense plant worker from Oakland, the ex-forester from Washington” (1988, 112). Tucker mentions that polls conducted by the Sierra Club show

that “support for environmentalism has been concentrated in the upper-middle-class, professional segment of society. Academics, attorneys, doctors, dentists, journalists, and upper income suburbanites have been [...] the backbone of the movement” (1982, 31). Michael Bennett also states that environmentalism is often seen to protect “the leisure and recreation of those Americans from the same class as the leadership of the environmental movement” (2001, 38).

The classed quality of outdoor activities is a phenomenon that can be observed in several countries. The German nature sociologist Rainer Brämer investigates the class appeal of hiking in Germany. Even though natural spaces such as forests and agricultural areas are accessible to the public and even though they are not far from the cities, hiking remains classed. Brämer describes how hiking has become more popular during the last years in Germany, but hikers tend to have a higher income and a higher education (2002, 1). A Norwegian study comes to similar results. Bicycling, hiking and cross-country skiing, even though the latter is considered to be so common that Norwegian children are said to be born with skis on their feet, turn out to be more frequent among higher income groups (cross country skiing 33% vs. 71%; hiking 67% vs. 96% for people with school education only vs. higher education, respectively). There is a general trend towards physical activity in more educated classes, due to a higher health-consciousness, but other physical activities do not show the same class differences as the aforementioned ones (Vaage 2004). The study does not provide the reasons for these differences, but it could be hypothesized that first, the paradoxical simplicity and low cost of these activities has the connotation of necessity for the working class (there is no class difference in terms of gym use even though it is more costly). Second, these activities have strong health connotations, and control of the body and health (as one’s body weight (Fussell 1983, 52)) are more typical for the middle classes. Third, the mentioned activities are more individual than for example team sports and therefore may appeal more to the higher classes.

Ecotourism too is a classed activity. The 1995 World Conference on Sustainable Tourism identifies three groups of ecotourists: 1) wealthy, healthy, older people who have previously traveled extensively and exhausted traditional destinations 2) younger, liberal middle class travelers who tend to participate in packaged, lower cost ecotours and 3) the eco-tourists who are travelers 20 years of age or younger and who seek a travel experience sensitive to environmental issues reflecting an alternative lifestyle (Luzar *et al.* 1998, 49).

Also Meric *et al.* confirm the class background of ecotourists as “middle age with higher education and income levels than general travelers and the general population” (1998, 1).

In the US accessible natural spaces are mostly public spaces. In contrast to most countries in Europe, private land is generally not accessible. Public lands that are accessible are often situated in less populated areas that are difficult to reach. Since the working class mainly lives in more populated areas and since traditionally it did not have the same access to travel as the middle class, open public spaces have been predominantly used by the middle class. Public natural spaces in the US also tend to be bureaucratically regulated and fees or permits are sometimes required. These factors are obstacles to the use of natural spaces.

The environmental movement has traditionally focused on the protection of remote wilderness areas. Even though wilderness areas are spaces where human beings are seen as intruders, these spaces have engendered their own form of tourism, and Tucker describes wilderness areas as “parks for the upper-middle class. They are vacation reserves for people who want to rough it—with the assurance that few other people will have the time, energy, or means to follow then into the solitude” (1982, 140). Natural and other public spaces that the working class would use, such as city or regional parks, have received less attention. It has also been a main concern of the environmental movement to protect ecosystems and to keep people out, although often with the paradoxical result that the new “untouched paradises” are overrun by people (Tucker 1982, 134). Recreation and tourism have not been a main concern for environmentalism, but it would be here where nature would play a significant role for the working class.

Pam Houston describes how her middle class group interacts on the fourth day of their journey: “They will begin to say things like ‘Coming out here has made me like myself again,’ and ‘It’s amazing how much living in the cities makes you forget.’ They will say, ‘This is so very beautiful,’ they will say, ‘My God, the things I’ve missed’” (1999, 68). The style of communication employed by the Monkey Wrench Gang on the rafting trip where they meet for the first time is different:

Dig the scene, Doc.  
No technical jargon, please. This is a holy place.  
Yeah, but where’s the Coke machine?  
Please, I’m meditating. (1976, 59)

According to Thomas W. Dunk, the “insistence on having fun is an affirmation that the point of work should be the enjoyment of life, rather than production for its own sake. Enjoyment denied in the labour process becomes an obsession in the realm of leisure” (2003, 93). Because there is more discipline and less self-control at their workplace, for the working class spare time is seen as a release from work. In the middle class spare time and working time tend to be less contrasted and could even merge in academic professions. The ascetic, sometimes puritanical, didactic, and spiritual connotations of outdoor life clash with the need for enjoyment and release that is expressed in the dialogue of the Monkey Wrench Gang.

The French writer Michel Houellebecq depicts the conflict between common people who use natural spaces and what is perceived as an administrative environmental elite. Whereas earlier in the novel one character proposes: “We should go and have an orgy on the nudist beach at Cap d’Adge. You get a lot of Dutch nurses and German businessmen there, all very correct, very middle-class” (2000, 256), later the beach is closed to the public: “The decision was taken by the Society for the Protection of the Littoral, which is entirely run by eco-warriors. People weren’t doing any harm, they were just having a quiet orgy, but apparently they were disturbing the terns” (2000, 304). Houellebecq illustrates the perception of environmentalism as elitist. Here it is interesting to note that even though environmentalism maintains a countercultural image, it has been incorporated into the bureaucratic administrative system. Tucker calls bureaucracy the “conservatism of the intelligentsia” (1982, 240). Both countercultural and administrative environmentalism have the same class background.

The clash between different modes of recreation has roots that go back to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Szczelkin describes the situation in England at that time: “As soon as the workers won time for themselves then its content was hotly contested between the dominant culture with its civilizing rational recreations, and working class culture with its ‘mindless and frenetic’ pleasure seeking” (Szczelkin 1993, 44). Today forms of recreation are similarly contested, and the question for ecotourism is whether it can incorporate working class recreational modes. One question is that of tourist numbers; according to Bourdieu the upper classes “have an obsessive fear of number, of undifferentiated hordes indifferent to difference and constantly threatening to submerge the private spaces of



bourgeois exclusiveness” (quoted in Szczelkin 1993, 68). The environmentalist view that human beings in general (rather than specific forms of recreation) pose a threat for the environment could provide a justification for this aristocratic perception. There is no basic difference between the fear of people invading exclusive holiday destinations and the fear of people invading natural spaces because both types of spaces have become travel destinations.

Abbey shows in many of his texts that it is possible to have fun in natural spaces, especially in company: “Sunshine and scenery, good company on a free river, great music sounding and resounding from a drifting boat—the queen of England never had it half so good” (1988, 122). The social aspect of the use of nature has class roots, as Erve Chambers points out. He argues that what we now regard as ‘mass tourism’ has historic roots in working class patterns (2000, 9). Whereas elite travel of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a vehicle for social distinction,

for working class tourists, on the other hand, the expression of solidarity and collegiality might well have been more important than individuality in planning a vacation. This could easily be judged to be a more appropriate style of tourism where the need for cooperation, shared experience, and pooled resources contributed so much to everyday survival. (2000, 10)

This working class style of recreation is marked by both the quest for release and for social interaction. But as shown in Houston’s rafting example, the middle classes are not alien to social interaction, as long as it does not have the connotations of mass tourism and release. In his essay “Down the River with Henry Thoreau” Abbey describes a social rafting trip with five friends. He claims that also for Thoreau nature was a social space: “He had frequent visitors, sometimes too many, he complained, and admitted that his daily rambles took him almost every day into Concord” (1991b, 18-19). It could be argued that the middle class experiences nature either individually or socially, and that the experience has connotations both of edification and of social distinction. The working class is more likely to experience nature socially and in the spirit of release. When Abbey describes nature as a social space he does not alienate his middle class readers because social experience of nature is a common denominator for the classes.

## 7.11 Abbey and the romantic aspects of environmentalism

According to James I. McClintock, environmental literature has been strongly influenced by romanticism: “Ecology encourages a biocentric perspective that emphasizes kinship, even equality, between humans and other forms of life. Its compatibility with a Romantic outlook is striking” (1994, 3). Here McClintock narrows down “romanticism” to its re-contextualizing strains and to pastoralism. Biocentrism is not only compatible with romanticism, as McClintock claims, I would argue that it is a modern manifestation of the re-contextualizing strain of romanticism. Re-contextualizing romanticism has a number of aspects that are interesting in a class perspective: pastoralism, anti-modernism, anti-urbanism, and the cult of authenticity and spirituality.

### *7.11.1 The pastoral and the city*

The idea that cultural identity and regeneration are linked to rural and natural spaces is not limited to pastoral literature but is engrained deeply into the cultures of the West, as some examples may illustrate. In Hemingway’s “Killers” the cynical killers invade the life of rural simplicity. Turner’s frontier thesis claims that the valuable character traits of North America are based on the frontier experience. In England, as Stefan Szczelkin argues, “[i]n the context of an already well developed romantic interpretation of the Southern English landscape the mythical ideals produced by the ruralist movement were powerful. The Arts & Crafts Movement [...] formed an arcadian ethos that became a cornerstone of modern nationalism” (1993, 21). In Norway the reason for the above mentioned “distriktspolitik” is that national identity is seen as rooted in the rural districts whereas the capital Oslo is regularly presented in the state television news as a place of armed robberies, immigrant violence, and traffic problems. The German director Leni Riefenstahl produced a propaganda documentary about the National Socialist party congress in Nuremberg, a documentary that is still acclaimed for its artistic innovation. Hitler is seen as on board of an airplane, coming from the pure heights above the Alps to save the masses in the lowlands from corruption.

As ubiquitous as the denigration of the city may be, this conceptualization is not class neutral. The working class in the cities may have experienced their cities differently, even

in the times of early capitalism that are usually associated with the greatest corruption and deprivation:

As the cities developed people lived in greater concentrations than they had ever done before. Enormous numbers of people could be in contact with each other in the street; crowds could gather in response to events at short notice; clubs for self-education and intellectual debate sprang up; the possibilities for mutual aid grew. [...] The old paternal lord or squire became the more distant bosses and their direct interference and cultural intimidation in everyday life was weakened. (Szczelkin 1993, 7)

Tucker refers to the medieval saying that “‘city air makes a man free’ meaning that the harsh social burdens of medieval feudalism vanished once a person escaped into the heady anonymity of a metropolitan community” (1982, 135). Karl Marx states in the *Communist Manifesto* that “The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life” (1872). Even though cities in early industrialization had immense problems, the romanticizing of the rural space with the resulting vilification of the city does not correspond to the experience of the working class, which experienced the cities as liberating. Abbey does not long for a pastoral ideal. He grew up in a rural area and since his youth his aim had been to leave it. The pastoral is not universally appealing and can only be appreciated if the conditions of life are perceived as comfortable and the countryside is not an obstacle to personal development.

As described in the chapter on modernism, Abbey has a surprisingly positive view of the city and even describes the urban transformation of the old mining community Telluride, a transformation from the Old West into the New West, with sympathy. In his discussion of Telluride there is some ambivalence in terms of class. The evolution of the town from a mining economy to the ‘new West’ is achieved by the educated middle (or x-) class, and the essay on Telluride reflects Abbey’s own upward mobility. There are new jobs in the new West too, as Abbey describes in *Hayduke Lives!* where a river guide speaks to the ranger at a demonstration against a road project: “I live at Vermillion Cliffs [...] Got a nice tepee there. Row boats down the Grand for a living. Dories, mainly. Ever been down the river in a dory? No? There’s nothing like it. It’s fun and it’s real” (1990, 84). There are two consequences of the transformation into the new West: the blue-collar West is

disappearing, replacing it with the new West of tourism and x-class artists, but its natural spaces become more accessible, even for the working class.

### *7.11.2 Industrialization*

The uneasy relationship between the working class and environmentalism results in part from the fact that environmentalism is based in the countercultural movement of the 1960s. This movement was a revolt of a privileged youth, and although there were some common aims with the labor movement, tensions and different interests became visible as early as in the Paris commune when workers denied protesting students access to their occupied plant. Tucker describes the conflict between the working class and environmentalists as a competition for economic resources:

Many environmental campaigns have involved opposition to large-scale construction projects, power plants, highways, and factories that involve blue-collar jobs. Whenever enthusiastic college students go out and picket a nuclear plant, they always find a group of hard-hat construction workers to throw bricks at them. (1982, 38)

The difference between the middle and working classes is that the economic basis of the latter is based on industrial activity, whereas this is often not the case for the former. Middle class environmentalism will not be accepted by the working class if it assumes “the unmistakable loftiness which maintains that ‘greed,’ ‘vulgar materialism,’ ‘progress,’ or simply ‘people’ themselves are the root of the problem” (Tucker 1982, 32). In this the working class will detect an aristocratic disdain for the classes closer to and more dependent on the production processes. Richard White argues: “Most environmentalists disdain and distrust those who [...] work in nature. Environmentalists have come to associate work—particularly heavy bodily labor, blue-collar work—with environmental degradation” (1996, 172). Whereas the blue-collar sector traditionally sees nature as a place of work, for the middle class it is a space of leisure. This latter view has led to a rejection of work in nature by the middle class and a hostile reaction from the working class.

The anti-modernism of parts of the environmental movement alienates working class people because industrialization created the working class and late capitalism has led to a democratization of consumption. A modern example of this conflict might be the environmental concerns about low-cost airlines that make air-travel affordable for the

working class. Abbey does not have a good solution for this contradiction between environmental and working class interests, but in *Hayduke Lives!*, he problematizes it when a bulldozer operator declares to a protesting environmentalist: “Lady, I need the job. Got a wife, seven kids, a pony and a half-ton four-by-four with camper, \$229 a month” (1990, 83). Abbey tries to find a position between consumption and restriction without using a discourse of limits. There is no easy solution for this problem. Richard White describes the problem of the clash of work and leisure interests in natural spaces: “Nature has become an arena for human play and leisure. Saving an old-growth forest or creating a wilderness area is certainly a victory for some of the creatures that live in these places, but it is just as certainly a victory for backpackers and a defeat for loggers. It is a victory for leisure and a defeat for work” (1996, 173). It could be argued that the sort of solution of this dilemma that Abbey envisions entails a protection of the old-growth forest on the one hand; on the other hand he seems to suggest that a protected natural space is more than a space for leisure of the middle class: it can and should function as a space of release for the working class too.

In his essay “Down the River with Henry Thoreau” Abbey discusses the problem of material necessities underlying the exploitation of natural resources, using the example of Thoreau:

How easy for Thoreau to preach simplicity, asceticism and voluntary poverty when, as some think, he had none but himself to care for during his forty-five years. How easy to work part-time for a living when you have neither wife nor children to support. (When you have no payments to meet on house, car, pickup truck, cabin cruiser, life insurance, medical insurance, summer place, college educations, dinette set, color TVs, athletic club, real estate investments, holidays in Europe and the Caribbean...). (1991b, 26)

However, Abbey does not think that this argument devalues Thoreau’s principles and imagines Thoreau with a family: “Henry might have been compelled to make pencils, survey woodlots, and give public lectures for twenty-four weeks, rather than only six, each year, but his integrity as a free man would still have been preserved” (1991b, 27). Abbey’s position would be that a middle ground between industrialism and Thoreau’s simplicity is possible, in other words, he uses Thoreau to question not the industrial society but the excesses of that society; in the list of needs above, there are essential and expendable ones, but he leaves it to the reader to assess the degree of necessity.

Abbey's solutions remain vague but he seems to endorse the transition from work to leisure or release. Although he appeals to the working class, this may still leave him open to the criticism of being arrogant, as White explains: "Environmentalists so often seem self-righteous, privileged, and arrogant because they so readily consent to identifying nature with play and making it by definition a place where leisured humans come only to visit, and not to work, stay, or live" (1996, 173). Nature, both for the blue-collar worker and for the environmentalist, is a resource. In the case of the above-mentioned bulldozer driver who exclaims that he needs the job, Abbey may suggest that he may propose to the driver that he may be able to get a job as a tourist bus driver or river guide in a future National Park. The problem is how and not whether nature is used. New uses would entail the above-mentioned "new Westerners" and tourism, whereas using the land for traditional industrial activities jeopardizes the new uses. Andrew Ross states that "ecology is commonly perceived as the [social movement] that says no, the antipleasure voice that says you're never gonna get it, so get used to going without" (1994, 268). The contest over the land is not that between humans and nature but between an old-style and new style industrialism and between a nature that is used as a material resource and a nature that is used as space of relief for city dwellers. It is furthermore a conflict of different styles of recreation, leisure and release, and only if the working class uses natural spaces can the environmental movement avoid being elitist. Abbey presents the transition towards the New West as unavoidable and cautiously positive, and he shows that the working class could benefit from that transition if it uses the newly accessible natural spaces.

### *7.11.3 Authenticity*

According to MacCannell, authenticity is a central concern in the modern age: "Modern Man is losing his attachments to the work bench, the neighborhood, the town, the family, which he once called 'his own' but, at the same time, he is developing an interest in the 'real life' of others" (1999, 91). The longing for authenticity is as much a reaction against a growing sense of modern detachment as it is an expression of it. Re-contextualizing strains of romanticism see themselves as being in opposition to the modern age, and their search tends to locate authenticity in a pre-industrial past or non-industrialized rural spaces. This pastoral notion of authenticity, which has been taken up by radical environmentalism, is not class neutral. In line with Veblen's argument regarding the conservation of archaic traits

(2002, ch. 9) in the leisure classes, authenticity is a vehicle for social distinction: “Puritans, liberals and snobs call it ‘tacky’ when anyone can afford it and ‘pretentious’ when it is dear” (MacCannell 1999, 155). The problem here is that archaic traits, pre-industrial design involving manual labor, and everything natural are transformed into commodities in a capitalist world; due to their scarcity or involved labor this means that these commodities will become vehicles for social distinction. MacCannell states that the “dialectic of authenticity is at the heart of the development of all social structure” and that it is “manifest in concerns for ecology (1999, 155). Even though the search for the “authentic“ or the “real” seems to be a search for external reality, the notion of authenticity must not be confused with external reality; instead authenticity is, in the terminology of MacCannell, a marker, a marker that is determined by social class.

Thoreau’s experience at Walden Pond, where he tries to find a “hard bottom” of reality and a “Realometer” (1980, 70) could be seen as the archetypical authentic experience. Finding authenticity outside of the cities has been a motivation for the protection of unspoiled wilderness areas. The notion of authenticity has furthermore influenced settlement (suburbanization) and travel patterns. Jo Waller *et al.* study the motivation of British tourists who travel to Spain and to what degree they link the experience of authenticity to expected enjoyment. Authenticity is defined as: experience of culture (direct contact to population, language, history), low number of tourists, level of independence, and *conformity to the stereotype of the country* (1998, 125, my emphasis). Authenticity as confirmation of cultural stereotypes has, according to Waller *et al.* become a major concern in tourism marketing and varies according to social class and education, with the highest concern in the middle class (1988, 124). According to Stefan Szczelkin “the mythologizing of authenticity [...] goes to the irrational core of bourgeois culture” (1993, 48). In his essay “The *Blue Guide*,” Roland Barthes discusses Spain as an example of the reductionism that lies at the heart of the notion of authenticity: “Spain is thus reduced to a vast classical ballet, a nice neat commedia dell’arte, whose improbable typology serves to mask the real spectacle of conditions, classes, and professions” (1993, 75). In the notion of authenticity lies a massive conceptual reduction in the form of an evasion of external reality motivated by the wish for a confirmation of classed stereotypes.

Finding authenticity in a pre-modern and stable space may be an effective strategy for tourism marketing, for a culture it is a dead end because it consist in a confirmation of

already existing markers rather than their challenge. Rather than representing authenticity, natural spaces could culturally be useful if they are promoted as heterotopian spaces where the making of markers is an open process and not fully pre-determined. An example for this creation of markers are the tourists looking at Delicate Arch: “You may therefore find proof for or against His existence. Suit yourself. You may see a symbol, a sign, a fact, a thing without meaning or a meaning which includes all things” (Abbey 1992a, 36). This is a case where a heterotopian external reality invites the tourist to participate in the process of cultural marking. Here Abbey can be compared to Thoreau who, according to Fredrik Brøgger is also conscious about human marking; Thoreau’s “anthropomorphic allegories reveal themselves to be conscious, as it were, of their own constructedness” (2003, 104). Furthermore it should be remembered that Thoreau’s Walden experience was a temporal experiment that was meant to challenge existing cultural patterns rather than an exercise of confirming pre-conceptions. This means that the “reality” that found at Walden Pond does not so much lie in the natural features as in the act of individual marking in a heterotopian space.

The notion of the authentic (in its anti-modern sense) is dubious not only because it is a projection of its beholders; it is also a social marker signaling remoteness from modern production processes. One alternative definition of authenticity is Chambers’ definition of authenticity as the degree of local control over tourism activities, discussed above. Another definition would see the “reality” of authenticity not in the confirmation of a stereotype but in an exposure to a heterotopian external reality that allows individual marking. In this sense for Abbey the question of what the arches represent is pointless because this would mean a staged authenticity in the form of a stereotype. This staged authenticity can be seen in natural spaces that have been developed to a degree where all steps of the experience are controlled and marked. One such space I have witnessed is the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona: the experience of it consists in driving along the one road of the park, stopping occasionally at parking lots, taking pictures from view-points and of having the phenomena explained by plaques. The park had pre-structured my experience of it and did not allow any individual marking. This is the kind of development that Abbey reacts against in his essay “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks” (1992a). Abbey expresses his dismay when he discovers that the park where he is working as a ranger is visited by a civil engineer who is in charge of a road building project. This development would make the individual act of marking more difficult and reduce authenticity.



#### 7.11.4 Spirituality

The re-contextualizing strain of romanticism has always had a spiritual aspect. Leo Marx discusses the use of the echo as a metaphor for the reciprocity of man and nature. The echo evokes “a sense of relatedness between man and not-man which lends a metaphysical aspect to the mode; it is a hint of the quasi-religious experience to be developed in the romantic pastoralism of Wordsworth, Emerson, and Thoreau” (2000, 23). The quest for spirituality is not class-neutral. According to Veblen the fact that workmen habitually perceive phenomena as matter-of-fact sequences results in a “proclivity to ‘undeveloped skepticism’” (2002, ch. 12). According to Veblen, workers habitually perceive natural phenomena as matter-of-fact sequences:

[T]hose classes that are habitually in immediate contact with modern industrial processes, and whose habits of thought are therefore exposed to the constraining force of technological necessities, animistic interpretation of phenomena [...] [is] in process of obsolescence. (2002, ch. 12)

The middle class, however, is removed from these processes and therefore

it appears that the devout habit to some extent progressively gains in scope and elaboration among those classes in the modern communities to whom wealth and leisure accrue in the most pronounced degree. [...] [T]he institution of a leisure class acts to conserve, and even to rehabilitate, that archaic type of human nature and those elements of the archaic culture which the industrial evolution of society in its later stages acts to eliminate. (2002, ch. 12)

Veblen argues that an animistic view of the world has upper and middle class connotations due to two factors: 1) an animistic view of the world expresses remoteness from the physicality of the production process and 2) that a veneration of nature is a veneration of the archaic or pre-modern elements of culture. Abbey’s middle class readership is prone to adopt what Veblen calls an “animistic interpretation of phenomena” (2002, ch. 12), due to their distance from the industrial process. The spiritual undertones can be experienced at ASLE-conferences, where a veneration of nature in the spirit of Deep Ecology is common.<sup>39</sup> Abbey’s skeptical worldview clashes with these animistic aspirations; this clash

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<sup>39</sup> David Rothenberg states that “[w]ith the recent popularity of deep ecology in the United States, there has been some tendency to idolize Naess and his ideas, taking his ideas of equal value for all living things and a putting of the Earth first, before human needs and aspirations as a kind of gospel. But he never asked for that”

is not only a clash between two belief systems or that of modern vs. anti-modern, it is also a class clash.

In *Hayduke Lives!* two FBI agents, Hoyle and Boyle, who represent working class views, are responsible for monitoring an environmentalist rally. The agent Oral Hatch reports to them what he saw during that rally:

‘Some woman named Dolores LaChapelle teaching people how to chant and dance and braid flowers in their hair and attain deep spiritual intimacy with the organic rhythms of Mother Nature.’ Boyle began to choke. His bloody Mary fell from nerveless fingers and splattered on his wellingtons. Tears streamed from his eyes. He gasped for breath, wheezing like a concertina. Hoyle slapped his back, harder than necessary. Boyle’s bridge fell out, his hat fell off, his toupee slid forward over his eyes. ‘Oral,’ said Hoyle, ‘you better take it easy. Poor guy’s got a heart murmur. Ain’t near as tough as he thinks he is.’ Oral stared. ‘I’m sorry, sir.’ ‘Just stick to the illegal stuff, Oral. Terrorism, PLO contacts, homicide, explosives, felonious conspiracy and so on. Skip the organic rhythms, Boyle can’t take it.’ [...] ‘There’s Art Goodtimes and the Seminar for World Re-enchantment Through Pure Earth Poetry.’ Hoyle raised a warning hand. ‘Careful.’ (1990, 195)

Even though Abbey promotes the aims of environmentalism, he ironizes its spiritual quest and sympathies with the skeptical matter-of-fact views of the FBI agents.

Environmentalism is often seen as having a religious component: “the most extreme environmentalism does look a bit like an ersatz Earth religion” (Leo 2001, 22). One source of the religious component is Deep Ecology, a trans-religious platform that has influenced especially American radical environmentalism. There is an often-heard wish to re-infuse the earth with spirituality, expressed for example by Ufuk Özdağ: “what will prove most valuable for an ecological way of life [...] will be the recovery of a sense of humanity’s oneness with the earth community, of a profound connection to the world that is our true home” (2003, 305). Paul Croce analyzes William James’ view that nature “is not itself sacred, but in embodying life and consciousness, it is more than its material makeup, and it is our window to the sacred” (2003, 114). This argument is paralleled in the Lynn White thesis (1967) that blames the Judaeo-Christian heritage for the ecological crisis and sees animism as a way to re-infuse nature with spirituality. Abbey shows that an aesthetic appreciation of nature is possible without an animistic re-infusion of nature, that there is

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(1998, 84). Unlike Rothenberg I would argue that Naess did “ask for” the use of his philosophy as an ersatz-religion, because it has all the necessary components. However, Rothenberg is right that it is not only the philosophy that is a basis for this religious feeling; it is the willingness of the proselytes that causes it.

“more poetry in a chunk of quartzite than in a make-believe wood nymph” (1991c, 87). Abbey’s aesthetics is compatible with the “undevout skepticism” of the working class.

### 7.12 Abbey and the countercultural movement

Abbey has an ambivalent stance toward the countercultural movement of the 1960s. As a student who benefited from the GI Bill, i.e. as someone who owes his upward mobility to institutions (army and university), he remained ambivalent towards the countercultural demand for the dismantling of these institutions.<sup>40</sup> This personal aspect is the reason why Abbey defended the university and its cultural basis in Western culture, science and rationalism. In another aspect, however, he agreed with the counterculturalists, namely in their mistrust of institutional power, and he developed this attitude into a form of anarchism. Abbey, who was born in 1927, was also too old to experience the movement as a student. At the end of the 1960s he worked as a part-time ranger and welfare caseworker and published his first successful book, *Desert Solitaire*, in 1968. Although his life at the fringe of society and in nature appears to be prototypically countercultural, Abbey did not feel part of the countercultural movement.

An example of Abbey’s ambivalence towards the countercultural movement is his stance on drugs. Abbey’s main drug is beer, and drinking is mentioned frequently throughout his work (and was likely to have been the cause of his death). On occasion he tried other drugs, and in his essay “Death Valley Junk” he describes his first (and only) experience with LSD. Together with a friend he drives to Death Valley, where the two “gulped down [the LSD] with a slug of beer.” The ubiquitous beer is accompanied by “some California weed” (1991a, 170), and after some time Abbey begins to hallucinate: “The ground [...] between my legs was palpitating slowly up and down, like the lungs of a sleeping animal” (1991a, 172). However, Abbey resists the hallucinations, and his matter-of-fact attitude conflicts with the drug-induced sensations: “I was trapped in limbo between two worlds—a place too queasy and queer to be the waking world, too bright and definite and three-dimensional

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<sup>40</sup> The same skepticism towards the idea of dismantling the institutions of education that Abbey represents is expressed by Ralf Dahrendorf, who refers to the English equivalent of the GI Bill: “The generation of education is called ‘scholarship boys’ in England – scholarship children for whom the university meant everything. Therefore this generation reacted with considerable sensitivity in 1968, because the university was our dream and the generation of ‘68 trampled on it” (2001, 80, my translation).

to be the world of dreams. I didn't know where I was, except that I didn't much like it" (1991a, 172). Later he complains about the "jellyfish world" that causes "intellectual nausea" (1991a, 173). His friend, however, seems to enjoy the trip, which angers Abbey:

Terry still sat by the fire, motionless, the beatific grin on his saintly, silly, obnoxious face, enjoying his metaphysical picnic. His brains turning soft as Camembert in the acid bath. Well, he had the proper set, the correct predisposition. The power of faith. Miracles come to those who need them. I envied and hated him. (1991a, 173)

Abbey's experience with LSD is marked by his unwillingness to give in to the hallucinations the drug produces, an unwillingness that is grounded in his skepticism towards all forms of spirituality. He is furthermore afraid of the loss of power that an hallucination entails. When the effect of the drug wears off he writes: "I was happy, pleased with what I considered my power and strength. By God, no lousy little 350 mikes of LSD was going to blow *my* brain to the moon. My sense of self was too strong to be dissolved in mere chemicals" (1991a, 174, italics Abbey's). Although Abbey does not reject the drug culture and is willing to experiment, his experiment shows that he rejects the loss of reality and control and the sense of spirituality that the drug causes.

Abbey almost never mentions that he uses marijuana, an exception is the quotation above where he accompanies his LSD experiment with it. He calls marijuana a "mild recreational substance" and does not seem to take the drug seriously. In the essay "Return to Yosemite: Tree Fuzz vs. Freaks" he describes a conflict between the different groups using Yosemite National Park:

Yosemite Valley has always been a popular place for hell raising. But in the fall of 1969 it began to attract long-hairs, the freaks and hippies from the San Francisco Bay Area. During the spring and summer this 'youthful element' began to take over an open space [...] known as Stoneman Meadow, with larger and larger crowds [...]. These young people behaved in many and various ways, mostly illegal, mostly offensive to the sensibilities of the respectable park visitors [...]. There was singing and dancing, sometimes in the nude; there was marijuana and underage drinking; there was bad language, loud coarse music, couples making love in broad daylight, the burning of fenceposts for firewood, a general trampling of the grass. (1991c, 140)

Abbey sees marijuana as a part of the countercultural movement. In the described conflict he is technically not neutral because he is one of the park rangers; this is visible in his ironic legalistic language ("underage drinking," "trampling of the grass"). Nevertheless he is sympathetic to the movement, although he is not a part of it. He describes how the

hippies are removed from the park, order is restored, the deer has returned, and asks ironically: “Surely that is the purpose of a meadow in a national park; quiet deer grazing on the grass. Is it not?” (1991c, 141). Abbey decries the closure of another heterotopia, but it is also clear that he is not the one using it for deviant behavior. In the essay he furthermore describes that the danger for Yosemite Park does not stem from the hippies but from over-development, especially the road building to meet the needs of the motorized campers.

Marijuana and LSD belong to a culture that Abbey witnesses but does not share. His stance towards the countercultural movement is sympathetic but distanced. This can only partially be explained by the fact that Abbey was a bit too old to be part of the young hippie crowds; other writers such as Alan Ginsberg or Gary Snyder belonged to the countercultural movement whereas Abbey remained distanced. One reason lies in the fact that Abbey belonged to a different social class. Whereas he only mentions marijuana and LSD occasionally, beer and its history is of much more interest to Abbey:

The last good American beer I ever tasted was Iron City Pilsener, brewed in Pittsburgh. The death of local breweries was the death of good beer. Although, by general agreement, some American beers are worse than the mediocre norm. At a ballgame in Tucson—Toros leading Dukes 3 - 1 in the fourth—I called down to the vendor for more beer. The boy looked in his bucket, shouted back, ‘Sorry, sir, all I got left is Schlitz.’ (1991b, 135)

The interest in the quality of beer and the interest in ballgames are working class markers, and Abbey seems to be at home in a world that distinguishes between Coors and Schlitz, but not in one distinguishing between Californian and Columbian weed.

Another reason that Abbey feels distanced from the countercultural movement is his professional situation; he wore a uniform and did police-work during much of his life. When he was drafted into the army he served as a military policeman in Naples, Italy, and during his 17 years of seasonal work he also had police duties as a ranger. Abbey explains the apparent paradox of “a libertarian, an anarchist, a dedicated scofflaw” (1991a, 149) wearing a uniform in the essays “My Life as a P.I.G, or The True Adventure of Smokey the Cop.” He states that “I’ve never known a serious policeman who had much respect for the law; in any well-organized society the police constitute the most lawless element. Policemen are not legalists; they are moralists, stern believers in good and bad, right and wrong” (1991a, 149). He describes the irony in his new role of a military policeman:

Some sergeant put a black and white Nazi-like armband on my sleeve, a white helmet liner on my head, a nifty red scarf around my neck, and a club and a .45 automatic in my hands. At once I began to feel mean, brutal, arbitrary, righteous. 'Let's stop coddling criminals,' I wrote to my mother, that first night in Napoli; 'let's put father in jail where he belongs.' (My father was the village Socialist back in Home, Pennsylvania). (1991a, 150)

Although Abbey's class background would make a career with police duties a desirable choice, his own and his father's political convictions were in conflict with this. Although Abbey did not choose to be a military policeman, he chose to be a ranger during his 17 years of seasonal work. Even though Abbey treats his "career as a PIG (Pride, Integrity, Guts)" (1991a, 149) with a certain irony, he is proud of it too, and these years of his life are crucial for understanding his writing.

Yosemite National Park has, due to its many visitors, a number of problems, and police work plays a major role for the rangers. Abbey describes one of his patrols with his colleague:

Wylie straightens out a campsite mixup, which involves a great deal of paperwork and radio exchanges. He speaks quietly to a hairy young man walking the streets with a bottle of wine in his hand, sends him back to his campsite. The freak offers us peanuts from a poke; we eat some of his peanuts. Ten in the evening, beginning of campground 'quiet time.' The air is foggy with the smoke of 500 campfires, rich with the dreamy redolence of *Cannabis sativa*. Sounds of music and jubilation—Wylie has to caution the party against excessive noise. Others are trying to sleep, he reminds them, and indeed, all around us, we can see through the gloom and the trees the pale forms of pickup campers, camper trailers, and Winnebago motor homes, where Middle America is bedding down to another night of lawful conjugal bliss. (1991c, 142)

This episode illustrates Abbey's alienation. He feels the greatest distance from the campers of "Middle America," as these are described only by the pale forms of their motor homes. Abbey has frequently argued against the use of motors in national parks, and there is little common ground between him and the campers since they have insulated themselves from nature. The "freak" is described as a person, but even though Abbey would rather sit at a campfire than in a camper, the relationship remains distanced; the distance is not bridged through the gesture of eating the peanuts—it rather underlines the cultural gap. The character closest to Abbey is his ranger colleague Wylie, who is presented in detail earlier in the essay. Wylie is Abbey's supervisor and does not like the police aspect of his ranger work. Whereas Wylie is a professional, Abbey feels like an amateur in his job, since in his

other ranger jobs he did not have as much police work as in Yosemite. Abbey neither wants to be a lifetime ranger nor a policeman. He is a writer, working part-time as a ranger and knows that he is going to write about his experience. Abbey feels alienated from all: from the campers whose lifestyle he rejects, from the freaks from whom he feels distanced, both because of his working class background and also because of his uniform, and finally from his ranger colleague who does not share his academic interests.

The students of the countercultural movement were not the only ones to mistrust the institutions of American society. As Vannemann and Weber Cannon point out, “Most radicals distrust the AFL-CIO, the Democratic Party, and the U.S. government; they should not then expect American workers to endorse reforms that would depend on these institutions” (1987, 159). In contrast to European societies, there is little representation of the working class in American politics. Another American peculiarity is the degree to which the state historically sided with the capitalist class, and Vannemann and Weber Cannon conclude that “the U.S. capital has had more power than the capitalist classes of other Western democracies” (1987, 167). The authors show furthermore that the alleged lack of class-consciousness is a conclusion based on representational weakness, i.e. a weakness of worker’s institutions, not lack of consciousness. In America there exists a vicious circle from historical oppression to lack of representation through institutions to a seeming lack of consciousness and resulting invisibility. From an European perspective it is highly questionable whether an anti-institutional stance can be a liberating force, particularly since it is the weakness of existing institutions and the fact that they do not represent the working class that leads to a weakness of the working class in comparison with Europe, not a lack of consciousness. Politically Abbey seems to live in a simple world with simple dichotomies, such as capitalists and workers, where problems of power abuse can be solved by dismantling the power structures. However, in a modern complex society there is no power-free zone, and the main political question is not how much power there is, but how it is controlled.

What Abbey does with his anti-institutional anarchist rhetoric is feed the mythology of the “American Dream” of individualism, not realizing that this dream is a factor supporting the weakness of the working class:

The American Dream seemed the perfect immunization against the dangers of a militant class-consciousness. It promised a common vision to all Americans—workers and bosses, the poor as well as the rich. In an open America, class struggle would be unnecessary. Discontent with one’s position would inspire workers to change their positions within the system rather than trying to change the system itself” (Vanneman 1987, 257).

Anti-institutionalism is a consequence of the extreme individualism of the American Dream. The form of resistance Abbey offers in his propaganda for the radical environmental organization Earth First! is anti-institutional, since the organization has a flat structure, “Vee is no one in charge” (1990, 85), as Erika expresses it in *Hayduke Lives!*. Whether these highly individualistic acts of resistance can succeed is questionable, according to Zweig “[t]o challenge capitalist power, working class power will have to assert a different set of values, more in tune with the reality of people’s interconnected lives, more respectful of the limits of individualism, but without denying individuality” (2000, 126). This would mean seeing institutions such as governments not as potential enemies (of individualism) or mere service providers but as exercising “power toward certain social ends, on behalf of some people, limiting others” (Zweig 2000, 164). Abbey, however, distrusts all institutionalized forms of organization and resistance and renders himself politically ineffective, despite his radical rhetoric. It is a paradox that he is an important inspiration and consciousness-builder for both the environmental movement and, particularly in his last book, the working class, but does not provide viable tools for the power struggle.

One of the important class elements in Abbey’s writing is the setting. In the Southwest class is organized in a different way, and even today, despite a massive influx of people, some areas could be called heterotopias in the Foucauldian sense. The prominent features of the region are cheap land, little industry, tourism (which generates business for artists), and a warm climate (which reduces the cost of housing). The character of the Southwest is changing now, but at Abbey’s time it was still the

poor man’s Paris in which people lived art. The spirit of the new was everywhere—new industries, new restaurants, new art galleries, new stores, new theater companies, new bookstores, new houses, new cars, new clothes, and, underlying all of it, new ideas. (Phyllis Flanders Dorset, quoted in Cahalan 2002, 38)

Abbey did not move into a traditional rural society when he moved to the Southwest, but rather into a modern and urban environment. Even today some of the towns in the



Southwest have a more urban feel than the larger cities in the area. The reason that the region had attracted so many new inhabitants was the low cost of living (today it is more the climate). This created a more egalitarian society, due to the fact that there was no old upper class, that many of the new inhabitants had an x-class lifestyle, and that costs were low. The classlessness of the old Southwest is a main theme in Richard Bradford's novel *Red Sky at Morning*. For Abbey the Southwest was a region where he could live an x-class lifestyle without too many hardships. "If you're gonna be broke, better be broke in a compatible environment" (Abbey quoted in Loeffler 2002, 51). In the 1950s Abbey and his wife Rita "moved into an old adobe mansion where they became the caretakers, rent-free. They had a splendid view of the mountains that dominate the eastern aspect of Albuquerque" (Loeffler 2002, 51-52). In no other region would Abbey have managed to live so comfortable and inspiring a life with so little money. Outside the Southwest the classlessness of the region is seen as a lower class marker, as Paul Fussell demonstrates in his humorous piece:

People from the middle and prole class will be tempted to imagine that place has little to do with class, that you can belong to the top classes just anywhere. Nothing could be more wrong.

("I understand, young man that you want to join the Cosmopolitan club.")

"Yes, Sir"

"Tell me, where do you come from?"

"Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, sir."

"I see." [*Averts eyes*] (1983, 36, italics Fussell's)

Fussell describes the Southwest of today in ironic terms:

In the Southwest, a place whose usages all of us are apparently expected to embrace in order to avoid "elitism," a popular high-prole family entertainment in the evening is going out to the car wash, with a stop-in at the local franchised food establishment on the way home. Or you might go the Ice Show, titled, say, "Bugs Bunny in Space." (1983, 47).

Fussell ironic piece shows that class differences are still less pronounced in the area, partially because of the lack of an older upper class (or its historical marginalization in case of the old Spanish upper class). When Abbey decries the industrialization and settlement of the Southwest, he is not only thinking of environmental degradation, what concerns him at least as much is the social change this brings, especially more marked class differences.

### 7.13 Abbey—a middle class maverick?

In his article “Edward Abbey: The Middle Class Maverick,” Peter Wild points out that Abbey’s work is targeted at a popular readership, describing his work as “it brings cheers. It sells books” (1983, 15). Wild correctly points at the popular appeal of Abbey—a popularity necessitated by his need to support himself with his writing.<sup>41</sup> The problem with Wild’s article is, however, that he defines the middle class in very broad terms, basically encompassing all Americans who respond to popular culture:

Ninety-six point three percent of American homes own at least one television set. People decry the insulting programming, the game shows, the soap operas, the superficial pablum and bang-bang journalism that passes for news—they decry it and go on watching it, on the average of four hours and twenty minutes per person a day, year round. (1983, 17)

The logic of this argument is faulty. People use television in very different ways, and different uses have different class connotations; Wild’s average figures are not specific enough for his argument. Not only do people watch TV for varying lengths of time, even the display of the TV-set may have class connotations, as Fussell points out.

Since Wild does not distinguish between different patterns of use and does not distinguish between different classes, his article does not really refer to the middle class. I would argue that the class he describes is closer to the working class. Wild is right when he criticizes Abbey’s “old Jeffersonian ideal” (1983, 18), a populist politics that is obsolete today. Wild furthermore points out that environmentalism and the love of wilderness are upper middle class preoccupations: “according to a recent Forest Service study only .8% of the backpackers are farmers, 6,3% blue-collar workers. By far the majority consists of folks with bachelor and higher degrees—doctors, lawyers, nurses, English Professors” (1983, 18).

At this point I would disagree with Wild, even though people such as the “Bostonian” may be Abbey’s actual readers: “Confessed one heady Bostonian to his diary: ‘I gazed for hours at a rotting stump until it seemed that it would begin dancing with the cosmos before my

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<sup>41</sup> Abbey states that “I have been able to earn my keep at writing for nearly fifteen years [this means since 1969] [and] have been well rewarded for my plodding work with the typewriter, with an average income in the period referred to of about 20,000 dollars per year. A handsome sum, more than sufficient for a comfortable life in the country” (2005, xvii).

very eyes’” (Abbey quoted in Wild 1983, 18). The point is that these readers are not Abbey’s target readers, especially not in his novels *Hayduke Lives!* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (*Hayduke Lives!* had not yet been published at the time Wild wrote his article). Also some of his older novels such as *The Brave Cowboy* target the working class (the latter novel was made into the popular Western movie “Lonely are the Brave” in 1962). Furthermore Abbey’s appeal to this class is ambivalent. On the one hand he fulfills the expectations that his readers have, but on the other hand he subverts them. Abbey indeed may appeal to a portion of the middle class, especially environmentalists. According to Wild, Abbey “excites the middle class longings by offering the Peaceable Kingdom that it has lost” (1983, 18). However, I would argue that Abbey’s values are neither pastoral as Wild suggests, nor that he appeals solely to the middle class.

#### 7.14 Abbey and the struggle over contested land

Rather than protecting natural spaces from humans, environmentalism and environmental literature should promote different uses of nature. Rather than speaking of the “rights of nature,” the “right to nature” should be stressed by environmentalism. The nature sociologist Rainer Brämer describes how the experience of nature is essential for the psychological well-being of humans (2000, 4) and that thoroughly designed playgrounds are not accepted by children who would rather play in the forgotten spaces of urban planning. The reason is that these spaces allow more creativity and are less controlled. Brämer claims that adults have similar needs for uncontrolled natural spaces (2000, 4). This concept of nature as a playground, or as a heterotopia with a lesser degree of social control, a space that allows individual marking rather than prescribing it, is what Abbey describes as a “radically different mode of being out there” (1991, 229) in his essay “Freedom and Wilderness, Wilderness and Freedom.”

One of the reasons the working class has not used natural spaces more may lie in a lack of familiarity with these spaces. Abbey’s rafting trip down the Glen Canyon in *Desert Solitaire* is an example where he shows that rafting is simple, social, cheap, and adventurous. Glen Canyon, however, is also an example of how the development of natural spaces (into Lake Powell) can lead to class segregation, as discussed in the chapter on modernism. In terms of familiarity with natural spaces there is a difference between the

urban and rural working classes. Dunk describes the recreational habits of the working class in a Northern Canadian town:

Hunting and fishing are also popular leisure activities in Thunder Bay. The degree of interest varies, of course, from individual to individual. Some couples spend as much time as possible camping and fishing. Both the men and women enjoy the outdoors, and they often spend a considerable amount of money on four-wheel-drive vehicles, boats, motors, campers for the back of trucks, and fishing equipment. The typical pattern for the Boys, however, was to make a couple of weekend-long fishing trips during the summer. Sometimes this was a male-only event, but wives and girlfriends often went along.” (2003, 69-70)

Several aspects have to be pointed out in regard to the described use of nature: 1) it is the use of a local environment, whereas ecotourism is often about exotic destinations, even though what is exotic for one group can be local for the other; 2) the described class here is the rural working class, the urban working class often uses less remote spaces; 3) some of the activities are seen as destructive or overly mechanized by environmentalists; 4) the activities are male dominated. Tucker describes the conflict between an urban middle class and mechanized forms of nature use by the local working class. Even though this conflict is about the proper use of public land, the power to control usage and access also implies a sense of ownership, and in this case Tucker describes the attitude of the middle class: “What do these laboring people with their chain-saws and trail bikes want to do with *our* woods?” (1982, 140, Tucker’s emphasis).

Tucker shows that natural spaces also can be contested between urban and rural interests. Despite the fact that he grew up in rural Appalachia and that he lived in the Southwest, Abbey holds an urban view. He frequently argues against machines on public lands and often characterizes the local population as being unable to perceive the beauty of the land, for example Bishop Love in *Hayduke Lives!*, who perceives his own land only in terms of money (discussed in the following chapter).

### 7.15 Conclusion

Anti-anthropocentrism in environmental literature tends towards a conflation of human interests. Rather than seeing nature as an entity, ecocritics should discuss nature as a heterotopian cultural space where interests intersect and different experiences and

individual marking are possible. In *Abbey* it can be seen that these interests vary according to social class. The working class perception of nature is marked by a need for release, and social qualities in the experience of natural spaces seem to be more important than authenticity and spirituality. In regard to nature writing this means that the discounting of entertainment, human focus, and the form of the novel are marks of a middle class perception. *Abbey* incorporates release and entertainment and envisions a new West that avoids both old-style industrialism and industrial tourism. In order to get his readers to experience these spaces, he educates them towards a simple and non-motorized use of these spaces that facilitates an emancipation from the pre-defined marking of industrial tourism and allows an individual appropriation.

## 8. The Blue-Collar Appeal of *Hayduke Lives!*

### 8.1. Introduction

Abbey's last novel, *Hayduke Lives!*, the sequel of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, is a light-hearted, entertaining, and youthful book. This is remarkable because Abbey wrote it knowing he was dying, but also because the above-mentioned qualities stand in contrast to the descriptive and meditative modes of environmental literature. However one characterizes environmental literature, the terms 'humorous' or 'entertaining' will not be the most frequently used ones. One of the characteristics that makes the novel stand out in an environmental contest is that it targets a blue-collar readership and thus thematizes social class.

Even though many details of Abbey's life are known through his biographers, there was a strange silence surrounding the cause of his death. He went "in and out of the hospital" (Temple 1993) for esophageal hemorrhages. The reason for these hemorrhages was pancreatitis, and with some medical knowledge it could be assumed that the heavy drinking that he describes in all his books was, if not a cause, a concomitant factor in the disease. James Cahalan has only recently brought up the question of Abbey's alcoholism (2001, 156). Abbey himself hints at the connection between pancreatitis and alcohol when Doc advises Hayduke to live a healthier life: "And George, you've got to stop drinking so much alcohol. You'll get kidney stones, liver trouble, pancreatitis, varices. Remember the code of the eco-warrior: keep fit. The eco-warrior is strong, lean, tough, hardy" (1990, 113). It is remarkable that Abbey makes fun of pancreatitis and varices (ironizing an ideal of a healthy ecowarrior that Abbey had never intended to live up to) while he is dying of these same medical conditions. The novel was written with a sense of urgency and Abbey was not able to polish his draft version. It was published posthumously in 1989, one year after his death.

## 8.2 The readers of *Hayduke Lives!* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*

It is not clear how many of the readers of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Hayduke Lives!* actually belong to the working class, but it is possible to get an impression of the readers by looking at the customers' comments on Amazon.com where there are eighty seven reader reviews of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and twelve of *Hayduke Lives!*. All of the following comments are taken from Amazon.com, the names or pseudonyms of the readers are indicated. Readers' comments on *The Monkey Wrench Gang* remain unmarked and comments on *Hayduke Lives!* are indicated. Book titles have been italicized, and spelling mistakes remain unmarked. Three of the names or pseudonyms indicate a female reader, 39 a male reader, and 57 do not indicate their gender.

The majority of the readers stresses the comic aspects of the books in an informal language: “[V]erge on the comic book, and holy cats and bananas, can this guy hyperbolate” (Curtis L. Wilbur on *Hayduke Lives!*); “[J]oy to read and fun” (Kevin Freibott); “[F]un and fantasy” (Robert W. Moore); “[F]illed with lots of laughter and action” (wench13); “[A]n environmentalist’s equivalent of ‘Butch Cassidy and Sundance Kid’ [...] [H]umor is predictable – no better or worse than you’d expect between coworkers or friends” (anonymous); “[S]uch fun stuff” (jay tracy); “It’s ‘The Blues Brothers’ for environmentalists” (Mike Smith), “[M]ake you laugh out loud” (anonymous); “[O]ne of the funniest books I have ever read” (anonymous); “The story is full of chaos and comedy” (anonymous). The readers do not compare the humor of the novels to other works of literature, but there are a few comparisons to film and comic books, also in the following quotations on entertainment and style.

Most reviewers praise the books for their action and entertainment: “[I]f you love action and the wild, then this book is for you;” (Rocky Troy) “Good as American beer” (B.C. Plant); “[T]he *Monkeywrench Gang* is a rollicking good read” (Jeff W. Krueger); “Hayduke’s stunts are the most outrageous Ed has cooked up so far” (anonymous, on *Hayduke Lives!*); “[S]crewball plot” (doomsdayer520); “[T]he closest what you would expect of a modern day suspense/action movie” (Samuel Porter); “I think it was just as important [as Abbey’s environmental agenda] for him that the book be fun, and full of adventure. It is something that anyone could read, environmentalist or not, for an exciting story” (anonymous); “It is intensely visual and the first time I read it I cast the movie—

Walther Matthau was Doc, Jane Fonda was Ms Abzug, Robert Redford was Seldom Seen, and only Dustin Hoffman could be Hayduke” (kay m. Roam).

Many readers notice that *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is easy to read, which is either appreciated or criticized, and some readers seem to be apologetic about this: “It’s an easy, shallow read” (efoff); “[L]acked any sort of real profundity” (xxxfranciscoxxx); “[V]iolence a bit cartoonish” (Jeffrey Leach); “[T]his is fun reading – it isn’t great literature by any stretch” (Shawn Moses); “No, it isn’t Proust” (Ryan McNabb); “So what if the writing is not Steinbeckian, the story is absolutely unbeatable” (Kevin C McIlvoy); “It was easy to imagine the story in my mind as I was reading” (paco); “I usually hate to read and can’t get through anything longer than the title let alone a 300 page book but I finished this in two days” (anonymous); “[A] third-rate romance/adventure novel” (anonymous).

All readers seem to agree that the novels convey a political message. This distinguishes it from other works where ecological sabotage is thematized but not advocated, such as Carl Hiaasen’s *The Tourist Season*. Many agree with Abbey’s advocacy of environmental sabotage while others are offended: “Abbey has a way of making fence sitting seem so indefensible” (Jerry Engelbach); “Ever watch bulldozers mauling a forest to make way for a residential subdivision? Ever think of something less than civil to stop it? If so, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is your kind of novel” (Shawn Moses); “In reading this book you will learn a lot how to wreak havoc on your enemies” (Chad Brick); “The gleeful side of ecoterrorism” (Al Kihano); “It really does make you want to go out and blow up a bulldozer” (Cat); “This should be published as a ‘how to’ book as well as an entertainment book” (anonymous). There is no doubt among the readers that Abbey “really means it,” and it should be mentioned that he actually wrote the foreword to a “how to” book, Dave Forman’s (a founder of Earth First!) *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching*.

Many readers react to the lack of political correctness in the novels, some positively, while others are offended: “And you gotta love the fact that the only female character in the book is the composite of a 13-year old boy’s female fantasy” (B.C.Plant); “foul language and sexual deviance” (Andy Rockwood on *Hayduke Lives!*). The following anonymous reader describes the cultural conflict that is at the basis of Abbey’s absence of political correctness:



Not only did the book start Earthfirst and raised our consciousness about the Environment but it all singlehandedly took Environmentalism out of the hands of the granola crunching, self-righteous, potsmoking, banner waving, Leninist hippies and gave it to the cowboys where it belonged. None of the characters are vegetarian or whiny like most Environmentalist Stereotypes but hark back to the real man macho bullshit that has been critiqued, criticised, and deconstructed to death. Abbey melds these two strains of thought and makes environmentalism cool again.

This reader points at the cultural conflict between the classes that is thematized in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and ironically depicted in *Hayduke Lives!*. The cause of environmentalism does not define a class, and the movement has fault lines. Abbey seems to have been able to combine an outspoken environmentalist agenda and an ability to reach out to readers who feel alienated by environmentalism.

None of the ninety-nine readers connects Abbey to other environmental writers. The names that are mentioned in the comments are Mark Twain, Carl Hiaasen's *The Tourist Season* and Rand Johnson's *Arcadia Falls*, the last two are entertaining thrillers with an environmental theme but without an environmental agenda. Even though Abbey has been advertised as the "Thoreau of the American West," only one reader makes that connection with an ironic twist, calling Abbey "Thoreau with a bazooka" (Richard B. Laney).

Some readers express their disappointment when comparing *The Monkey Wrench Gang* to the more meditative *Desert Solitaire*: "I thought this story would be about the beauty and the enjoyment of the desert southwest. Instead its a book about the glorification of vandalism and the destruction of property. *Desert Solitude* is a much better book, its hard to believe they are by the same author" (anonymous); "Abbey does a better job of this more meditative type of writing in *Desert Solitaire*" (Al Kihano); "[T]his book [...] certainly does not compare to *Desert Solitaire*" (collierphotography).

Some readers indicate their background or background knowledge, and some state that they usually read little: "I don't read as much anymore because, frankly, the history channel and discovery channel are just as informative without putting me to sleep" [...] "people who like shnitz can have high ideals" (B. C. Plant) (Schlitz is the most inexpensive beer in the USA); "I know people who fight the system in similar ways to those in the book and can attest that the characters in the book are very real" (Samuel Porter); "There was a group of people who are captured by this book in a way that no other art form has ever done. They

still exist today although they've largely been swallowed up by the new Cappuccino crowd" (Michael J. Bush); "For a fifteen year old like me, it makes damn sure that we realize what the crap the media fills the world with aint true at all" (anonymous); "I first discovered the *Monkey Wrench Gang* while working at a bookstore in Billings, MT [...]. Then I re-read it when hired by the Bureau of Reclamation" (kay m. Roam); "I am a conservative political, engineer type who loves the outdoors. There are more of us than you may think in spite of the media's obsession with compartmentalizing us all, i.e.: 'liberals can be the only environmentally conscious individuals on the planet'" (anonymous). It appears that at least some of Abbey's readers characterize themselves as people who would more likely be seen in a pickup truck than on a bicycle.

How popular are Abbey's books? Here the sales rank of Amazon.com can provide a clue. All figures are taken from Amazon.com on March 2, 2005. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* has a similar sales rank to *Desert Solitaire* (5671 and 4229 respectively), much higher than *Hayduke Lives!* (181,443). This means that some of Abbey's books are quite popular, being in the same category as Thoreau's *Walden* (3707) or *Huckleberry Finn* (3384) and more widely read than icons of environmental literature such as Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island* (183,000), *No Nature* (475,000), Peter Matthiesen's *Snow Leopard* (14,976), Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* (279,090), or Aldo Leopold's *The Sand County Almanac* (11,340). I indicate the following figures for comparison: Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (603), Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (13,323) and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (4059). The figures show that some of Abbey's work, including the *Monkey Wrench Gang*, are equally popular as some of the classics of American literature and exceed the popular appeal of other environmental literature. I can only speculate why *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is much more widely read than *Hayduke Lives!*, even though I would regard the latter as the more interesting and more entertaining work. One reason could be that *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, published in 1975, was at that time more provocative than *Hayduke Lives!*, which came out 15 years later.

In conclusion it can be said that *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and its sequel, *Hayduke Lives!*, have a distinct low-brow humor that attracts readers who usually read books for entertainment rather than for literary value. The language of the readers' comments is markedly informal. The popularity of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and the fact that readers do not mention other environmental authors indicates that the book is read outside of

environmentalist circles. Rather than mentioning other environmental writers, some readers make connections to the comic book and film genres. Abbey appears to have reached his aim of targeting a blue-collar readership, or at least a readership outside of the highly educated classes.

### 8.3 Target reader and language in *Hayduke Lives!*

It is plausible to assume that *Hayduke Lives!* has a blue-collar target readership because many of the characters of the novel are working class types such as machine operators, rangers, or small-scale farmers. The novel contains much informal language in dialogues. Most of the characters producing these dialogues could be labeled working class, despite the fact that they stand on opposite sides in the environmental struggle. The main challenge of the novel does not lie in the fact that it advocates an even more radical environmentalism; it rather lies in the fact that it has a target readership that is different from most of environmental literature.

The language in *Hayduke Lives!* is marked by the same contrasts that mark Abbey's life. Whereas the dialogues mainly consist of informal working class language, the narrative voice displays a more neutral register, the tone is calm and the language contains elements of description and reflection. An example of this is when Doc Sarvis meets Hayduke, whom he had presumed to be dead:

Sarvis stared, trying to remember the identity of that dark-skinned, smooth-shaven face, the eyes concealed by dense sunglasses [...] the heavy shoulders and beer-barrel chest clad in a field jacket of desert camouflage, faded, greasy, frayed at the seams. Not the Banana Republic type of camoufleur. Not yet your ordinary freeway-interchange transient derelict either. This bum belonged to and had created a class with only one member. One was enough. [...] In a nation of pansies one nettle formed a majority, one prickly pear a quorum. [...] Still unrecognized, he pulled off the sunglasses. 'It's me, Doc. Holy shit, you blind?' Is that you?' 'Fuck yes, who else.' 'You're dead.' 'Not yet I ain't.' [...] 'I mean you don't look happy to see me, Doc. All I want is some help, Doc, just a little fuckin' help for one fuckin' little project and then I'll go away and you never see me again.' (1990, 109)

The entire novel is marked by the contrast between a narrator who explores the semantic possibilities of language in a playful way, using a neutral register, and dialogue in informal language and slang. However, the narrator is sympathetic towards the voices in direct

speech and his higher register does not connote superiority, rather it signals an attitude of playfulness.

Abbey's style is marked by a raunchy humor and frequent allusions to sex, which is an appeal to his predominantly male blue-collar readership. Erik Ness characterizes the language in *Hayduke Lives!* thus: "this book contains a full volley of objectionable language in a ribald, thoroughly masculinist celebration of sexuality unlikely to win him any new friends in the feminist community" (1990, 458). The language is very direct and outspoken, and Bourdieu characterizes this outspokenness as a working class marker:

In language, [there is] the opposition between popular outspokenness and the highly censored language of the bourgeois, between the expressionist pursuit of the picturesque or the rhetorical effect and the choice of restraint and false simplicity (litotes). The same economy of means is found in body language; here too, agitation and haste, grimaces and gesticulation are opposed to slowness—the slow gestures, the slow glance' of nobility, according to Nietzsche—to the restraint and impassivity which signify elevation. (1984, 176-177)

The exuberant style of *Hayduke Lives!*, its direct and outspoken language and tall-talk style exaggerations, and its fast and agitated pace are markers of working-class literature. The outspokenness and sexual explicitness of this literature does not automatically mean that the working class is less restrained by a moral order; Bourdieu shows that the opposite is the case (1984, 436, table 32). It could be argued that the outspokenness and directness of the language mirror real working class language, whereas the theme of sex is more of an outlet in an otherwise repressed moral order. It functions not unlike the fantasies of violence that have a higher appeal among those who are powerless. This means that Abbey's sexual outspokenness has the double function of mirroring working-class language and being an outlet; however, Abbey's main aim with the novel is not to entertain, but to subvert. Today it seems to be questionable how an Abbey-style sexual outspokenness could be seen as subversive. In the 1950s through the 1970s, however, when Abbey's world view as a writer was formed, "outward demonstrations of sexual desire were considered subversive acts" (Quigley 1998b, 302). This means that his sexual outspokenness must be seen both within the context of working-class appeal and also within that of the 1970s conceptualization of explicit sexuality as liberating and subversive.

*Hayduke Lives!* is more than a depiction of blue collar styles and language, it is, as others of Abbey's books, a guide with an educational purpose. The following quotation can be

seen as an attempt to educate the readers towards an appropriation of what is often seen as a middle class activity, using a bicycle. When Doc Sarvis rides his bicycle up a hill, he thinks about the cars that are unable to pass him: “Let ‘em wait. Let ‘em fester. Let ‘em walk. Let ‘em ride a bike like me, would do me and them and everybody a world of good. Cleanse our city’s air [...] anything bad for the auto industry and bad for the oil industry is bound to be good for America” (1990, 107). Abbey promotes the use of bicycles using both informal language and appealing to national pride.

#### 8.4 The characters in *Hayduke Lives!*

Most of the characters of *Hayduke Lives!* are taken from *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. The protagonists are a group of four that meets for the first time during a rafting trip and decides to take action against the industrial development of the American Southwest. These characters are Hayduke, a Vietnam veteran, Doc Sarvis, an older wealthy cardiologist, Bonnie, a younger nurse, and Seldom Seen Smith, a polygamous Mormon farmer from Utah. On the other side of the environmental struggle are Bishop Love, a local Mormon bishop, politician, and developer with an economic interest in uranium mining, Hoyle and Boyle, two cynical FBI agents, and Oral Hatch, a naive Mormon missionary who works for the FBI as an informer. New characters in *Hayduke Lives!* are Virginia Dick, a young ranger who is new to the Southwest and comes from Michigan, the intellectual colonel who supervises the FBI actions, Mary, who works for the mining company, and Erika, the Norwegian woman who leads the environmentalist protest. In *Hayduke Lives!* there are more female characters than in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, and in general Abbey focuses more on characters than on action in the sequel. The characters will be discussed in the following subchapters.

##### 8.4.1 Bishop Love and Virginia

Bishop Love is the main antagonist in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and is mainly responsible for the persecution of the protagonists. In *Hayduke Lives!* the colonel characterizes him as a puppet of economic interests: “He’s that small-time bigshot down in Landfill County. [...] Mine operator, trucker, rancher, County Commissioner. Wants to be a US Senator. Can’t

even get elected to the state legislature. Works as front man for Syn-Fuels. Does what the mining execs tell him to do, like any smart Utah politician” (1990, 55). The status of Bishop Love has been scaled down. Whereas in the *Monkey Wrench Gang* he was depicted as an all-powerful antagonist, he is now a local redneck under the control of economic interests.

In the opening of the novel Bishop Love undergoes a period of doubt, “Love’s heart had softened, nearly failed, began to bleed for things like juniper trees and kit foxes and purple asters and desert turtles. A bad weak shameful period—menstrual, climacteric, you might say—in his life” (1990, 17). The metaphorical heart condition gives way to a seemingly unambiguous industrialism. His medical heart problem improves but does not go away, and later there is a relapse of his “problem.” His sympathy for desert turtles refers to the fable of the desert turtle that gets buried by a bulldozer in the beginning of the novel and manages to dig itself out at the end. Love too digs out some of his human aspects during the novel.

After being affected by doubt, Love displays that he has overcome what he regards as a lapse into feminine values with a display of machismo: eating a piece of uranium ore in a public hearing on mining he demonstrates that “radiation is good for you! [...] What’d you think the sunshine is? Radiation. What’s that old sun hisself. One big old nuclear [sic] power plant boiling away, shooting out all those rays of golden radiation that makes the grass grow, the flowers bloom, the pigs happy and the clouds fill up with rain” (1990, 22-23). He holds a Geiger counter to the piece of ore that creates a buzzing sound and exclaims: “That’s high intensity radiation. That’s one mad buzzworm in there. Pure U-238. Yessiree bob, this little yeller rock is hot as a pistol, folks, hot as my Aunt Minnie’s old timey radium wristwatch” (1990, 23). Abbey shows sympathy for a character who chooses to fight with such unconventional ideas, speaks in plain language, and is willing to jeopardize his health. The reader is left between an absurd humor in the tall talk tradition and admiration for an unconventional struggle. Like Abbey’s protagonists, Love fights with personal dedication and with unconventional methods.

In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey recounts to the history of uranium mining in Utah. The Cold War had increased the demand for uranium, and an intensive search for uranium began. The geologist Charles Steen patented a mine called “Mi Vida” (1992a, 62) which features in

*Hayduke Lives!*. Abbey points out that, although many miners came from the outside, “[s]ome of the native Utahns also made money, particularly the ones shrewd enough the moment the boom took off to hustle out into the boondocks and stake claims on everything in sight” (1992a, 63). Bishop Love is such a native character who has become rich. Although mining is problematic for the environment in Utah, Abbey describes the miners he meets personally during his visits to Moab (during his year at Arches National Park) in positive terms: “The nature of their work requires a combination of skills and knowledge, good health and self-reliance, which tends to inspire self-confidence; they need not doubt their manhood. (Again, everything is subject to change)” (1992a, 41).

Love,<sup>42</sup> his telling name pointing at the perversion of Christianity through Christian land developers and the industrialism of a Christian nation, comes from humble origins. He is “a former poor boy who got his start as a mucker in Charlie Steen’s Mi Vida uranium mine” (1990, 17). The name of the mine, “Mi Vida” (my life) is ironic and ambivalent. Whereas generally a uranium mine and its radiation is more associated with death than with life, for Love the mine is indeed the source of his life. Here Abbey points at the old conflict between environmentalism and labor, environment and jobs, in an ironic form. With Love’s background in mind, even the seemingly mad act of ingesting uranium begins to make sense because in his case radiation really has been good for him.<sup>43</sup>

Even after Love has left behind his humble origins and become rich, he has not yet become one of “them,” industrialists and professional politicians. He has remained a country boy: “The Bishop’s suit, naturally, was a little different from the others. They wore business suits, some with vests; he wore a Western stockman’s suit of silvergray gabardine, with leather buttons” (1990, 21). Like the author himself, Love belongs to two worlds. Love’s case also suggests why conventional arguments for environmentalism do not work for part of the population. Compassion for other life forms is seen as soft and feminine, which is unacceptable in a world governed by macho values. The contempt that Love feels for his

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<sup>42</sup> The name “Love” refers to a governor of Colorado: “Colorado has gone to hell anyhow, sold out to industry by its loyal sons of the pioneers. Including a recent governor called Love” (1991c, 147). A similar ironic use of names is that of the character Oral Hatch, which is a corruption of Orrin Hatch, the governor of Utah.

<sup>43</sup> Also today uranium mining in the Grand Canyon area remains a hotly debated topic. The Indian Havasupai and Hualapai tribes are particularly affected by existing and planned mines, as Cate Gilles *et al* point out: “Uranium mining presents a profound risk of permanent destruction of a great natural wonder and of a way of life for the indigenous people who have been its guardians” (2005).

own occasional lapses into compassion parallels the contempt “tree hugging” environmentalists meet among local populations. Rather than trying to convince the working class target reader of the importance of soft values, Abbey employs a strategy that both appeals to traditional male attitudes and subverts them.

The other type of environmentalist arguments that do not work with parts of the working class are those exemplified in the same public hearing during which Love eats the piece of uranium ore. One of the protagonists, the Mormon farmer Seldom Seen Smith, uses well thought-out arguments, describing the dangers of radiation and the consequences for the local communities: “This goddam nuclear industry moves into our country, tears up the land with open pit mines [...] poisons the ground water supply, dries up the springs [...] takes their profits back to New York and London [...] and leaves us nothing but miners with lung cancer and a ten-billion cleanup job which our kids are gonna have to pay for” (1990, 20). Even though there is little doubt that Abbey agrees with these rational arguments that point at the long-term consequences and at the loss of local control, the short-term profit and short-term gains prove irresistible for the local inhabitants. The audience replies to Smith that “Our kids need jobs” (1990, 20), and Smith is unable to counter this argument, especially since he has seven children himself (Abbey had four), and the logical way out would be population control, “Stop having so many kids,” which is even less acceptable than the compassion for nature argument and is denounced as “Genocide” (1990, 20).<sup>44</sup> In the hearing scene Abbey shows that using arguments of compassion and reason is futile with a large portion of the population and that other strategies have to be employed. These strategies have to come from a voice from within that population. Even though Smith has the better arguments and even though he speaks the informal language of the people, he loses the hearing to Bishop Love who both embodies the validity of short-term gains from mining and is also able to get the audience on his side with a greater public appeal.

Rather than employing moral arguments against Love’s position, Abbey uses irony. Love tries to convince his unwilling wife to produce child number twelve: “Got to preserve ... that nuclear family” because “God he said be fruitful honey ... [...] and we ... [...] shall

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<sup>44</sup> Abbey also mentions the problem of overpopulation later in the novel when his character Oral thinks: “People and nature, [...] Too many people, no more nature. Just enough people, plenty of nature for all. Nature *or* people? Or nature *and* people? Think, Orval,[sic] think” (1990, 84, emphasis Abbey’s). Abbey does not seem to have a clear-cut solution to this problem.



make the desert blossom as ... the ... ho! ... the rose? Replenish the ...” (1990, 39). While the number of Love’s children and his involvement with uranium mining makes the term “nuclear family” doubly ironic, at the same time as Love wants to replenish the earth, insects are dying in a bug zapper, “Zip! Zap! Crackle! Die!” (1990, 39) and rendering his arguments absurd, introducing the notions of population control and human custodianship of other species, that could not be addressed directly, through a backdoor of irony and with comic book language. The inherent sexism in Love’s notion of feminine softness is defused in this scene when it becomes apparent that his wife is more reasonable than he is: “Seems to me like there’s too many replenishers already [...] the schools, all that fighting in the halls now, kids getting stabbed in the restrooms [...] thirty-five forty kids in ever’ class, it’s bad, Dudley,<sup>45</sup> bad” (1990, 40). This statement is followed by dying bugs: “Snip! Snap! Dead bugs falling from the light, falling, failing, electrocuted by automated cybernetic process, death on the industrial mass-production plan” (1990, 40). Abbey here points at a deeper irony—development and industrial growth may have made the prosperity of a man like Love possible, but the industrial revolution is eating its own children because growth finally destroys the lifestyle it helped to create, not unlike the car destroyed the city that mass transport had created. The ironic and humorous form does not soften Abbey’s criticism, but it helps it to have a wider appeal to readers who would not normally be reached by environmentalist arguments.

During the operation against environmental activists, Love meets a female ranger, Virginia H. Dick, whom he does not take seriously in the beginning: “A rangerette. Another female, naturally—and why not?” (1990, 84). Here it is not clear whether it is the narrator or Love who describes her as “stoutly built and looking stern,” comments on the obvious pun of her name (“she may or may not have been a virgin”), and states that “[a]ctually she was only a shy sweet well-meaning terrified rookie rangerette” (1990, 85). Love is mildly surprised by a woman in a what is presumed to be a man’s job and does not take her seriously, pointing at the contrast between her “huge holstered high-caliber piece, loaded with hollow points, that weighed as much as all the rest of her hardware together” (1990, 85) and her insecurity. She seems not to be a match for Love and his male-chauvinist behavior. Abbey introduces the new character purely from a male, non-politically correct view, focusing on the female features of attractiveness. The characterization of Virginia as “stoutly built” and

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<sup>45</sup> Love’s nickname “Dudley” ironically refers to William Dudley Haywood, aka Big Bill of the IWW.

insecure are class markers. Bourdieu points out that farming and working-class women have larger waists and would want to look “natural” rather than “refineé”; they use less makeup and exercise less than women in clerical or executive positions (1984, 203-205, table 20).

A little later in the same scene Virginia becomes more sympathetic when she allows herself to demonstrate insecurity: “Jeez, she thought, what the hell do I do now? I wish I was back at Michigan State. I wish I was back at the drive-in with Marty and Bobbie, holding hands and popping popcorn and watching *Return of the Jedi*. Oh Jeez, Momma, where are you now?” (1990, 87). Here, in demonstrating her doubts she becomes more human than the bragging Love with his macho posturing: “The Bishop patted her helmet as he climbed past her to the controls. ‘You are a good girl, honey, but this is a man’s work.’” (1990, 88). Whereas Virginia acted on her own and was graceful and polite, the Bishop takes a seat in the “cramped cockpit of this new Nipponese machine” (1990, 88), indicating that he acts more as a tool than a man. In all his bragging macho behavior he demonstrates less individuality. Abbey further ridicules Love letting him think: “Lady rangers, *he* was thinking. Female dozer operators. Next thing you know they’ll want to be bishops. In *our* church. Just like the niggers” (1990, 89, emphasis Abbey’s).<sup>46</sup> Here it becomes clear that Love’s rugged behavior and sexist and racist thoughts are signs of a deep insecurity towards a changing world, an insecurity deeper-seated than that of Virginia, who faces a demonstration for the first time on her new job. Abbey portrays industrialization as having a civilizing effect on the local culture in terms of adaptation to modern gender roles. Chambers reports a similar situation from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the first tourists were brought to the Southwest using the new railway system:

Women played multiple roles in the staging and accommodation of tourism in the region. Early on, the Fred Harvey Company brought young women from the East to serve in its hotels and restaurants. These ‘Harvey Girls’ came to represent the taming of the Southwest, in that they served as models of virtuous, civilized, and Anglo-American womanhood. Every effort was made to distinguish the Harvey Girls in manner and dress from two other prominent female representations of the region—the Native American women and the prostitute who had become a significant feature of the frontier. (2000, 25)

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<sup>46</sup> In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey mentions that the Mormons deny “full membership to Negroes because they are believed to be the outcast sons of Ham” (1992a, 235-236).

The next step in Abbey's deconstruction of Love is when his macho handling of the situation makes things much worse and the fighting leads to an outcome where "[b]oth bulldozers clanked over the edge" (1990, 94), a heavy and unnecessary loss of equipment. Love is so devastated by the situation that his patronizing behavior towards Virginia stops, and now she treats him like a little boy: "'Bishop Love, when you going to stop things like this? Got to take care of yourself. Get your hand off my leg.' 'That's your leg?' 'My hogleg. Take your digitalis today?'" (1990, 94). When Love begins to brag, Virginia points out that he pushed one of his own bulldozers over the cliff. In his defeat Love is, for the first time, able to express emotions, "Hold my hand, Ginny, I feel weak" (1990, 95). Abbey shows sympathy for Love's macho posturing, but he also shows its ultimate futility.

What Abbey is describing in *Hayduke Lives!* corresponds to a change of values in the rural Southwest. Modern social values such as the equality of women have finally arrived, and men like Love cannot accept the inevitable. However, there are two different modernizations of the Southwest: one is the expressway modernism of forced industrialization, represented by the GEM ("Giant Earth Mover," a road construction machine); the other is city street modernism, represented by, among other things, the change of gender roles. In addition, the economic basis of the Southwest is changing, and tourists are coming in. There are two modes of tourism, one is Bishop Love's dream large-scale development of hotels and golf courses, and the other is represented by small rafting companies. In the terminology of Chambers only the second one is authentic since it leaves local enterprises in control, although it changes the social structure: "in many places tourism has provided unprecedented employment opportunities for women and young people, with the potential to challenge the traditional male-dominated hierarchies of some of these places" (2000, 36). It is not the large-scale industrialization that causes this social change, quite the contrary; the large projects are more likely to benefit an already established elite. The new small-scale structures such as the ones that Abbey has helped to create through the nature tourism motivated by his writing are responsible for change.

Chapter 17, "Love and Ranger Dick in Love," contains one of the key scenes of the novel. The main elements here are the transformation of the two characters, Bishop Love and Virginia Dick, and also the role nature plays in their nascent relationship. Virginia, who grew up in the East, (as Abbey did) is a newcomer in the West and for the first time is exposed to the landscape without being on the job. She immediately develops an aesthetic

sense for it, “Dudley ... it’s beautiful in here” (1990, 134), a sense that Love does not share. The land fascinates both, albeit for different reasons. Their conversation parallels that of Dave Brower and Charles Park in John McPhee’s *Encounters With the Archdruid*, where both characters have a sense of wonder and admiration for the land, although one sees it through the perspective of a geologist and prospective miner while the other’s admiration is rooted in the aesthetic perspective of an environmentalist. Whereas the point of McPhee’s book is to create understanding for the other’s perspective, Abbey exaggerates and thus ridicules Love’s perspective.

While Virginia admires the beauty of the land, “so beautiful Dudley. It’s like a fairyland in here,” Love responds with: “You bet your boots, Virginny. Why, someday we’re gonna have fifty thousand people living here, mining that uranium, digging that coal, building golf courses and swimming pools and condominiums and selling hotdogs and postcards to a million tourists a year” (1990, 135). Even thinking aloud about the possibility of a national park makes Love react with hostility: “a park attracts them environ-meddlers and Sahara Clubbers like a dead horse draws blowflies” (1990, 135). Abbey shows Love’s inability to grasp Virginia’s perspective, while exposing the destructiveness of Love’s vision through exaggeration and caricature. His language, however, is not unlike that of Hayduke: an informal working class sociolect which the target reader can identify with.

Once Love’s macho rhetoric is exposed to comic deconstruction, the working class perspective of Virginia becomes more reasonable and palatable for the reader. Virginia also introduces an element of doubt that contrasts with Love’s unthinking boasting about technical details. When Virginia tries to deflect Love’s enumeration of geological riches, among others CO<sub>2</sub>, with the mildly ironic “[w]hat’s the CO<sub>2</sub> good for Dudley? To carbonate Pepsi-Cola?” he slips back into a long monologue on the uses of CO<sub>2</sub>. This time Virginia does not interrupt him but merely responds with an internal monologue: “Smiling herself, amused rather than annoyed by the Bishop’s techno-industrial fantasies, which she tended to regard as merely one more example of the comic male lust to always improve on nature, to organize, exploit, design and dominate (even jeans designers were men too, of a sort)” (1990, 135). Abbey is very careful not to lead the two characters into an actual dispute where the reader would have to take sides. Rather he softens down the actual conflict by keeping the thought in the mind of Virginia and by stressing that she was “amused rather than annoyed.” With his carefulness to let the thought be expressed by a

presumably simple working class girl, by avoiding an actual conflict, and by caricaturing and ridiculing Love's perspective, Abbey manages to make palatable a piece of environmentalist and feminist criticism that the target reader would be unlikely to even listen to in other circumstances.

Through Virginia, Abbey expresses some of his own strong views on cattle ranching: "in only six months on the job she'd already met every rancher in her district, heard all their complaints about the government not doing enough to poison wildlife, kill off the ravens, clear off the sagebrush [...] And they were outraged, those cow-loving, horse-forking, rope-twirling, cud-chewing, crotch-snatching, fly-slapping, old-timey rugged individualists" (1990, 136). Her views parallel that of Abbey's controversial speech at the University of Montana, "Free Speech: The Cowboy and his Cow" (1988) where he uncompromisingly attacks the use of public land for the cattle industry. Again, keeping away from an actual conflict in the narrative and keeping the criticism an internal monologue expressed by a non-environmentalist character, makes the criticism palatable. Here it also becomes clear why she cannot convince Bishop Love—his views are not just his personal ones but represent those of a whole class of Westerners. Virginia describes them as colorful and visible and dominating the political scene, while her own views have to remain silent.

After expressing strong criticism along the lines of Abbey's own environmental position, Virginia expresses Abbey's aesthetic perspective:

Sometimes she hated her job. But she was coming around, more and more and day by day, to love this queer barren God-forsaken land. There was something here, something in the space and silence, something in the landforms and the cloud formations that she'd never seen back in Michigan. (1990, 136)

Virginia voices Abbey's views in her thoughts, but Love does not understand her, and she is aware of this fact and the reason for it: "Too bad ol' Dudley here didn't understand that. But then ol' Dudley he'd never been east of Denver, except for important politico-business flights to Washington, D.C. And what do you see from 29,000 feet? Mostly nothing" (1990, 136-137). Abbey here thematizes a thorny subject, the fact that the love of nature is often a city phenomenon or that in order to appreciate a landscape one needs something to compare and contrast it to. Abbey himself came from the East, saw the Southwest for the first time as a young man and immediately fell in love with it. Abbey's aesthetic perspective, here given voice by Virginia, is essentially an urban perspective, and this

urban perspective conflicts with the material interests of local inhabitants. This is a typical problem for environmentalists who, after having won a national or supranational battle, face local resistance against preservation, as Love expresses it: “One thing we don’t need is no more goldang national parks or even state parks or god-damn wilderness *pre-serves*” (1990, 135, emphasis Abbey’s). Abbey lets Virginia voice his own perspective; however, in one aspect she is different from Abbey as she keeps her thoughts for herself and lets Love boast and employ an often appealing but wordy rhetoric.

During Virginia and Love’s visit to the desert, a love affair between the two develops, in spite of their differences. For both the relationship is initially mainly physical. Love “likes his ‘wimmin’ as he says, well built” (1990, 137) and Virginia knows that her colleague “wants to get into your pants and you know it and that’s why you’re here, haven’t been laid for six months, two weeks and four days now and I’m tired of it” (1990, 141). Virginia’s feelings for Love are blended with her enchantment with the landscape: “Beyond the high rim of pale sandstone, sparsely but elegantly decorated with isolated junipers, blooming yucca, and the fragrant shrubs of cliffrose—that scent like orange blossoms—she saw and could see nothing but an infinite expanse of Western sky” (1990, 137). Abbey parallels the physicality of the affair with that of nature. But when she expresses how wonderful the landscape is, Love answers with his fascination for the use of the land, which contrasts with her perspective. The emotion of the new relationship between the two acquires the quality of a farce when Love states: “I was thinking right here’d be the spot for a big deluxe motel [...] [W]e can level off this mesa, put a jet strip over there, a by-God million-dollar eighteen-holer along the rim” (1990, 138). Abbey not only ridicules Love’s view, he also manages to bring it into conflict with the beginning of the love affair, which Virginia expresses thus: “Virginia thought that it best to change the subject again, divert his mind. [...] She wanted to hear him talk of something other than money. At least for a few minutes. Perhaps pick a flower for her” (1990, 139). Virginia’s perception of nature in terms of aesthetics, rather than of money, is not alien to the working class; in fact, her view would be dominant within an urban working class that sees nature as a space of recreation. The contrast Abbey uses here is not primarily between the sexes or generations or between environmentalism and industrialism—it is the contrast between a rural view that sees land in terms of use and an urban perspective that sees land in terms of recreation. The reader does not know much about Virginia’s background, but Abbey mentions her having studied at Michigan State University, a place that is not overwhelmingly urban. However life at a

large university and also life in the city of East Lansing (where MSU is located) would count as urban experiences in contrast to rural Utah.

Love's unresponsiveness to aesthetic and the emotional perspectives merges and is traced to the same source; his pathological obsession with domination: "His voice warm and choking with sentiment, rich with the poetry of his passion, the Bishop had to pause for a moment to swallow, clear his throat, regain full and manly control of his emotions" (1990, 139). Abbey ridicules Love's perspective through exaggeration and traces the perspective to the male desire to dominate. Furthermore, Abbey conflates the aesthetic dimension of the land with sexual attraction and thus constructs something that could be called a life force. Love diminishes this force by only seeing it, and the land, as a resource. His only emotion stems from developing the land, something that ecofeminists would see as a form of rape, but I would argue that Abbey, through ridiculing Love, is comparing it to something more akin to masturbation, where Love (and here the name shows its ironic potential) is unable to invest any form of feeling in both the land and women. He sees the land in terms of mining, Virginia as a source of sex, and his wife as a breeding machine. His fascination with development acquires the quality of a masturbatory fantasy, "and then a good road in here, as we got to get for the uranium pit over, yonder in Eden Canyon well, listen honey..." (1990, 138-9).<sup>47</sup> Virginia tries to counter these dreams with some reality by first asking Love about who is on the land commission and then: "What about the Lone Ranger? [...] Rudolf the Red and the Earth First! mob? And that Monkey Business Gang?" (1990, 139). Whereas environmentalists often struggle with their reputation as dreamers, Abbey here presents the environmental perspective as the reasonable one and the developer's mentality as an ultimately unrealistic (yet destructive) fantasy of domination.

The lack of criticism of *Hayduke Lives!* is probably partly due to the book's language and humor, which many would see as unacceptable. When Love begins to realize his own sexual interest in Virginia, he also sees her as a resource: "Lord, but oh my God, Lord, look at them tits on her. If she was a cow I'd go into the dairy business" (1990, 141). There is no need to excuse the language of the book and I would argue that it is the book's main strength if the target reader is kept in mind. It is clear to the reader that this language is

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<sup>47</sup> A similar male masturbatory fantasy is found in Abbey's novel *Good News*, where the general, the ruler of a post-apocalyptic militarized society, can only achieve an erection through acting out a power fantasy. Power and domination are both at the basis of his motivation as a ruler and of his sexuality which he attempts to rule too.

unacceptable in a middle-class world and would only be used in male-dominated, blue-collar working-class cultures. But it is not Abbey's aim to show how many rules of political correctness he can break but wants to appeal to his readers through the use of language.

Even though Love is portrayed as a dirty old man, Virginia feels sympathy for him: "Poor old Dudley, she was thinking, such a sentimentalist. Actually got tears in his eyes talking about that motel he wants to build. And he's so shy—hand on my hip, arm around my waist, jabbering away about hotels and golf courses and jet strips when what he's thinking about is love" (1990, 141). Abbey here portrays the dream of domination and development as not only interfering with romance and emotion; it interferes with actual sexual intercourse. Again Virginia is portrayed as much more realistic and pragmatic than Love. The description of the actual act of lovemaking is contrasted with the rest of the text. It is printed in italics and the language is poetic and metaphorical with an element of kitsch: "Their mouths hungered to prolong this sweet, heady assault. They tasted, sapping the strength from each other's limbs, and they clung to each other as a wild, tempestuous river of passion swept them away" (1990, 143). The language here does not fit with the rest of the book (and is not typical for Abbey at all). Here Abbey is playing with pastiche, incorporating the language of a romantic dime novel into his book, a language that the target reader may be familiar with.

When Love and Virginia return from their lovemaking, they realize that their car has disappeared and they only find a pile with their gear and a written note from the Lone Ranger, a solitary and anachronistic character that turns up occasionally in several of Abbey's novels: "Howdy podners motorized veehicles not allowed in this genril area within ten miles yer veehicle wuz impounded as per rooles & recklations this here genril area" [...] (1990, 144). The language of the Lone Ranger creates a subversive effect because it is an oral dialect and not usually found in written form. This shows a certain playful defiance towards the monopoly of the rules of the standard language, an effect like in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Abbey, however, ironizes the language because it, with all its non-standard spelling, refers to "rooles & recklations" concerning the use of the land (apart from the obvious irony that the role of Lone Ranger is the antithesis of regulation).



When Love and Virginia return to the spot where they had parked their car and find it stolen by the Lone Ranger (but their equipment intact), Love considers calling for help. Virginia, however, proposes: “Let’s walk a few miles first. [...] Then rest awhile. [...] *Then* call for help” (1990, 145, emphasis Abbey’s). Love agrees and for the first time he appears to be breaking out of his view of seeing nature as a mere resource and starts to appreciate an aesthetic perspective: “Right. What the hell, we still got half the day. Let’s go admire the view—want to show you where we’ll build the condos. Then long about sundown...” (1990, 145). Even though Love is not fully changed, the relaxedness of his proposal and the mere hint of admiring a view show that he can change. The change was facilitated by the act of the Lone Ranger who forced them to stay in nature longer than intended and even to walk through the desert: “They shouldered as much of their belongings as they could carry [...] and trudged together, side by side, holding hands, through the sand toward the westering sun, toward the promise of sunset and evening star, love and beauty, rescue and Pepsi Cola” (1990, 145). Even though Abbey ironizes the romantic scene through juxtaposing love and Pepsi Cola, the relationship between Love and Virginia is not ironic and Abbey presents it as something valuable.

The most important element here is the setting, the desert landscape. The desert provides an actual space for the romance, and its aesthetic appreciation is conceptualized as running parallel to romantic emotions. In addition, the desert functions as a heterotopia, a space with different rules and perceptions, that makes the love affair possible. It is both the relative absence of social control and the presence of a strong aesthetic force that brings the unlikely couple together. The fact that natural spaces are less controlled make a wider range of experiences possible than in controlled civilized spaces. Abbey’s argument is that these spaces can be accessed easily, freely and cheaply by everyone, and that everyone can take part in the experience of these spaces. These spaces enhance the quality of life, and they are a real and metaphorical common ground for a democratic society. Their democratic appeal is to a certain degree threatened by environmentalist elitism, the larger threat, however, comes from the development (i.e. compartmentalization) of the spaces and their destruction. In the chapter under discussion this is visible when Love and Virginia’s path is crossed by the prospective route of the road-grading machine GOLIATH (1990, 145). Since large open spaces cannot be taken for granted in today’s world, it becomes a paradox that wild spaces have to be protected, that development has to be curbed by

“rooles & recklations.” As discussed on the topic of modernism, this is not really a paradox because free and open urban spaces are also the product of central planning.

#### 8.4.2 Hayduke

Peter Quigley argues that the characters Erika and Hayduke are mythical figures. The title of the novel, *Hayduke Lives!* is an ironic rendering of the “Jesus Lives!” bumper stickers that were popular in the 1970s (Quigley 1998, 303). But rather than merely ironizing the Christian themes of domination of nature and sexual restraint, Abbey constructs a counter-myth of his own that loosely draws on pre-Christian models: “Hayduke is a mythic, Pan-like figure who represents unbridled disregard for inhibition. He is Bacchus and Orc mixed into one” (Quigley 1998b, 303).

The character of Hayduke is inspired by a real-life figure, Doug Peacock, a friend of Abbey (Peacock features in Eric Temple’s documentary on Abbey). Whereas in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Hayduke is a real-life character, although with some comic book style exaggerations, in *Hayduke Lives!* he develops more and more from a realistic character into a mythical figure. In *Hayduke Lives!* the first indication that Hayduke is still alive<sup>48</sup> comes from Bonnie, who ironically depicts the experience of born-again Christians with sexual undertones: “Him dead?—Not bloody likely. I can feel him [...] Coming again [...] I can’t believe it but I feel it, yes he’s coming again, that ugly squat hairy evil grinning son of a bitch—yes! oh God—he’s coming” (1990, 48). But Hayduke, despite all the ironic reference to religion, is not a holy figure, if holiness is defined by Christian standards. When Hayduke meets Doc, the conversation is a reversal of the expected etiquette. Whereas Doc reiterates the party-line of “official” radical environmentalism: “The eco-warrior is a guerilla soldier fighting a war against an enemy equipped with high technology [...] [T]he eco-warrior cannot even carry a weapon; his own Code of Honorable Conduct forbids it,” but intends to remain inactive in the battle, Hayduke approaches morality with sarcasm and pragmatism: “What? Not even a sidearm? Not even some knife? How about toenail clippers? How about a live duck, Doc, to beat on his head? How about a snow shovel to whup his ass down the street?” (1990, 114). Hayduke does not come back into the

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<sup>48</sup> *The Monkey Wrench Gang* leaves it open whether or not Hayduke survives at the end of the novel.

world as a saint or savior: he comes as a force that disturbs not only the comfortable life of the protagonists but also the accepted standards of environmentalism.

Although the informal register of Hayduke's language seems to allow identification, Hayduke is not a human character but represents a force and is akin to the demi-gods of Greek mythology. According to Quigley, Hayduke is a "mythic, Pan-like figure who represents unbridled disregard for inhibition" and is "overwhelming the abstract, earth-destroying transcendent religion of Christianity" (1998b, 303), a figure that is not gentle but is a pagan "Pan pissed off" (1998b, 304). In the wake of the Lynn White debate Christianity has been blamed for the environmental crisis, and this argument has become a staple view among radical environmentalists. Abbey demonstrates little sympathy for Christianity in his work, and *Hayduke Lives!* is no exception. The Mormon bishop Love advocates a destructive expressway modernism, and his aim to have twelve children shows disrespect for his wife. The character Oral Hatch, a Mormon missionary, is characterized as a figure who is more pitiful than destructive. Although Christianity plays a major role in the novel, and although it is characterized as destructive, the main theme of the novel is not a struggle between pantheism and Christianity. There are non-Christian mythological forces on both sides of the struggle. Hayduke (Pan) and Erika (who represents Gaia) fight against another non-Christian mythological figure, the GEM (Giant Earth Mover) which represents Goliath (Abbey titles chapter 4 "GOLIATH the Super-GEM"). The world of *Hayduke Lives!* is a pre-Christian mythological world where different forces fight each other, and human beings, Christian or not, are minor figures. This is not to suggest that Abbey tries to re-infuse nature with spirituality; the forces in the novel are exaggerated because, like comic book figures, they are not supposed to be taken seriously: there are meant to entertain, not to install spiritual awe.

Even if Hayduke and the rest of the Monkey Wrench Gang act together, and even though they are described as a close-knit group of friends in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, they do not have the same narrative roles in *Hayduke Lives!*. In *Hayduke Lives!*, Hayduke has been transformed into a demi-god who shares his power with the other characters. This force has a variety of characteristics. First it is a force of resistance, and as such it resides in the wilderness, or it could be said that Hayduke is the personified wilderness. Hayduke lives and hides in the desert, and this is an expression of what Chaloupka and McGreggor Cawley call "Abbey's hope" (1993, 18), Abbey's original argument for the preservation of

the wilderness as a base of resistance against a potentially oppressive government. But Hayduke shows that the base of resistance is more than a militia compound in the forest—Abbey's desert is a space where the external world makes itself felt through its physicality, a world that is not static but constantly changing due to the interactions of the mythical and playful forces represented by Hayduke. Hayduke is a personified marker of the desert: through him a culture perceives natural spaces as being dynamic, subversive, creative, and wild. He is mythical not so much in a sense that he represents a non-human world of gods or nature but is a cultural projection made in order to grasp and appropriate external reality. Specifically he is constructed as a counter myth to the marking of natural spaces as thoroughly controlled economic resources for industrial tourism or for mining.

Hayduke's transformation of a Vietnam veteran into a mythological figure structurally resembles the figure of Rambo who is not created for identification but for revenge. It could be asked why Abbey constructs a character close to the stifling anti-intellectualism and barbarism of a figure like Rambo. I would argue that the resemblance of Hayduke and Rambo is superficial—both can be seen as mythical figures that, having gone through the brutalizing experience of Vietnam, seek revenge against civilization using quasi-military methods. In contrast to Rambo, however, Hayduke does not reject civilization but interacts with civilization, mainly through the other members of the Monkey Wrench Gang. Hayduke is not a barbarian but a corrective for the civilized world. Here I define "barbarism" in the sense of the literary critic Manfred Schneider who in his book *Der Barbar* defines barbarism as the tendency to simplify the complexities of culture, as the negation of civilization's polysemies. The aim of the barbarian is a "organic totalization of life" (1997, 223, my translation). It is not difficult to see how many utopian environmental movements fall into this definition of the barbarian; the prophets of the ecological crisis use apocalyptic arguments (Schneider 1997, 294) to reduce the complexities of culture and to define a new ecological ground. Is Hayduke such a barbarian simplifier, the prophet of a simpler ecological utopia, a green Rambo? I think this is not the case, first there is no utopian vision in this book, and secondly, despite all its alleged radicalism, Abbey's work is based on the values of Western culture. Whereas figures of the popular imagination such as Rambo or Forrest Gump fall into the framework of pastoral anti-modern, characterized by Leo Marx "'by an urge to withdraw from civilization's growing power and complexity'" (2000, 9), Hayduke enters the civilized world not to dismantle it but to help in the internal struggle of street against expressway modernism. Furthermore, rather than simplifying the

world he complicates or stirs society, as in Abbey's quotation that "society is like a stew: you have to stir it or you get a lot of scum on top."

The main conflict in the novel is not that between a mythical Hayduke and an equally mythologized GEM (a contest between good and evil), but a struggle between real-life characters on both sides that create a more complex setting than it at first may appear. GEM, Hayduke and Erika represent blind forces, whereas the characters that actually have to make decisions and to act can use these forces and have to deal with them. The blind mythic forces are incorporated into individual lives and inspire individual action. The mythic component in the novel is interwoven with the realistic one, not unlike the manner in which humans and gods interacted in Greek mythology. The mythic characters are not created for reader identification but serve as sources for inspiration and power for the powerless. Here a difference between *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Hayduke Lives!* becomes visible. On the one hand Abbey exaggerates the difference between mythic and real life characters and on the other he constructs his real-life characters more distinctly as belonging to the working class. This mystification allows the other characters to show weakness and reluctance. In that sense Hayduke is an ironic Jesus figure—although he does not suffer for the sins of his friends, he allows them to be weak and doubting, in a word human.

Hayduke's mythical status is affirmed by his sexual energy. He is described as a "violent brutal aggressive reckless lover" (1990, 159). Whereas Hayduke has some parallels to Jesus, his sexuality distinguishes him from the asexual Jesus but has parallels to the god Pan. There is a strange scene where he celebrates his sexuality and maleness, after having successfully destroyed the GEM: "Satisfied at last he stood up, unbuttoned his coveralls and fondled it out into the open air, letting it breathe. Fully erect he staled like a stallion on the hard rimrock. Thank God I am a man" (1990, 287). This hyper-masculinism appears embarrassingly outdated today, but it must be considered, as Quigley points out, that "in the period when Abbey was politicized—the 1950s through 1970s—outward demonstrations of sexual desire were considered subversive acts" (1998b, 302). Abbey exaggerates sexuality to the point of caricature. One reason for this is that it enables him to create a distance between mythical and real characters, and the other reason is that Abbey's form of exaggerated sexuality will make the book popular among his target readers and serve as a vehicle for its environmentalist message. Sexuality has a double function in the

book: it is in itself subversive (to a larger degree in Abbey's time than today), and it entertains, which expands its readership beyond the usual readers of nature writing. It is, however, this playful and entertaining treatment of sexuality that makes the book problematic for readers who would expect a more spiritual treatment of the matter, in other words, sexuality and not sex. An example of this would be Gary Snyder's poem "The Bath" where sexuality is explicitly described as an element that connects humans to nature:

The body of my lady, the winding valley spine / the space between the thighs I reach through / cup her curving vulva arch and hold it from behind / a soapy tickle a hand of grail / the gates of Awe / That open back a turning double-mirror world of / wombs in wombs, in rings, / that start in music. (1974, 12-13)

For Snyder sexuality connects the individual not only to another person but to life (womb in wombs), the world of matter (rings) and even to immaterial form (music). Sexuality in Abbey, on the other hand, is meant to be disruptive and does not have the spiritual undertone of connecting oneself with the earth. The physical appearance of Hayduke is described in an ironic way: "Roaring with laughter and snorting for air, he flung up his head, tossed the hair and water from his eyes, took a deep breath and jackknifed under the surface, mooning Bonnie with his small pale rear, his puckered asshole, his wrinkled balls. Not a pretty sight" (1990, 162).

According to D. H. Lawrence (1961, 23), there is a connection between sexuality and religion, as Christianity transformed the figure of Pan into the devil. This connection between spirituality and sexuality is also visible in the novel, when Doc Sarvis thinks about Hayduke as "this satanic lad" (1990, 172) whom he never wants to see again. With the invocation of the devil, Abbey not only wants to stress Hayduke's spiritual side, he also emphasizes his sexuality (in a Christian world this can only be done through the devil, not the divine). Also the many disguises that Hayduke uses for his sabotage action, from cleaning lady to night watchman, are a parallel to the devil whose aim is to stay unrecognized. But all the mythic powers of Hayduke are not used to overpower the will of the other characters. An example of this is that Bonnie visits Hayduke in his cave and refuses to have sex with him (1990, 163), although the two were lovers in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

Hayduke and the other characters belong to different spheres, the mythical and the civilized, and furthermore literally inhabit different spaces. Whereas Hayduke lives in a

cave, the other members of the group live in the civilized world. Abbey does not see the urban lives of his characters as a problem but their powerlessness, and Hayduke has the function to empower them. As Abbey explains, the name Hayduke is derived from “heiduk”, which means “1. bandit, brigand, outlaw. 2. rebel soldier, insurgent, guerilla warrior. Saving the world. But how, why? Saving the world was only a hobby” (1990, 169). The rebel Hayduke is a counterforce to the impersonal forces of industrialism (what Eisenhower called the military industrial complex), embodied by a list of about twenty multinational companies (1990, 169) that have a disproportionate amount of power in the country. That means that Hayduke’s enemies are not abstract concepts such as the Judaeo-Christian heritage, but concrete enemies, from Exxon to Dow Chemical, who threaten both natural spaces and a vision of city street modernism.

What Abbey defends is a modern lifestyle, and he does not advocate a return to a pastoral garden. Hayduke keeps a snake in his cave, “who but him would keep a goldarn buzzworm around for a watchdog” (1990, 178). The snake is a symbol of the eviction from Eden, of the disruption of a settled and ordered world, not for its reconstruction. Abbey attacks the agrarian lifestyle in the West and attacks cattle ranching. Doc Sarvis thinks that someday “we’ll drive all these stinking public-lands cattle onto the highways, where they belong, herd them back to Texas, where they come from, feed them to the alligators, where they’ll serve a purpose” (1990, 169). Abbey here voices a position against a pastoral primitivism that was popular in the wake of the countercultural movement. Rather than being a pastoral hero, Hayduke is a modern character, full of play and irony, representing the force of wilderness. Only Pan lives in the wilderness, and a return to nature in the style of a latter-day Brooks Farm or Fruitlands is impossible. Abbey lived during an era where these dreams had been revived, visible for example in the movie “Easy Rider” with its pastoral depiction of a return to nature and the simple farm life, but he did not share them.

#### 8.4.3 Erika

Erika is a character as overdrawn and mythical as Hayduke, and she complements his exaggerated maleness with the overdrawn female characteristics of an earth goddess.

Throughout his work, female characters in Abbey are sketchy<sup>49</sup> and often a mirror of male desire, in other words, not Abbey's greatest literary achievement. On the other hand it can be said that the most developed female characters in Abbey are to be found in this last book as Virginia and Bonnie are credible and developed characters. Erika, on the other hand, is not a real character in the book but a mythical figure, and Abbey playfully exaggerates her female characteristics.

I would argue that Erika, the highly sexualized earth goddess, can only be fully explained with the target reader in mind.<sup>50</sup> With his heavy sexualizing of characters, figures, and nature, Abbey aims at a readership beyond those who care for nature writing. As mentioned above, sexuality in this book is not a metaphor but a source of pleasure and release and is meant to entertain. The use of sexuality in the book opens up a discussion of the role of literature. Sexuality in this book is not only a literary tool, it is also a political one, not only in the more general sense of subversion (that Quigley describes), but also in the direct sense of getting people to read the book. This latter sense is akin to the use of sexual display in advertisement. The question could be asked whether this propagandistic use of sexuality is an acceptable tool in literature, especially since Abbey saw himself as a professional novelist. Abbey states that a "writer [...] must be useful to his people, to his community" (1988, 163) and admired Leo Tolstoy "because he was able to go beyond novel writing" (Loeffler 2002, 65). Abbey belongs to a strain of realism and modernism that values social engagement. From Harriet Beecher Stove's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to John Steinbeck's *The Jungle*, there has been a tradition of literature that sees social engagement as a main aim.<sup>51</sup>

Abbey describes Erika in highly attractive terms for the male reader: "a tall young woman with blue-black hair reaching to her rump, a red headband with hawk's feather around her

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<sup>49</sup> Clarke Abbey once remarked of her late husband that "he really didn't understand women" (Temple 1993)

<sup>50</sup> See my discussion on physique and class markers above. Also Erika falls into the category of working class women that Bourdieu describes.

<sup>51</sup> Another strain of modernism is marked by an absence of social involvement, reflecting a decision to keep art out of the sphere of mass production. Two of the early films of the Spanish director Luis Buñuel show the difference between the two modernisms. In "Un Chien Andalou" (produced in 1929 in cooperation with Salvador Dalí), he declares that "Our only rule was very simple: no idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation would be accepted (quoted from the back cover of "Un Chien Andalou & Land without Bread", Interama Video classics, New York: n.d.), and tries to establish an art removed from the world. In his documentary "Tierra sin Pan" (1931), however, he shows realistically and without a trace of romanticism the wretched living conditions in Las Hurdes, an underdeveloped part of Spain and accuses the government of inaction.



brow, and a pair of startling fjord-green eyes that blazed within her charcoal lashes” (1990, 80), and, a little later, “[h]er breasts heaved slightly, nipples aroused from the bounty of her emotion, heart and feelings ill-concealed by the sweat-dampened T-shirt” (1990, 83). A reason for this display is that Abbey wants to attract male readers. Another reason would be that the sheer physicality, beauty and strength of Erika are deployed to counteract the clichéd perception of environmentalists as scrawny tree-hugging vegetarian granola munchers. Like Hayduke Erika represents a mythical force, but unlike the male “Panic” disruptiveness of Hayduke, she represents the female life force of Gaia. Both Hayduke’s disruptiveness and Erika’s holism supplement each other. The forces that Abbey describes through the two characters are on the same side of the environmental struggle but do not melt into one.

One of the topics in the novel is the conflict between local and non-local interests. In the above-mentioned Earth First! action against road building Abbey paints a differentiated picture where the developers consist of both international companies and local people. Also the protesters are both locals and environmentalists from other parts of the US and Europe. Abbey here defuses a common perception among local people that development primarily serves a local interest and that environmentalists come from the outside. First of all there is little doubt that in the alliance between non-local and local developers the real power is on the side of the non-local (and the radioactive refuse will remain local in the case of radium mining). Secondly, there are alternative models of local development that both create jobs and keep natural areas (and the quality of life in them) intact, as exemplified by the protester who runs a river-rafting outfit.

Whereas environmentalists often downplay the possible conflict between local and non-local interests (exemplified in the slogan “think globally, act locally”), with Erika, Abbey not only questions the legitimacy of local interests but of national ones as well. Erika is from Norway and regards both the environmental movement “*Vee* is no one in charge” (1990, 85, my emphasis) and America as her own: “I speak [...] because I luff America and because I luff your beautiful free speak and your beautiful canyon land” (1990, 85-86). Looking at the construction of the novel, both the protagonists (the environmentalists) and the antagonists (the developers) have local, national, and international elements. This shows that the environmental conflict cannot be understood in terms of local vs. non-local, but as a conflict between lifestyles and powers. In terms of the intended reader it must be

noted that Abbey constructed the novel in such a way that the international elements of both protagonists and antagonists are mythical, and the local elements are real-life. The mythical life-force of Erika and the mythical “machine” of the multinational companies are contrasted with real local people on both sides, such as the Monkeywrench Gang on the protagonists’ side and Bishop Love on the antagonists’ side. There is a double contrast in the novel, protagonists vs. antagonists and mythical vs. real. What Abbey avoids is an appeal to the local versus the international elements.

Seen in an American context, the use of Erika also questions an element of environmentalist chauvinism. It is a common charge against environmentalism that it is a first-world movement and has a colonial aspect since it forces the politics and values of developed nations upon the rest of the world. Gary Snyder asks in his poem “Mother Earth: Her Whales:” “Brazil says ‘sovereign use of Natural Resources’ / Thirty thousand kinds of unknown plants. / [...] / And a robot in a suit who peddles a delusion called ‘Brazil’ / can speak for *them*?” (1974, 47, emphasis Snyder’s). As legitimate as it is to ask why a nation uses nature in a particular way, one can also ask what authorizes Snyder to speak for the rainforest? It is possible to see the concept of an unspoiled rainforest as a European-American construction that runs counter to the interests of the inhabitants of the area. What is even more problematic is that Snyder’s high moral ground originates in a nation that, through the Monroe doctrine, claims political influence in Brazil, and in Snyder’s high moralism there is an element of colonialism.

Abbey addresses this complex of questions from a surprising new angle by turning around the argument of colonization and letting the Norwegian Erika claim rights to the American West. Abbey himself points out that the Grand Canyon plateau is a unique landscape in the world, and thus it is understandable that not only Americans have an interest in it. What Abbey, in his ironic reversal of the colonial theme, achieves is that he opens up the American West again. The West becomes a new frontier, and the conflict in the book is also a conflict between people who have the legal deeds to the land and people who have interests in the land. Rather than, like Snyder, referring to an ultimate authority of the land and ecosystem, Abbey shows that there exist a number of conflicting human interests in the land.

Abbey's environmentalists appropriate national symbols such as the flag: "the red the white the blue the stripes and stars of the Fucking United Fucking States of America by God and by Christ. This was a mucho-macho patriot crowd, *fanatic lovers of the land, of liberty*, of a glorious tradition" (1990, 199, my emphasis). If Abbey rejected the national symbols, he would surely alienate his target readers. What he does instead is appropriate these symbols and define them for his own purpose, defining an American as a lover of land and liberty. Therefore there is no contradiction in Erika appropriating the national symbols, because Abbey's definition of nation, as someone who loves the land rather than someone who owns it, is not exclusive. For Erika there is no exclusive claim to the land, which is "God country, your country, my country, our country" (1990, 207). It should be mentioned here that Abbey is also a stranger in the West who has chosen to appropriate the land and call it home because of a love for the land. Erika is a subversive figure because she challenges established notions of rights to the land. What is challenged is the established order of allegiances, which the FBI agent explains to Oral: "Don't forget, you are an American first, a boy friend second, a nature lover third" (1990, 197). The presence of Erika confuses the Mormon country boy Oral because she teaches him that a nature lover can be the better American, and because the love of a Norwegian brings him into conflict with the authorities of his country.

In the description of Erika there is one curious element that has puzzled many readers. She is supposedly from Norway, but is called the "Svenska" (Swedish) girl and has a German accent. Could it be that Abbey was sloppy in his construction of a character, especially since he wrote the book knowing that he was dying? I would regard the sloppiness argument for Erika's muddled nationality as unlikely for several reasons. First, Abbey knew the respective countries (Norway, Sweden, Germany) from his travels in the 1950s and spent several weeks in Norway, a time which he emphasizes in his journal. Second, the novel is overall carefully constructed. What is more likely is that Abbey muddled Erika's heritage on purpose. Doc Sarvis talks to Smith's wives about Erika: "'where's she from? Italy? Spain?'<sup>52</sup> Greece? Germany?' 'Norway,' Doc said. 'The Svenska maid. The King of Norway's daughter, fair Sigrid with the Emerald Eyes'" (222). For someone who knows

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<sup>52</sup> It may be surprising that someone could mistake a Norwegian for a Spaniard. Norwegians, through their history of sea-faring, Viking raids, trade along the sea routes, and shipwrecked foreign sailors often have a darker complexion than e.g. Swedes. Abbey remarks on this fact, calling Erika "black haired Sigrid" and an "odd and interesting genetic type" (1990, 223). This also shows that he knows Scandinavia too well to make a blatant mistake in her ethnic depiction.

the geography of the region it is hardly possible to mention “Svenska” and “Norway” in the same sentence, therefore it must be assumed that Abbey constructed Erika’s heritage in a muddled way on purpose, the question remains why.

First, the distinction between the three countries would play a minor role or even be unclear for the target reader, in contrast to European readers or an educated American readership. What Abbey achieves with this characterization is a signaling that differences are not important (as it is not important whether she was American or foreign). As in the construction of Hayduke, Erika is the product of Abbey’s playfulness and exuberance, and he wanted to create a “Nordic composite” (Quigley 1998b, 305). Quigley reports that his Norwegian students thought that “her depiction had serious flaws,” and found it sloppy, particularly her German accent (1998b, 305). My students also found this blend puzzling, probably because Norwegians do not like to be mixed up with either Swedes or Germans.

I have mentioned two reasons for the sloppy ethnic depiction of Erika, the unconcern of the target reader and Abbey’s playfulness, but it can be asked how he could allow himself such a freedom of depiction when many of his characters were depicted more carefully and more believably than in the novel’s precursor, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. The reason for this is that Erika (like Hayduke) is not a real-life character but a mythical figure. Too much accuracy in her background would create the impression of a real-life character and disturb her mythical status. It should be remembered that the reader does not get much background information on Hayduke (except that he was in Vietnam) either. These mythical figures allow Abbey to direct his exuberance and playfulness onto them without the restraint of real life. In contrast the division of characters into real-life and mythical also allows Abbey to create truer real-life characters, as is visible in the comparison between *Hayduke Lives!* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Erika is a life force, an “Earth-loving goddess” (Quigley 1998b, 304), and the sloppiness and sketchiness of her characterization adds to her perception as a mythical force.

Erika’s ethnicity may be confused, but it is clear that Norway plays the major part in it. Quigley points out that Erika and Norway function as a counter-myth, and Abbey depicts Erika as “Nordic goddess of beauty [...] representing the song of Norway, the mind of Arne Naess, the spirit of Grieg, Nielsen, Sibelius, the beauty of Greta Garbo” (1990, 187). Quigley argues that “Norway is also used to suggest a counter to modern life,” and that

Erika “represents a kind of counter raid.” He goes on to say that Erika “tracks down Oral, the symbol of American cultural imperialism, narrowness, and rigidity, who before was in her land attempting to convert her to Mormonism” (1998b, 304). Quigley presents Norway as a counter to American culture, “a rugged and pristine alternative to the American life of cars, fast food, and lack of contact with or understanding of nature” (1998b, 300-301).

This counter-myth is problematic because it romanticizes Norway rather than pointing out political or cultural alternatives such as the status of private land. Abbey is right to look for cultural models outside of American culture (in this way the book is progressive), but I would argue that what he sees as a political/cultural alternative is not Norwegian but generally Western European. What Abbey does not mention, however, is how European manages to be different from American style capitalism—namely a greater acceptance of state intervention in public life. This conflicts with Abbey’s political position of Jeffersonian individualism, however, and this leads to the fact that Abbey’s political argument in his use of Norway remains shallow rhetoric. One example of this is an area where Norwegian/Scandinavian culture (and to an extent European culture in general) could act as a model for America: the status of private land. In Norway there is an old common law that is called “*allemannsretten*,” which permits traffic over and non-permanent residence on private land for everybody, today mostly realized in the form of hiking and camping. Abbey, however, although he defended the openness of the West, never went so far as to suggest adopting what would amount to an infringement of individual property rights; this would have conflicted with his American-style individualism. For these reasons I regard the deployment of Norway as a cultural alternative as rhetoric, lacking any substance suggestive of actual political alternatives.

Abbey often discusses the proper uses of public land, but he never questions the status of private land as did Henry David Thoreau in “Wild Apples.” Thoreau describes half-wild apple trees and states:

They belong to children as wild as themselves—to certain active boys that I know—to the wild-eyed woman of the fields, to whom nothing comes amiss, who gleans after all the world—and, moreover, to us walkers. We have met with them and they are ours. These rights, long enough insisted upon, have come to be an institution in some countries, where they have learned how to live. (2003, 14)

Interpreting Thoreau's statement that "in wildness is the preservation of the world," Tony Hiss claims that "Thoreau proclaimed that natural landscapes have an innate public value" (1990, 118). Even though Abbey frequently criticizes private or commercial interests in public lands, he never considers the possibility of communal claims to private land or regulation of private property rights. Thoreau shows that it is possible to combine a criticism of private land use with a notion of individualism. Abbey never followed Thoreau in this respect and private land forms a white spot on his literary map, a white spot that is the more visible as he instrumentalizes Norway as a counter-myth.

Another problematic element in the depiction of Erika is racial stereotyping. This is how Erika's Norwegianness is depicted:

She sank to her knees on the pine needles of the forest floor, mindless of gaping bystanders, and wept freely, loudly, with the fairytale abandon of the lovelorn Svenska maid. The dour Norse? That Nordic phlegm? The dull and sluggish Norwegian permafrost? *Tout a contraire*: they are a wild and hearty breed, whose emotions from joy and despair and back again run deep, fierce, true and hotly energetic, untainted by the cynical affectation of Latin posturing, the operatic gestures of the lukewarm worn-out thin-blooded Mediterranean soul. If ever turned loose from their self-constructed cage of inner doubt, guilt neuroses and liberalistic angst, these northern races could subjugate the entire planet in approximately two weeks. (1990, 192)

Abbey does a variety of things here: first he creates a counter-image to the image of Scandinavians in America who are seen as somewhat sluggish (this stereotype is probably most memorably depicted in the movie "Fargo"). Here also Abbey's target reader has to be considered, and I would argue that racial stereotyping is used in the text as a careful transgression of political correctness, which would be popular among his working class readers (a parallel with the above-discussed usages of sexist language). It should also be noted that not all racial stereotyping is racist, and that there are different degrees of danger involved in them. Throughout the book Abbey plays with the Nordic theme; in the above quotation, however, he uses the racial stereotype to defame another ethnicity, namely the Southern European (which is especially problematic with regard to the Hispanic population in the Southwest). In addition, a German reader would find it hard to forget that one northern race did indeed attempt to subjugate the entire planet half a century ago. Considering that Abbey sees himself as a political writer, a writer who expressed the didactic aim of being useful to his community, the above quotation is inexcusable. Here it

is visible how playful and inoffensive, yet problematic, racial stereotyping can slip into outright racism.

The racist undertones in this episode of *Hayduke Lives!* are certainly disturbing. However, it is possible to find a more reflective Abbey, admittedly in his earliest writings. In his journal he notes, during a trip through Norway:

The Nordic human is a good one. But any better than the Bantu, or the Neapolitan or the Mexican? A problem: we get into all kinds of anthropological [...] difficulties the moment we begin thinking of human beings not as unique personalities, but as types, breeds and races, as though men were manufactured like automobiles [...] as though we could compare one nationality with another [...] as we compare Fords with Buicks, Chevrolets with Dodges and so forth. Foolishness” (1994, 61).

In *Hayduke Lives!* Abbey appears to have forgotten his own *caveat*.

A further factor in the depiction of Erika is anti-intellectualism. The Earth First! rally becomes reminiscent of a church service when the crowd of activists, after having heard Erika’s speech reacts: “‘Yes!’ they thundered, male and female. ‘Yeah!’ they rumbled, girls and boys alike, as they whistled, sparkled, twinkled, hollered, cheered and clapped. ‘We are coming, Princess Erika, one thousand bodies strong!’” (1990, 207). It is remarkable that in the scene where Abbey most directly takes the side of radical environmentalism, he becomes the most questionable. Even in its exaggeration, the above-mentioned scene remains eerie, and even though the movement does not have a nominal leader (“‘vee iss no one in charge,” (1990, 85)), Erika becomes a spiritual *fürher* of the environmentalists. Even the character of the journalist, which could be seen as Abbey’s alter ego, surrenders to the seductions of mindless hero-worship: “The journalist, on his feet, yelling and cheering with the rest [...] felt tears trickling down his bourbon-rubicund cheeks” (1990, 207). It is here, where environmentalism is depicted as a religious awakening, that Abbey loses his usual ironic distance. It can only be speculated why Abbey employs such a dangerous strategy, and a strategy that he himself has distanced himself from earlier.

A final problem of the radical environmentalist movement that is visible in the figure of Erika is a latent anti-democratic current. The novel makes it clear that democratic institutions, such as hearings, have failed and that direct action is the only effective way to save the environment. Therefore Erika does not need to convince the crowd with

arguments. All she needs to do is inspire them to action with the battle cry “No more fucking compromise... in defense ziss Mutter Eart!” (1990, 207). “No compromise in defense of Mother Earth” is the slogan of Earth First!, and in this unwillingness to compromise a contempt for slow and painstaking democratic decision-making can be detected. In this undemocratic attitude is a parallel to postmodern cultural critics such as Eric Darian, as I have pointed out earlier. The debate on the justification of illegal action is, of course, older than environmentalism and the most prominent voice for the justification of civil disobedience has been Henry David Thoreau. I once asked Arne Naess, one of the (Norwegian) spiritual fathers of radical environmentalism in the USA, how he assesses the question of the justification of illegal actions in the US and Norway. He argued that it is justified in a big country such as the US because of a loss of democratic control, and that it is unnecessary in a small country such as Norway, where the people have a better chance to control the government (1995). Since the justification of illegal action seems to be based on subjective reasoning, as I would interpret Naess’ comment, the conflict is unlikely to be resolved. What should be pointed out, however, is that contempt for democratic decision-making in combination with anti-intellectualism and racism is a breeding ground for a fascist ideology. Erika, who seems to be a positive life-force, turns out to be the most problematic of Abbey’s figures. In the United States there is a long tradition of mistrust of government authority, from anti-Federalism to Thoreau’s “On Civil Disobedience.” However, today anti-Federalism is associated with reactionary political stances.

Abbey preempts this criticism of radical environmentalism, voicing it through the character of Bernie Mushkin, “old- time Marxist, sectarian revolutionary, tenured professor, academic writer, pedagogue, demagogue” (1990, 202). Mushkin (whose name refers to the social ecologist Murray Bookchin) speaks to the environmentalist crowd and presents a number of arguments against radical environmentalism. First that Earth First! is a synonym for terrorism, that the movement is “fascist, neo-colonialist, and anti-humanitarian” (1990, 202), and that it is nationalistic and xenophobic, “as preached by your official ideologists Hardin<sup>53</sup> and Abbey” (1990, 202). In the last statement the fictional and real-life political levels are indistinguishable. Here Abbey would object because he does not see himself as an official spokesman for any movement, although he knows he is seen as one. When Mushkin points at the ideological shortcomings of biocentrism (which, in its radical form

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<sup>53</sup> Refers to Garrett Hardin, a Human Ecologist who was attacked by the left for his stance on immigration.



would allow the same rights to humans, lions, and bacteria), he is interrupted by a little boy and ridiculed (1990, 203-204). Abbey presents Mushkin, who is the intellectual antagonist for that what Erika stands for, as an obstinate and bitter ideologue and an intellectual with little effectiveness. Whereas “his voice [is] abruptly squeaking into boy-soprano range again” (1990, 203), Erika is depicted as an attractive force: “standing there, regal, tall and slender, rosy, bright-eyed, radiant, lovely as a Nordic flower in her snug T-shirt, her skintight cowgirl jeans” (1990, 205). Mushkin’s intellectualism has no chance against Erika, the life-force whose “beauty was not hers; she was beauty’s; and living what she was, and being what she lived, in essence and appearance one and the same vibrant harmonious whole, she melted every heart” (1990, 205). But all Erika has to do to defuse Mushkin’s intellectual arguments is utter the battle cry “Zee Eart’ She First!” (1990, 205). It is not entirely clear what Abbey intended with this character, but it is possible to read Erika as a warning.

Even though there is an anti-intellectual element in the novel, Abbey is not anti-intellectual but makes fun of Bishop Love’s anti-intellectualism. When Love’s wife protests against his plans to have a twelfth child and fears for her physical and mental health, Love reacts against the notion of mental health: “And that mental health talk [...] that’s part of the Communist international environmental—you hear? Environ-*mental*?—conspiracy. That’s why we made the state shut down that what they called ‘Mental Health’ clinic. That’s why we run them Jew headshrinkers outa the country” (1990, 218, emphasis Abbey’s). Love’s anti-intellectual and racist rant is countered by his wife who defends common sense: “Sometimes I wish you hadn’t done that, Dudley. That Doctor Robinson was a nice man. Everybody liked him. He done some poor women around here a world of good. I know three might of killed theirselves wasn’t for him” (1990, 218). Abbey here presents Love’s anti-intellectual rhetoric as non-commonsensical and destructive. Abbey furthermore presents right-wing activism as a danger when he has Bonnie mention an assault on an environmentalist rally: “There was a raid one night by the Aryan Nation. [...] Or Alien Nation, something like that” (1990, 229). Erika is a mythical figure that opens up questions about who has a claim on natural spaces and about nationality. However, in her depiction there are racist and anti-intellectual overtones that clash with the other characters.

#### 8.4.4 Seldom Seen Smith

Both Bishop Love and Seldom Seen Smith are Mormons, and this means that Mormons are on both sides of the environmental struggle, creating another fault line. In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey presents a surprisingly positive view of Mormons who are

generally very conservative in their political opinions, yes, and old-fashioned in their morality, but despite this or because of this they have the usual virtue of country people: are friendly, hospitable, honest, self-reliant and self-confident. Not very interesting, perhaps, but good to know, good to have as friends and neighbors. (1992a, 237-238)

Abbey points out that the Mormons

built coherent, self-sustaining communities with a vigorous common life in which all could participate, free of any great disparities in wealth [...]. There was even room for the dissenter and nonconformist—every town had a few jack-Mormons, those who smoked tobacco, drank tea or coffee or hard liquor, and perhaps even joined the Democratic Party. (1992a, 237)

Whereas Seldom Seen Smith is such a jack-Mormon living on a marginal farm, Bishop Love represents the forces that dismantle rural communities, lead to social problems and “the symptoms of discontent and desperation with which most Americans are now familiar: from LDS to LSD” (1992a, 238). Whereas the traditional Mormon communities share their fate with the cowboys and blue-collar workers and are either under pressure or have disappeared, Abbey sees two different types evolve from this change. The one is represented by Bishop Love, whose industrial vision will eventually destroy both the land and social coherence of the communities. Seldom Seen Smith, on the other hand, represents a different character: he is politically engaged (he opposes Bishop Love at the hearing on uranium mining), is reflective and has understood that his way of life (farming in remote areas) has become obsolete (see quotation in chapter 7.8 above, “women don’t care for that kinda life anymore. And never did, probly” (1990, 179).

#### 8.4.5 The journalist

The journalist could be seen as Abbey’s alter ego (Abbey worked as an editor for a student newspaper during his student years). The journalist turns up during the Earth First! rally and keeps an intellectual and personal distance from all participants, with the above-

mentioned exception when he is overtaken by the religious force of Erika's speech. He is characterized as an "old buzzard from nowhere who called himself a 'literary journalist' and sometimes appeared at events like this [...] getting his facts wrong but interviewing the prettier women at exhaustive length" (1990, 82). Quigley points out that "the journalist distances himself from the action, neither fully apart nor fully involved, like the narrative voice in general" (1998, 312). Throughout his life Abbey was both distanced from and involved in the environmental movement, and, while writing *Hayduke Lives!*, he was in a very real way distanced from the world since he was dying.

Abbey started his career as a writer during the sixties' youth revolt and its aftermath in the seventies. He always kept a certain distance from the movement, a distance that is also seen in the journalist who does not mingle with the Earth First! crowd, which he describes from the vantage point of a hill overlooking a

motley crude Coxe's army of the malcontent, the discontent, the madly visionary, the vengeful revolutionists, the pipe-smoking field trained deep ecologist, the misty-eyed tree-hugging Nature Lover, the sober conservationist, the native American 1/16<sup>th</sup> Chippewa Mother Earth Goddess [...] the *beer-drinking fun-loving gun-happy trailbusters in sweat-rich camouflage T-shirts and worn-out steel-sole jungle boots*, the zealot-eyed unisexual fun-hating sectarian Marxists in corduroy and workman shirts, the pot-smoking flower kids sagging into middle age [...] *misanthropic redneck pseudo-intellectuals steeped in Thoreau* and Garrett Hardin. (1990, 186, my emphasis)

The aspect that Abbey celebrates in his description of the environmentalists is their colorful variety and their playful creation of identities. Some of those described groups would be very unlike Abbey himself and some of the characters would be similar to the public image of Abbey (the emphasized parts). But even though the mixture of the different groups creates a colorful crowd, Abbey caricatures some groups and their display of self-importance. He mistrusts the outward exaggerated display of self-importance of the type that is best illustrated in the movie "Easy Rider" and remains, as Quigley puts it "neither fully apart nor fully involved." In Abbey's work one again and again sees this dialectics of (often physical) involvement on the one hand and distance on the other, a variation of the "distinct but not separate" theme.

#### 8.4.6 Doc and Bonnie

Both Doc and Bonnie feature in the *Monkey Wrench Gang* and in *Hayduke Lives!* but are depicted differently. In the *Monkey Wrench Gang* Bonnie is a little-developed type, a projection for male desire and a sex partner for both Hayduke and Doc. Although female characters never have been Abbey's main strength, in *Hayduke Lives!* Abbey manages to construct more complex female characters. In *Hayduke Lives!* Doc and Bonnie are married with children, and Abbey narrates their episodes from Bonnie's perspective. Bonnie focuses on elements of daily life such as work, childcare and health. It is not that Bonnie is domesticated, but her life has become more complex than it was in the *Monkey Wrench Gang*. Because they have children they have to be more careful about breaking the law and remain reluctant when Hayduke asks them to participate in environmental sabotage.

Doc has gone from being a cardiac surgeon to being a pediatrician with a significantly lower income who needs all the money he makes for his family. The reader finds out little about his job (which still places him in the middle class). Instead Abbey chooses to focus on their domestic life, which is not fundamentally different from that of the working class, or on classless elements such as the preoccupation with children and ageing. What Abbey has done in *Hayduke Lives!* is to convert the types of the *Monkey Wrench Gang*, the sexy nymphette and the rich doctor who finances sabotage into more believable characters.

#### 8.4.7 The G.E.M.

The antagonist of the mythical figures Erika and Hayduke is a machine, the GEM or Giant Earth Mover, used for road grading, that also has mythical qualities, and Abbey describes it with his usual emphasis: "the Super G.E.M., the 4200-W walking Dragline earth-moving machine. Him. Her. It. The Thing. The Dragon. GOLIATH from GOLGOTHA, the giant from the place of skulls. Tyrannosaurus" (1990, 243). The natural features that lie in the path of the G.E.M. are "a roadless mesa called Lost Eden" and a "plateau called Island in the Sky" (1990, 243). Later the machine is called "an invader from Mars reenacting the War of the Worlds" and "Moloch the insatiable" (1990, 249). What the machine becomes is a pastiche of all the monsters of the cultural memory of Western civilization and an ironic presentation of the machine in the garden-theme. Through the playful excessiveness

of his description of the machine, Abbey takes away some of its threat, converting it into an unreal figure from the world of myth and comic books.

What the mega-machine, symbolic expression of expressway modernism, is primarily out to destroy is not nature but the individual, and Abbey makes it clear throughout his work that he fears de-individualization through technology. It is not so much technology or science as such Abbey deplores; it is the abuse of that technology that leads to a loss of power and control in the sense of Emerson's "Things are in the saddle / and ride mankind" (quoted in Marx 2000, 178) or Thoreau's "some have the pleasures of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon" (1980, 67). The machine's invasion of the garden is an old cultural theme going back to romanticism, but what is original about Abbey is its playful treatment. Hayduke enters the G.E.M. for sabotage and addresses Bishop Love and his team over the loudspeaker:

Now hear this. Now hear this. This here's Goliath speaking, men, master of the fucking world and fucking emperor of the fucking universe. When requesting permission to speak to our imperial fucking majesty, you will sink to your fucking knees, place nose against ground three times, lower pants, and remain bottoms up until recognized. (1990, 261-262, original in capitals)

This is an ironic subversion of the perceived power of industrialism; first of all through the voice of Hayduke, but also through exaggeration and comparing industrial power to feudal authority. One may remember that it was industrialization that swept away feudalism ("imperial majesty"). Through exaggeration Abbey ridicules his enemy and also shows that expressway industrialism is just one more historical reality that seems to be invincible but can be swept away.

It may seem to be problematic that many of Abbey's target readers will be fascinated by heavy machinery and its power. Abbey does not directly counter this fascination but ridicules it. The feminist activist Hayduchess states: "You know the rule ol' buddies: big machines, teensy-weensy wienies. [...] Whoever runnin' that walkin' dragline probly has a poodle's pecker" (1990, 245-246). But he also uses rational arguments against the use of recreational machinery, for example snowmobiles:

[S]nowmobiles five miles to the east, disturbing the peace on the old road [...] Those goggled helmeted space-suited androids, encased within the screaming uproar of their infantile machines, drove themselves onward sealed off from everything but the red

light, exhaust fumes and thrashing treads of the idiot in front of them. [...] The purpose of snowmobile recreation is not to get anywhere, see anybody or understand anything but to generate noise, poison the air, crush vegetation, destroy wildlife, waste energy, promote entropy [...] (1990, 128-129)

Abbey's contempt for off-road vehicles is old, and as a park ranger he actually once shot at a four-wheel-vehicle that was being used illegally in a wildlife preserve. He uses a range of arguments against the use of recreational machinery: first these machines lead to a de-individualization and dehumanization of the user ("androids"); secondly they create noise preventing others from enjoying nature (he made the same argument comparing the motorized use of Lake Powell vs. the non-motorized use of the Glen Canyon, see above). This argument could be called the democratic argument; he points at the wastefulness and destructiveness of snowmobiling (an environmental argument), and he points out at the loss of quality in the use of nature, and he points at the immaturity of the users (infantile machines). Abbey, however, is not an environmental saint and liked his cars (one of them a large Chevrolet convertible), but he kept them to the roads.

Behind the mythical machine, G.E.M., stands an international corporation that is painted in equally inhuman and mythical terms. Smith is reluctant to join Hayduke's fight because he is afraid of the enemy: "They—I mean *It*—It comes from some other world, George. Saturn, maybe. [...] *It* scares me" (1990, 122, emphasis Abbey's). Abbey uses many of the arguments and perceptions that would turn up more than a decade later in the anti-globalization protests. Throughout the book Abbey rants against the Nipponese machinery, and some of the Earth First! slogans are "Syn-Fuels go home. Euro-trash go home. Back to Brussels with Goliath. Save our Grand Canyon. Whose land is this anyhow?" (1990, 238-239, original in capitals). Abbey would have been delighted with the anti-globalization protests, but in this text it also becomes clear how fine the line is between voicing political and environmental concerns against globalization and serving the ingrown sentiments of national chauvinism. I would argue that Abbey here does both, and the reason for that is that his nationalist rhetoric is effective among his target readership. The rants against "Nipponese machines" derive from the popular "Buy American" slogan. Resistance is paralleled to historical precedents of high national symbolic value, "[a]nother Boston Tea Party" (1990, 238).

#### 8.4.8 Mary

Mary is a character that only makes a short appearance once in the novel. She is not involved in the plot, but even though she could be seen as a negligible bystander, she has an important function. She appears towards the end of an action sequence, when Hayduke, dressed as a cleaning lady, dumps nuclear waste into the executive meeting and is then hunted by security guards. Her appearance in the narrative interrupts the flow of the action sequence, and one can assume that if the book is ever used as the basis for a film script, Mary will be cut out. Whereas things happen around her at a frantic pace, she is uninvolved and all she does is ride the elevator, light a cigarette, leave the building after a long workday and think about her friend and lover at home.

In contrast to the mythical characteristics of Hayduke whose anarchistic energy is contrasted with the regulated world of business suits, Mary is an ordinary person in spite of the fact that she is an executive. She rides “her own elevator” and “sank sedately, like an executive goddess in an air conditioned space module” (1990, 36). The elevator that is reserved for executives gives her the insignia of power and provides status, but at a cost. As Abbey does not instrumentalize a dichotomy between environmentalists and industrialists, he does not see the working class and executives as inhabiting opposite worlds of experience.

Despite being an executive, the “junior vice president for Marketing Research,” Mary is glad to be able to go home after being on the job. She “had enough blustering male foolishness for the day” (1990, 36), and is glad to move “[t]oward love and life. True love, real life. So long for another sixteen hours, you foul-breathed oversized blue-suited forever-yammering arseholes” (1990, 36). Mary’s corporate identity lasts for no longer than the job, and already on the way out she feels no more duty towards her company and does not care about what happens with the elevator (which Hayduke uses to escape). Abbey’s portrayal of Mary is friendly and sympathetic, and he dissolves the “us” against “them” dichotomy through showing that the real people in the environmental conflict cannot be reduced to their professional function. It is in private life where weaknesses and doubts and humanity become visible, and this focus on private life, distanced from the actual conflict, creates a more multi-faceted view of the world than is found in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

The character of Mary interrupts the plot at a time when Hayduke's male style of action and adventure dominates. Through her appearance both the reality of male dominated corporate life, the "blustering male foolishness" and the rowdy activism of Hayduke merge and can be seen as two sides of a male coin. Mary is looking forward to her private life:

[S]he slipped out through revolving doors to the crowded five o'clock sidewalk, strode through the mob on elegant heels in swishing nylon to that dark sleek little bar round the corner where her lover waited, her darling, her sweetheart, her little mate, her ingénue, her petite treat, her trim trig tasty little trollop for the night, for the week, for the year, Trixie by name and Trixie by nature. Toward love and life. True love, real life. (1990, 36)

The playful tone of the introduction of a lesbian relationship here is a further instance of Abbey incorporating elements that are unusual for readers of simple action novels and his attempt to include a female perspective.

#### 8.4.9 The FBI agents

The function of the agents in the novel is ambivalent. Superficially, in terms of plot, they are the "bad guys," antagonists of the good environmentalists. The described infiltration of environmental activists' groups by the FBI posed and poses a real danger for activists,<sup>54</sup> and it can be assumed that Abbey supported their position. In the opening of the novel the agents Hoyle and Boyle are depicted as cynical and emotionless, not unlike Hemingway's "The Killers." Like the killers, the agents come from the outside and threaten the local community, creating a level of cynical distrust that was unknown before. The colonel points out that the agents should "remember that we're not playing a humorous game with a handful of jolly pranksters" but are "here on a matter of national security" (1990, 58).

Whatever their function in the plot as "bad guys," the agents are depicted as rednecks who are not unsympathetic. First Abbey shows a human side of Hoyle and Boyle who have to spend a day in a motel: "There might be a Playboy Channel, we could see some T and A. Some basic Western values. There might be a plain-talk straight-talk talk show. Hear the

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<sup>54</sup> A group of radical environmentalists, the "Prescott Four" took *The Monkey Wrench Gang* seriously and engaged in ecosabotage, but were victims of infiltration and sentenced to prison in Prescott, Arizona (<http://outside.away.com/outside/magazine/1096/9610fewe.html> ).



white man's side for a change" (1990, 60). Abbey presents the two as working-class characters, and in the characterization of the two there is both an element of sympathy and identification and an element of irony. Abbey keeps the balance between identifying with his working class characters and subverting them ironically. In the same conversation Hoyle and Boyle talk about their young and naïve Mormon informant Oral Hatch: "Why'd you hire somebody like that Oral? *Oral*, for godsake. What a name. How could anybody do that to their own kid? (1990, 60, italics Abbey's). The intended pun is aimed at the then governor of Utah, Orrin Hatch, whom Southwestern environmentalists saw as their archenemy.<sup>55</sup>

Later in the novel the agents send Oral to the Earth First! rally for surveillance. In their comments on the radical environmental movement they voice the reasons why Abbey keeps his distance from a part of the movement that is dominated by a mixture of old hippies and New Agers. Oral reports to Hoyle and Boyle:

"You wouldn't last five minutes down there. Those people are crazy. [...] Half of them beating on drums while the other half hop around like frogs. [...] Some guys in sportshirts and bolo ties smoking pipes, they might be the weirdest of all, talking about biocentric land ethics. And there is a little bunch called Sparklers and Twinklers [...] and the Twinklers believe you should sort of twirl your hands around in the air" [...] Hatch attempted to illustrate his words with grotesque limp-wristed birdy-like gesticulations [...] Hoyle and Boyle watched him with fascinated contempt. "I feel sick," Boyle said. "Yeah. It's like one of them old army V.D. movies." (1990, 193-194)

Through Oral's eyes Abbey describes the various parts of the movement, some of them he finds ridiculous, some of them may not be too far from himself, others he sees with "fascinated contempt." Abbey does not attempt to streamline the radical environmental movement into a single voice; what he attempts is to include Hoyle and Boyle's commonsensical working-class perspective on the movement. Whereas the agents at their first appearance were characterized as cynical enemies, through the use of humor and irony they become sympathetic and possible figures for identification for the working class target readership. Their ironic remark about "old army V.D. movies" furthermore shows an autobiographical parallel to Abbey. Abbey's alter ego in the semi-autobiographical novel *Fool's Progress*, Henry Lightcap, "loved the V.D. movies" (1990b, 160). Hoyle and

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<sup>55</sup> The name may also be a swipe at the televangelist Oral Roberts from Oklahoma with his "Doctrine of Prosperity," who, in contrast to the idea of predestination, states that faith and prosperity are linked. In 1985 and 1986 he said he would die if he did not raise eight million dollars ([http://encyclozine.com/Oral\\_Roberts](http://encyclozine.com/Oral_Roberts)).

Boyle's cynicism is softened into irony, and their plain-spoken humor contrasts with the self-importance and spirituality of parts of the environmental movement.

The fact that Abbey keeps an ironic distance from the Earth First! environmentalists and sympathizes with Hoyle and Boyle is, besides Abbey's working class sympathies, also an expression of a cultural split in the radical environmental movement. The redneck type of environmentalist that Hayduke and Seldom Seen Smith represent is being replaced by more countercultural activists. In the environmentalist magazine *High Country News*, this cultural split was discussed in 1996:

Such schisms are nothing new to Earth First! The first widely publicized split happened at the tail end of the 1980s. As the group's unofficial membership swelled throughout that decade, new converts saw connections between radical environmentalism and traditional leftist politics. Civil rights and labor, among other things, were added to the mix. This year's rendezvous workshops treated issues as diverse as safer sex, alternatives to monogamy and Mexico's Zapatista rebels. According to Howie Wolke, who along with Foreman, Mike Roselle and Bart Kohler founded Earth First!, the broadening of the group's agenda forced many early members out. These "rednecks for wilderness," he says, had no use for the broad social agenda of the counterculture types who came to embody the radical environmental movement. (Okon and Barnett 1996)

Abbey's characters represent a rural working class type in the early and little organized radical environmental movement. The Earth First! meeting that Abbey describes is also an ambivalent expression of both his cultural alienation from the movement and his wish to integrate these different cultural currents.

#### 8.4.10 The colonel

The FBI-colonel has little in common with the other agents. He is quiet, educated, and homosexual. He leaves his agents because he has a date with a "certain United States Congressman from Utah and he had discovered [...] that they had more in common than merely their imperial politics; from urinals to teak-paneled sauna, romance blossomed" (1990, 150). The colonel is transformed in the course of the novel in a different way from Hoyle and Boyle. As with Hoyle and Boyle, the colonel starts out a hardboiled cynic, but develops a growing skepticism and existential outlook that characterize him as an intellectual. Even though he stresses the dangers of the environmental movement and the necessity of fighting it throughout the book, he is the one who shows a touch of humanity

at the end and releases Oral from prison, even though he had changed sides. Later he saves Hayduke in the final shoot-out and lets him escape. He does this, not because he has become another follower of the mythical environmentalists, Hayduke and Erika, he does it because he doubts the meaning of his whole mission and ultimately of life.

As long as he is together with the other agents he shows no sign of doubt and explains the dangers of the environmental movement: “They’re worse than terrorists. These people attack property. Property, Oral.” (1990, 148). However, when the colonel later is alone, it becomes clear that the reason for his unforgiving viewpoint is to suppress existential doubt. Walking home he develops a migraine: “Never mind, there was no pain he could not surmount by scorn alone” (1990, 150). The colonel’s scorn in this Camus-quotation expresses his existential doubt. Then the pain sets in and “he raised both hands to the gray, leaking, sulfur-smelling sky and cried out aloud, ‘Man is a useless passion,’ [...] his face uplifted to the hidden stars.” The Camus and Sartre quotations identify him as an intellectual. Trying to divert his doubt by attaching himself to a ‘hardboiled law-and-order agent’ self-image is a strategy that has worked so far, but he is showing the first signs of strain.

The colonel’s first breakdown that is visible to the other characters is when he releases Oral from prison—but the colonel has enough power so that he does not have to explain his decision. At the end of the novel, however, he shoots at his own agents, helps Hayduke to escape and then commits suicide. After Hayduke has escaped the colonel is alone for some time at the beach, and here the tone of the novel changes from being humorous and action-filled to being introverted and existential:

The Colonel too was wounded. He watched the slowly receding form of the swimmer—easy target—and his wake upon the moonlight. The man, the men, the birds, the dolphins, now here, now gone. That lightless pirate ship out there would soon be gone as well. This very shore and coast would slide, rise, fall, the sea itself become an enclosed desert lake, turning to salt, shrinking century by century beneath the glare of a pitiless desert sun. (1990, 304)

The tone of this scene conflicts with the rest of the novel. However, Abbey has brought in surprising and seemingly unexplained bits of existentialism into his more action-dominated texts, as the example of the threatening forest in *The Brave Cowboy* shows. The quotation above, the sudden shift from the action of shooting to the geological perspective has a

parallel Abbey's essay "Dust—A Movie" in which he employs a similar technique of a suddenly shifting time frame and resulting shift of perspective from human to existential. The above quotation is also a reminder that one of Abbey's literary role models is Robinson Jeffers. Jeffers often shifts his perspective from human to existential, as in his poem "Carmel Point." The human perspective of enjoying the "Unbroken field of poppy and lupine walled with clean / cliffs" shifts to an existential one with a geological time frame: "the image of the pris- / tine beauty / lives in the very grain of the granite" (1965, 102).

What is the reason for this existential mood? The colonel recites a poem by Titus Lucretius: "Our terrors and our darkness of mind / Must be dispelled then not by sunlight... / but by insight into nature, and a scheme / Of systematic contemplation" (1990, 304). Titus' long poem is a celebration of the human mind dispelling myths and gods through scientific insight. But the price for dispelling old fears and gods is existential lostness, since scientific insight and rational thought do not provide metaphysical meaning. The colonel accepts his non-attachment and celebrates the beauty and peace of the meaningless nature surrounding him: "The moon, the sea, the quiet surf. He smiled with tragic resignation. The peace and splendor of this scene—his scene—led him to remember another and much later poet, another and much simpler poem: 'It is a beauteous evening, calm and free. / The holy time is quiet as a nun...'" (1990, 304). After reciting Wordsworth's poem he kills himself.<sup>56</sup>

The suicide of the colonel is not a defeat but the logical endpoint of an existential development that is equally valid as the more life-oriented view of Hayduke and Erika. In killing himself at the moment of an intense experience of beauty and clarity of vision, the colonel's suicide parallels that of Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Discussing Edna's suicide, Paula Treichel states that "[t]he self asserts itself and in doing so undoes itself. Suicide is perhaps the most profoundly ambivalent of all human acts" (Walker 1993, 328). The colonel's suicide is such an assertion of both the world and of the self. Both

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<sup>56</sup> The fate of the colonel is an illustration of Herman Tennessen's claim that "[p]hilosophy and suicide have always been typical upper-middle-class phenomena. Both presuppose some minimum of leisure time and a certain level of education" (1966, 184). However, the view that there is a higher prevalence of suicide in the classes that have more leisure time is doubtful and seems not to be supported by evidence. See for example Alvin Powell (2002) who reports the opposite. Tennessen may be right that an existential world-view is associated with higher social class, but this seems not to affect actual suicidal behavior. Abbey often played with suicidal thoughts, especially in his journals, but was aware of that these thoughts were not serious.

Edna and the colonel feel estranged from human society, experience a confirmation of the self in nature (the sea), and confirm their personal independence through suicide.

The colonel's existential world-view is not opposed to life-affirming positions. When he looks at the dead agents he thinks: "poor dumb loyal fools, how could mere hatred have brought you so far, so terribly far, from the innocence of childhood and the sweetness of youth? You have been terribly wronged; you shall be avenged" (1990, 304). Then the colonel looks at the swimming Hayduke and it is clear that it is Hayduke, not the colonel, who will be responsible for the revenge. In this piece Abbey's dilemma can be seen—his philosophical views, which parallel those of the existentialists Jeffers or Zapffe, are not appealing for most people, and in order to reach a larger audience and to be politically effective, it is necessary to promote a life-affirming stance. This is also the reason why there are only homoeopathic doses of existential thought in this novel aimed at a broad readership. But what exactly shall be avenged? It is at the commonly felt need for revenge in this book where parallels between the life-affirming and the existential view become clear. The colonel complains about lost innocence and "sweetness of youth." What the colonel here points at is also similar to the reason for Edna's discontent in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Discussing Chopin's novel, Cynthia Griffin Wolff states that "[i]t is the haunting memory of this evanescent state which Freud defines as 'Oceanic feeling,' the longing to recapture that sense of oneness and suffused sensuous pleasure—even, perhaps, the desire to be reincorporated into the safety of preexistence" (in Walker 255-256). The sense of oneness that many nature writers seek can only be reached through abandoning human distinction in death. For the living it remains impossible. The colonel's suicide at the ocean can be read as Abbey's comment on the impossible attempt to overcome human alienation from nature.

#### 8.4.11 Oral Hatch

Oral is a caricature of a Middle American. His IQ is exactly 100, upon which Abbey ironically comments: "Only the average [...] are truly exceptional" (1990, 51). Oral is a Mormon missionary from a backward region of the US who had been sent to Norway. It is a reality that redneck country boys are sent into the world to proselytize, and it is also a reality that they are used as infiltrators. In Norway Oral is raped by Erika in an ironic

reversal of the “lay of the land” theme: Oral is raped by Mother Nature. That Oral falls under the spell of Erika is an ironic reversal of the cultural imperialism inherent in being a missionary. Oral’s weakness makes him sympathetic, and his moral dilemma of trying to be loyal to both the FBI and Erika lets him develop the necessary strength in the end to make the right choice and to change sides.

### 8.5 Conclusion

Through his character Virginia Abbey shows that the working class can appreciate the aesthetics of the desert. He furthermore shows that the desert is more than an ecosystem but a space of experience and adventure that can be appropriated by all classes. Whereas nature writing is mainly a middle class affair, Abbey introduces a class perspective to the genre. Abbey’s working class perspective does not appear to be currying favor with the target reader because of Abbey’s own working class background and his respect for the characters on all sides of the environmental struggle. Working class elements in *Hayduke Lives!* are the irreverent language and humor, the mild ridicule and distance with which he sees middle class environmentalists, the stress on action and entertainment in the novel and the focus on the everyday problems of ordinary people. Some of the elements (language and action) could be said to appeal more to a male blue-collar segment of the working class; others appeal to the working class in general. The most important difference from middle class environmentalism is the different ground of environmental activism. What is threatened through capitalism and a global economy is not just the environment but also the small elements of self-determination that remain for a local working class population. Abbey particularly addresses the jobs vs. the environment-problem and shows this conflict between short-term gains and long-term losses both on the societal and the personal levels. One of the losses is the loss of power that affects both the working class and the middle class (e.g. Bishop Love).

Although Abbey appeals to his readers, he encapsulates challenging and subversive thoughts into a conventional language. These challenges are aimed at subverting the male dominated conservative culture of his target readers. Through Abbey’s irony and exaggeration it becomes visible that he accepts many of the changes that industrial and urban society bring to the West (such as women in traditionally male jobs).

Industrialization and the modern society are not seen as threats: rather certain aspects of modern developments—such as loss of democratic control and power, growing inequality, and centralization of power—are criticized.

Abbey's solutions to the environmental and social problems that international capitalism brings are not convincing. The problematic aspect in Abbey is his absolute reliance on a specific American version of individualism and anti-institutionalism, and furthermore there are elements of racism, chauvinism, and anti-intellectualism in his novel. Although his mistrust of institutions is understandable in an American context where institutions hardly represent the working class, it is questionable whether anarchist methods of resistance can have a lasting effect on American political culture. It may be said that Abbey's strength lies in the voicing of a working class view of the environment, addressing a readership traditionally skeptical towards environmentalism, whereas his solutions are less effective because they remain entangled in the same mythology of individualism that spawned a particularly aggressive form of capitalism. Nevertheless, with *Hayduke Lives!* Abbey managed to write a complex and challenging text that should not be neglected by criticism, exactly because it is so different from conventional nature writing.

## 9. *Desert Solitaire*: An Exploration of Natures

### 9.1 Introduction

The publication of *Desert Solitaire* in 1968 converted Abbey from a marginal literary figure into a well-known author who has ever since been associated with nature writing. The timing of the publication helped the popularity of the book and “seemed to voice much of the 60s spirit of environmental protest and rebellion against the military-industrial complex” (Aton 1981, 3). Even though *Desert Solitaire* comes closer to nature writing than Abbey’s other books, it is entertaining, with a “bantering, self-deprecating, yet often hyperbolic” (Lyon 2001, 112) style. *Desert Solitaire* shares some parallels with *Walden* and founded Abbey’s fame as the “Thoreau of the American West.” Abbey never comprehended the success of the book and even refused to permit publication of excerpts from it for some time (Temple 1993). The idea for *Desert Solitaire* came from Abbey’s publisher who proposed he write a book “about his camping trips” rather than a new novel, to which Abbey replied “gee, that is easy” (Temple 1993). In general, the texts Abbey wrote in an offhand manner are better than his fiction, which has a more labored feel, which is ironic for someone who saw himself as a novelist.

According to Lyon, the central quest of *Desert Solitaire* is “to come into contact with the desert, to know the desert if possible, to learn there something about life in general—‘what it had to teach,’ as Thoreau said in *Walden*” (2001, 112). Philippon argues that non-anthropocentrism is one of the main features of *Desert Solitaire* and that the book “concerns itself principally with the landscape itself and with the nonhuman inhabitants of that landscape” (2004, 234). Critics agree on the fact that the main theme of the book is Abbey’s contact with the natural world. The question remains which form this contact takes, whether it is a merging with the natural world or a human exposure to it. One of the few critics of Abbey who see not the wish for union but for distinction at the heart of *Desert Solitaire* is James Aton, who states in his 1981 thesis: “Abbey’s most intimate connection with Thoreau lies in his use of a half-year natural cycle—April to October—to frame his narrative experience” (1981, 6) but argues that the main difference between Thoreau and Abbey is found in their opposing views on nature: “While transcendence lay



at the heart of Thoreau's nineteenth century view of man and nature, death, paradox and separation are the by-words of the modern situation according to Abbey. In other words, while he adopts certain attitudes of the Romantic nature tradition, he grounds them in a contemporary mode" (1981, 42).

*Desert Solitaire* and *Walden* describe how their respective authors spend two years in relative solitude in nature. Abbey describes his work as a fire lookout and several of his trips into the desert. The book is not Nature Writing in the pastoral sense; even though there are many descriptions of nature in the book and most of the settings are desert spaces, Abbey does not aim at reconciliation or merging with nature; on the contrary, the desert intensifies the feeling of solitude, as the title indicates. The main theme of *Desert Solitaire* is not the overcoming of separation but a distinction that is intensified through the physicality of the desert. Although *Desert Solitaire* is an environmentalist text to some degree, its main aim is not to defend nature as such but the heterotopian quality of the desert, its openness of signification. *Desert Solitaire* is also a travel guide, providing detailed markers for readers who want to explore the Southwest.

## 9.2 The notion of distinction

Dana Phillips sees nature writers as being trapped between the dichotomies of culture and nature, word and thing, inner and outer, self and other, literature and science. The main motivation behind nature writing is then to "try to reconcile these dichotomies" (2003, 206). An example of the theme of reconciliation in and through nature writing is Terry Tempest Williams who expresses a "yearning to heal the fragmentation and divisions that separate us from nature, that separate us from ourselves, that separate us from God or the mysteries" and claims that it is possible to "make peace with our contradictory natures" in nature (quoted in Phillips 2003, 220). Abbey, however, is not a writer of reconciliation; as a political writer he "likes to keep things stirred up," and he conceptualizes nature as an entity that resists attempts to assign purpose to it and is marked by a lack of control. According to Aton, "in *Desert Solitaire* [Abbey] acknowledges the human tendency to find transcendent value in nature, but he assiduously fights that anthropomorphic tendency" (1981, 6). In Abbey, the external world constantly interferes with the human attempt to create markers and meaning. The basis for such a perception of nature is the notion of

distinction. Human beings, human culture, and human individuals do not share a common purpose with nature. In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey expresses this notion of distinction: "I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate" (1992a, 6). Abbey does not attempt to reconcile humanity with nature, neither in the form of humanizing nature or naturalizing humanity. The naked self and the non-human world are distinct entities, and Abbey's creative energy derives from their distinction.

Abbey's use of the term "merge" does not denote dissolution but refers to a close contact between nature and humanity. This conceptualization of concurrent distinction and physical proximity is similar to Calvin's idea of distinction but not separation. During his rafting trip down Glen Canyon Abbey describes very close physical proximity:

We are merging, molecules getting mixed. Talk about inter-subjectivity—we are both taking on the coloration of river and canyon, our skin as mahogany as the water on the shady side, our clothing coated with silt, our bare feet caked with mud and tough as lizard skin, our whiskers bleached as the sand—even our eyeballs, what little you can see of them between the lids, have taken on a coral-pink, the color of the dunes. And we smell, I suppose, like catfish. (1992a, 185)

Even though the physical proximity goes down to the level of body and molecules, this does not imply to question the notion of distinction.

An illustration of the concept of distinction but not separation is Abbey's relationship to gopher snakes. He domesticates one of the snakes, keeps it first in his trailer and later around his trailer to keep the rattlesnakes away. There is a closeness between the human and the animal: "When I take him outside into the wind and sunshine his favorite place seems to be inside my shirt, where he wraps himself around my waist and rests on my belt" (1992a, 19). Abbey is aware of the fact that the feeling of closeness is one-sided: "We are compatible. From *my point of view*, friends" (1992a, 19, my emphasis). Even though there is a close physical proximity, Abbey knows that the distinction between the two, which is expressed in the fact that only one of them is able to conceptualize friendship, cannot be overcome. The reason for the snake to seek proximity is not friendship but, as Abbey points out, the fact that it is a cold-blooded animal which uses his body as a source of heat. The contact with other gopher snakes is more clearly marked by distinction. Abbey observes two snakes close to his trailer who apparently perform a mating dance: "Like a

living caduceus they wind and unwind about each other in undulant, graceful, perpetual motion, moving slowly across a dome of sandstone. Invisible but tangible as music is the passion which joins them—sexual? combative? both?” (1992a, 20). Abbey is aware of his unavoidable anthropomorphism:

How can I descend into such anthropomorphism? Easily—but is it, in this case, entirely false? Perhaps not. I am not attributing human motives to my snake and bird acquaintances. I recognize that when and where they serve purposes of mine they do so for beautifully selfish reasons of their own. (1992a, 21)

Abbey shows that anthropomorphism is possibly unavoidable but remains a description of the human interest, not of the animal, even though there is an element of shared physicality. The notion of distinction remains intact even in his anthropomorphic reflections.

Although the worlds of animals and humans are not separate in terms of physicality, their distinction stems from a different source. Abbey quotes Whitman’s description of animals:

They do not sweat and whine about their condition  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins (1992a, 21)

It is the ability for self-reflection and the search for meaning that distinguishes humans and animals. One form of reflection is found in the scientific attitude that is, according to Abbey, as old as humanity. He writes about how Indians have used hallucinogenic natural drugs: “How could they have made such a discovery without poisoning themselves to death nobody knows [...]. We must concede that science is nothing new, that research, empirical logic, the courage to experiment are as old as humanity” (1992a, 29). Distinction does not necessarily affirm humanity’s superiority in the world: on the contrary, distinction is based on an ultimately futile search for meaning. Jeffers expresses this notion of humanity that searches for an unattainable meaning in these words: “the animal that despises itself / is man’s distinction” (2000(4), 537). Affirming humanity’s distinction is a two-step process, as Abbey explains in “Dead Man at Grandview Point,” an essay about a search for a missing tourist which Abbey took part in as a ranger. When the tourist is found dead, Abbey reflects about death: “The plow of mortality drives through the stubble, turns over rocks and sod and weeds to cover the old, the worn-out, the husks, shells, empty seedpods, and sapless roots, clearing the field for the next crop. A ruthless, brutal process—but clean and beautiful” (1992a, 214). The first step is to be able to understand and to reflect upon death, but the second step is to fight against it:

A part of our nature rebels against this truth and against that other part which would accept it. A second truth of equal weight contradicts the first, proclaiming through art, religion, philosophy, science and even war that human life, in some way not easily definable, is significant and unique and supreme beyond all the limits of reason and nature. And this second truth we can deny only at the cost of denying our humanity. (1992a, 214-215)

The conflict that Abbey describes is not only a conflict between nature and humanity but between the different natures of humanity.

Don Scheese claims that “*Desert Solitaire* represents the correspondence of man and environment, a kind of literary environmental determinism” (1996, 110). I argue that the book does not represent correspondence but is marked by a concurrent feeling of physicality and distinction. There is nothing deterministic about Abbey’s text; on the contrary, it is a celebration of the openness of signification. Scheese’s interpretation is biased by his romantic (he sees romanticism as exclusively re-contextualizing) preconceptions about nature, as when he describes “Abbey’s passionate desire for sanctuary from civilization [...] in which time and the forces of history float by, leaving him undisturbed during an idyllic retreat” (1996, 110). Abbey’s retreat is heterotopian, not idyllic, and his writing is marked by distinction, not by “the quest for oneness with the nonhuman world” (Scheese 1996, 111). Abbey’s notion of distinction also influences his aesthetic sense; therefore he often mentions “the abyss”—literally the abyss of canyons but metaphorically the abyss that distinguishes humanity. The main element of the abyss is the presence of death, as when Abbey speculates how the missed tourist may have disappeared: “It is not impossible that our man [...] eased himself over, deliberately, in broad daylight, drawn into the void by the beauty and power of his own terror” (1992a, 210). Abbey then quotes Nietzsche: “Gaze not too long into the abyss, lest the abyss gaze into thee” (1992a, 210)—which refers not to reconciliation with nature but to the second step of distinction, rebellion against death. The abyss, not correspondence, is the central metaphor in *Desert Solitaire*.

A scene that parallels Abbey’s ambivalence towards merging with nature is found in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. When Edna goes swimming in the ocean for the first time, she experiences both freedom and a premonition of her later death:

She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself. [...] But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome. A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. (1993, 46-47)

Swimming in the ocean both heightens the sense of self and the sense of distinction and threatens its undoing through merging which results in death. It is the closeness of existential nature, symbolized through the “moonlit sky,” not the merging with it that allows freedom; coming too close does not provide freedom but “enfeebled her senses.”

In his description of Delicate Arch Abbey reminds the reader that there is an external world, and that the desert (like Chopin’s ocean) is a space where its physicality can be experienced: “Delicate Arch has the curious ability to remind us—like rock and sunlight and wind and wilderness—that *out there* is a different world, older and greater and deeper by far than ours, a world which surrounds us and sustains the little world of men as sea and sky surround and sustain a ship” (1992a, 37, emphasis Abbey’s). The experience of external reality does not take the form of correspondence, rather it unsettles established notions of reality: “If Delicate Arch has any significance it lies [...] in the power of the odd and unexpected to startle the senses and surprise the mind out of their ruts of habit, to compel us into a reawakened awareness of the wonderful—that which is full of wonder” (1992a, 36-37).

In the chapter on Calvinism I have discussed Abbey’s inability to communicate with the juniper tree and would this regard this scene as crucial for understanding Abbey’s relationship to the external world: “Two living things on the same earth, respiring in a common medium, we contact one another but without direct communication” (1992a, 27). Abbey is not only unable to merge or communicate with the external world, but the experience of distinction is central to his motivation to expose himself to the physicality of that world. Aton discusses the juniper tree episode and states that “otherness is all he can perceive about the relation between man and nature, yet, ultimately this more than suffices. Correspondence and transcendence are not necessary in a finite world” (1981, 47). If communication, reconciliation, or the urge to merge with nature define Nature Writing, then Abbey does not belong to that genre. Don Scheese discusses Annie Dillard’s attempt

to merge with the natural world: “she questions whether she can ever really know and become one with the microscopic world she lives in” (1996, 36). Abbey’s answer to this would be a flat “no,” as he demonstrates with the example of a juniper tree.

Abbey is not only unable to communicate with a living being such as the juniper tree, also more abstract nature, such as the universe, escapes him:

The wind stops, completely, as I finish my lunch. I strip and lie back in the sun, high on Tukuhnikivats, with nothing between me and the universe but my thoughts. Deliberately I compose my mind, quieting the febrile buzzing of the cells and circuits, and strive to open my consciousness directly, nakedly to the cosmos. Under the influence of cosmic rays I try for cosmic intuitions—and end up earthbound as always, with my vision not of the universal but of a small and mortal, particular, unique, and disparate... her smile, her eyes in the firelight, her touch. (1992a, 227)

Like in the episode with the juniper tree, Abbey attempts to reach a state of correspondence with the external world and fails. Although the external world is physically present through the location and the rays of the sun, it does not mean that the spheres of personal knowledge (or markers) and external reality merge. On the contrary: exposure to external reality intensifies the sense of distinction and humanity as Abbey’s vision reaches for the cosmos and ends up dreaming of a human touch. The desert here functions as a heterotopian space, creating a sense of tranquility and focus that makes this reflection possible. When Abbey descends from the plateau he reaches a steep snowfield which he slides down. Again Abbey exposes himself to physicality, this time in the form of gravity. In a daring maneuver (“Things are out of control at this point but fortunately the snowfield begins to level off” (1992a, 229)) he slides down and manages to remain unhurt. The sheer physicality of the snowfield enhances his sense of distinction.

The reason for Abbey’s sense of distinction is not that he conceptualizes a harsh nature whereas other nature writers see nature as benevolent. Whereas Abbey’s juniper tree is benevolent, Annie Dillard describes the killing of a frog by a water bug before she wonders whether she can merge with that world. The wish to merge with even a partially hostile nature is also seen in David Rothenberg who discusses Thoreau’s trip up Mount Katahdin where he meets with a hostile nature: “It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor wasteland. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth [...]. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific, – not his Mother Earth that we have heard of” (Thoreau in Rothenberg, n.d.). Rothenberg accepts

the “dark side” of Thoreau but does not see it as distinct from humanity; on the contrary, according to Rothenberg the depiction of harsh nature does not cancel the wish for reconciliation and harmony: “The wild barrens of such a mountain are chillingly inhuman, while at the same time touching us deep inside our own human selves, as a weight in the gut somehow proves that the wild within belongs here” (n.d.). Rothenberg argues from a deep ecological position that assumes the unity of humanity and nature. There is, however, no need to create unity or harmony, neither between humanity and nature nor between the different (material, animal and human) natures of human beings. Abbey’s sense of distinction does not stem from the wish to isolate himself from a harsh nature but from his existential insight into the incompatibility of the different natures.

Distinction and the feeling of apartness are crucial for Abbey’s aesthetic perception. He discusses his taste in music and the different spatial connotations he has for different types of music, associating, for example, Debussy with forest glades and jazz with indoor clubs:

In the desert I am reminded of something quite different—the bleak, thin-textured work of men like Berg, Schoenberg, Ernst Krenek, Webern and the American, Elliot Carter. Quite by accident, no doubt, although both Schoenberg and Krenek lived part of their lives in the Southwest, their music comes closer than any other I know to representing the apartness, the otherness, the strangeness of the desert. Like certain aspects of this music, the desert is also a-tonal, cruel, clear, inhuman, neither romantic nor classical, motionless and emotionless, at one and the same time—another paradox—both agonized and deeply still. (1992a, 255)

One has to remember that Abbey grew up in the forested and agricultural landscape of the Appalachians. When he came to the Southwest for the first time he was immediately taken with the harsh landscape there because it appealed to his aesthetics of distinction. In the desert the different natures, inanimate, animate, and human are most clearly distinct. The quotation above is followed by an explanation of what the harsh music and landscape resemble: “Like death? Perhaps. And perhaps that is why life nowhere appears so brave, so bright, so full of oracle and miracle as in the desert” (1992a, 255).

One of the central and most disturbing scenes in *Desert Solitaire* is Abbey’s killing of a rabbit. While he is having a rest in the desert he asks himself: “Suppose [...] you were out herehungry, starving, no weapon but your bare hands. What would you do?” (1992, 33). He then spots a cottontail rabbit and kills it with a stone. He does not see his act as hunting: “A sportsman is one who gives his quarry a chance to escape to with its life. This is known as

fair play, or sportsmanship. Animals have no sense of sportsmanship” (1992, 33). After killing the rabbit he is at first shocked by the scene, but not for long: “I try but cannot feel any sense of guilt. I examine my soul: white as snow. Check my hands: not a trace of blood. No longer do I feel so isolated from the sparse and furtive life around me, a stranger from another world. I have entered into this one” (1992, 34).

As Don Scheese points out, many readers have struggled with Abbey’s rabbit scene in *Desert Solitaire* and some reject the entire book because of the scene. Scheese interprets the scene as an extreme case of Abbey’s biocentrism: “Perhaps Abbey reverts too far back to our wild ancestry here, offending more civilized types. He thus extends the pastoral into new, unexplored territories of temperament. The implication for some readers may be that biocentrism can be taken only so far, if in the process we lose our distinctly human traits of compassion, mercy, and justice” (1996, 112). The latter viewpoint contradicts the former one, and if one tries to see the scene in the light of biocentrism or the pastoral, it has to remain enigmatic. Abbey’s experimental killing of the rabbit is a temporary regression into the animal world, into the world of, for example, a centipede with its “single-minded devotion to only three ideas: capturing, killing, devouring. Product of a hostile environment it knows no higher law” (Abbey 1991c, 63). However, the very temporariness of Abbey’s drifting into a world devoid of higher laws confirms his human distinction. It is a perfect illustration of the theme of *distinctio sed non separatio*. It demonstrates the distinct natures of humanity and the impossibility of reconciling them.

The killing of the rabbit could also be seen as a gratuitous act, similar to Meursault’s killing of an Arab in Camus’ *The Outsider*. Eagleton points out that pure freedom is also the freedom to kill (2003, 106) and that a gratuitous act can be performed solely to prove one’s freedom, i.e. one’s distinction as a human being. That killing is an anti-social act is not relevant in this case since “[t]rue freedom means divesting yourself of the world, not engaging with it” (Eagleton 2003, 219). The killing of the rabbit indeed confirms Abbey’s humanity, although only indirectly. The fact that the act causes the reader to feel moral outrage confirms moral standards. However, Abbey states that the point of the experiment was to divest himself of his humanity and to act like an animal. And as an animal Abbey would have had no choice but to kill, and therefore the act would be morally irrelevant. Therefore the transgression of boundaries does not happen at the moment of killing but at the moment where he decides to strip himself of humanity. This act confirms his freedom



because only as a human being is it possible to switch to a different state. Aton, on the other hand, interprets the rabbit episode not as a temporary shift into animal nature but as a permanent change of personality: “As a part now of the natural and eternal processes of predator and prey, Abbey qualifies himself to talk about the destruction of earth” (1981, 61). This statement is self-contradictory: it is slipping into the “processes of predator and prey” that made the destructive act possible. Portraying the acceptance of one’s animal side as a prerequisite for an environmental consciousness is turning things on its head; as Abbey points out, “[t]he idea of wilderness preservation is one of the fruits of civilization” (1991c, 229).

Abbey’s rabbit experiment can be compared to his reflection on the relationship between rabbit and owl:

The horned owl may be the natural enemy of the rabbit but surely the rabbit is the natural friend of the horned owl. The rabbit feeds the owl. One can imagine easily the fondness, the sympathy, the genuine affection with which the owl regards the rabbit before rending it into edible portions. (1992a, 98)

The terms “fondness” and “sympathy” sound strange in this quotation because they belong to the human sphere. Sympathy and fondness are terms that express a personal interest in the human sphere, and using them in outside of that sphere is ironic. It is furthermore notable that only the owl feels sympathy: Its state of interest, namely to get a meal, is diametrically opposed to that of the rabbit whose interest it is to avoid the predator. As it is absurd for a human being to feel disinterested sympathy towards all other human beings, it is absurd to assume a common state of interest among different animals. The only communality lies in the fact that humans, owls, and rabbits pursue interests at all: this is another way of saying that they are alive. For Abbey being aware of these interests implies also being aware of the differences. A similar ironic rendering of different perspectives and different interests is employed in a description of a rainfall followed by a short-lived blossoming of life. The plants and insects will die soon, but after a new rainfall the scene will appear identical to the human observer: “Nothing had changed but the personnel, a normal turnover, and the contours of the watercourse, that not much” (1992a, 121). Abbey here ironically describes a nature in human terms, but where individual interests and individual existence—which are central for human beings—have little currency.

The natural unity that Abbey describes is not one of reconciliation between the natures but their physical proximity. The tension between distinction and proximity influences Abbey's aesthetic sense as in this description of the desert: "each rock and shrub and tree, each flower, each stem of grass, diverse and separate, vividly isolate, yet joined each to every other in a unity which generously includes me and my solitude as well" (1992a, 99). Abbey is aware of the fact that each conceptualization of the extra-human world means a degree of anthropomorphism, and this is how his description is followed up:

Or so it seems at the moment, as my fire dies to a twist of smoke and a heap of rubies, and for a moment I think I've almost caught a falling star: there is no mystery, there's only paradox, the incontrovertible union of contradictory truths. A falling star which melts into vapor as I grasp it, which flows through my fingers like water, like smoke. (1992a, 99)

Abbey ironically acknowledges his human perspective ("Or so it seems to me"). Although external reality can be marked, it cannot be appropriated easily, except in a temporary manner, and extra-human natures remain distinct ("incontrovertible union"). Even though external reality is experienced physically, its conceptualization or marking is invariably human and anthropomorphic, like "a fallen star that melts into vapor as I grasp it." In the following description there is also a tension between physicality and distinction:

I listen for signals from the sun—but that distant music is too high and pure for the human ear. I gaze at the tree and receive no response. I scrape my bare feet against the sand and rock under the table and am comforted by their solidity and resistance. I look at the cloud. (1992a, 136)

Whereas sun and tree remain distant, through his body Abbey is able to experience the sheer physicality of external reality.

It is not easy to place Abbey because he so often confuses his readers. In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey states that he would "rather kill a man than a snake" (1992a, 17), echoing a similar statement by Jeffers (who would rather kill a man than a hawk). Does this mean that Abbey is a biocentrist or an anti-humanist? I argue that this is not the case and that the quotation is an example of Abbey's playful and contradictory rhetoric. On the page following the quotation he describes what he did when he found a rattlesnake in his trailer. He removes the snake and carries it away, warning it that "if I catch you around the trailer again I'll chop your head off" (1992a, 18). Since the snake turns up again, Abbey keeps his promise and kills the snake. In order to avoid this problem with rattlesnakes he later domesticates a

gopher snake, which is harmless to humans but keeps other snakes away. Abbey does not cultivate a moral relationship to nature but one that is dominated by his interests.

### 9.2.1. *The morality of distinction: The Husk family*

Although Aton acknowledges Abbey's skepticism towards transcendence and correspondence ("otherness is all he can perceive about the relation between man and nature"), he introduces the notion of harmony between different natures through the existential back door. Aton interprets *Desert Solitaire* in a somewhat paradoxical way, on the one hand acknowledging the otherness of nature, on the other re-introducing correspondence: "Because of man's limited role in the ecosystem, he must not only accept the possibility of sudden and unexpected doom, but must value it as part of the complex system of death and rebirth" (1981, 56). Aton goes on to argue that man's arrogance in conquering nature with science is part of the "cancer cell ideology" (1981, 56) that Abbey criticizes. This argument is, however, based on a narrow reading of Abbey as a pastoral anti-modernist. I think that Aton here is afraid of the consequences of his own argument. Once he accepts notions of otherness and questions correspondence, he should accept the notion that the human and natural spheres can conflict, and that particularly the human drive to find meaning in nature is disappointed. First stripping nature of its romantic anthropomorphic quality but retaining a notion of harmony between the human and natural spheres undermines humanity and would render Abbey an anti-humanist.

Aton illustrates his point with Abbey's statement that the death of the "Dead Man at Grandview Point" was "[a] ruthless, brutal process—but clean and beautiful" (Abbey quoted in Aton 1981, 57), and argues that for Abbey "this kind of death is both the final stage of one natural process and the beginning of another" (Aton 1981, 57). Indeed, there are two processes or rather two natures involved in the death of the man. The man's human existence comes to an end, and biological and geological natures go on. Shifting into a non-human perspective, his death can be called "beautiful," but from a human perspective it remains "brutal." Death marks a moment of antagonism between the different natures, and claiming that nothing has changed because one process is followed by another is to disregard the distinction between the processes. Abbey makes the point that the man had to die sometime and that a death in the desert may be more peaceful or aesthetically appealing

than dying in a hospital bed; death itself, however, remains a defeat, not a harmonious transition from one process into another. Aton claims that to “recognize and to accept the brutal side of nature [...] is an essential aspect of Abbey’s natural education” (1981, 57). I argue that Abbey shows and recognizes the brutality and indifference of non-human nature, but he does not accept that brutality, particularly not as a moral basis for human nature. Conflating human and non-human nature while maintaining a notion of the brutality of nature and, at the same time, seeing nature an ethical ground, prepares the ground for some very dubious politics, and therefore the notion of distinction is essential for Abbey.

An example of the problematic notion of non-human nature as an ethical ground is the story of the Husk family in *Desert Solitaire*. A poor farming family from the East packs their belongings onto a truck to try uranium mining in the West. They befriend a prospector by whom they are finally betrayed. The father is killed by the prospector, the prospector dies while trying to cover up the murder, the son escapes but dies after a long flight through the desert, and the wife eventually manages to sell the claim for a very good price. Aton sees the story as a moral fable: “Albert Husk, Charles Graham and Husk’s son, Billy Joe, are all victims of the first two’s avarice. Both Graham and Husk try to possess nature (mining uranium) but it kills them” (1981, 56). This story takes up considerable space in the book, and I do not think that Abbey tells it to make a moralistic point. After all, it is not clear why mining uranium “possesses” nature more than farming. Aton is correct in pointing out the inhuman brutality of nature in the death of the son: “No pine needles quiver in sympathy, just dry rocks, razor-edged plants and a variety of hostile animals and insects. Abbey calls the desert atonal, clear, cruel and inhuman” (1981, 63). Rather than being a moral fable this is a story of human endeavor and a reminder that the West, until not so long ago, still possessed frontier qualities, i.e. the possibility of striking it rich. Abbey certainly has sympathies for the adventurousness and resilience of the Husk family. To blame a poor family for trying to escape from a marginal farming life is similar to blaming landless Brazilian farmers for destroying the Amazonian rainforest (or, for that matter, Abbey for leaving his Appalachian roots). But this story is not a moral fable; what fascinates Abbey in it is its openness: It could have ended in many different ways, only human greed and the accidental circumstances of indifferent nature lead to the actual ending.

Besides the human element in the story, Abbey also focuses on the aesthetic aspect, and here nature's inhumanity is both a source of beauty and of terror. After the Husk family's son has escaped the murder attempt he finds himself floating log for days under a relentless sun, is eventually discovered but later dies of third degree burns. Floating on a log, this is how Abbey imagines his perception: "Gasping for air Billy-Joe crawled onto the trunk and rode it all the way through the canyon, all the way while boulders clashed in the foam beneath him and slabs of sandstone shook free of their ancient fastenings, spalled from the cliffs and crashed with a sound like thunder into the heave and roar of the flood" (1992a, 79). The boy narrowly escapes the prospector's attempt to kill him, is paradoxically saved from dehydration by a flash flood, but eventually dies from exposure to the sun. In all this there is no moral lesson, what Abbey describes is the beauty of the inhuman landscape and the terror of the human struggle for survival. As there is no need to derive ethics from inhuman nature, there is no need to accuse inhuman nature of immorality. Jeffers expressed this point in a poem "Be angry at the sun for setting / if these things anger you" (1965, 66). Both Jeffers and Abbey detach themselves from human nature to some degree and the distinction of the human and non-human spheres facilitate the simultaneity of beauty and terror.

### 9.3 Representation and naming

*Desert Solitaire* does not attempt to represent nature, but is an account of a highly idiosyncratic exposure of the author to the external world with all its unpredictability. The reader is doubly removed from that world: first the experience of the external world is coded as knowledge, and second, the literary documentation of that knowledge is not re-creating external nature but creating a marker. For the readers this marker may guide their personal exposure to external reality in the form of the described sights in the book. These markers are never perfect representations of external reality, and Abbey would agree with Phillips who claims that "poets aren't paragons of piety, prophecy, and perception but partisans of the imperfect" (2003, 154) .

Phillips calls the aim of literature "figuration, not representation" (2003, 9) and identifies something self-defeating in the literary ideal of representation: "Devoting our time and energy to the perusal of environmental literature would seem to be a roundabout way for us

to secure a bond with the earth: it's as if we should spend our time poring over the personal ads, instead of striking up a conversation with the lonely heart next door" (2003, 7).

Aiming for representation in nature writing is a self-defeating attitude, similar to the self-defeating anti-intellectualism of ecocritics who define themselves as the scholars "who would rather be hiking." When Abbey reads Thoreau, he sees figuration and not representation:

'The sun is but a morning star.' Ah yes, but what exactly does that mean? Maybe the sun is also an evening star. Maybe the phrase had no exact meaning even in Thoreau's mind. He was, at times, what we today might call a put-on artist. He loved to shock and exasperate. Emerson complains about Henry's 'contrariness.' The power of Thoreau's assertion lies not in its meaning but in its exhilarating suggestiveness. Like poetry and music, the words imply more than the words can make explicit. (1991b, 18)

This means that a literature that tries to limit itself to explicit representation would impoverish itself.

An important aspect of representation is naming. Abbey is aware of the arbitrariness of naming that often has more to do with a human sense of humor than any representation of nature. In his essay "Tukuhnikivats, the Island in the Desert," Abbey lists a whole page of place names in the Southwest and introduces them as "folk poetry of the pioneers" (1992a, 226). Many of the names are humorous (such as Poverty Knoll, Kodachrome Flats, or Queen Anne's Bottom), some refer to a circumstance of their exploration (such as Hooray Pass or Frenchman's Spring), others are crudely descriptive (such as Mexican Hat or Stinking Spring). Many of the names are signs of playful markings of nature, a marking that, due to historical circumstances, is still reflected on contemporary maps.

With a friend Abbey comes to a section of the remote region of The Maze that contains unnamed natural features and ponders how they should name them:

In a far-fetched way they resemble tombstones, or altars, or chimney stacks, or stone tablets set on end. The waning moon rises in the east, lagging far behind the vanished sun. Altars of the Moon? That sounds grand and dramatic—but then why not Tablets of the Sun, equally so. How about Tombs of Ishtar? Gilgamesh? Vishnu? Shiva the Destroyer? (1992a, 256)

These names subvert the attempt to represent their objects. Instead, they are arbitrary and reflect casual human interests and a sense of humor. The literary critic and birder George Levine discusses the act of naming: "I take the arbitrariness of naming as part of the

pleasure of birding, a continuing revelation of the ways in which ‘nature’ and human conventions and consciousness are always intermingled and never in entirely satisfactory relation” (quoted in Phillips 2003, 179). Abbey can afford to be playful about the subject of naming because names neither reflect the essence of what they refer to, nor do they appropriate their objects. They remain a harmless human enterprise. Examples of this are when Abbey and a friend find a field of sunflowers: “perhaps we should call this the Sunflower Desert” (1992a, 251), or when they, after having marked a trail with white stones, speculate that “this will be known hereafter, for a thousand years, as the Abbey-Waterman Trail. Maybe” (1992a, 261). A related act, not of naming but of appropriation, is Abbey’s idea of bringing Christmas decoration to the desert, to “pick out the loneliest, most forlorn of those little junipers and dress it in splendor, gay and glittering, and leave it there shining in the wilderness for a season or two, until the winds and the sun and the birds strip it bare again” (1992a, 262). Naming and decorating are not displays of human arrogance here but demonstrate the distinction between human endeavor and the external world. Decoration and naming will remain inside the human sphere.

Abbey discusses the name “Turk’s Head” for an anvil-shaped butte:

Hard to see any reason for the name. Is there any reason, out here, for any name? These huge walls and giant towers and vast mazy avenues of stone resist attempts at verbal reduction. The historical view, the geological view, the esthetical view, the rock climber’s view, give us only aspects of a massive presence that remains fundamentally unknowable. The world is big and it is incomprehensible. (1991b, 43-44).

Admitting that the world is incomprehensible would be tantamount to defeat for a traditional nature writer. Abbey, however, does not try to describe external reality but rather to expose his knowledge to that reality without blending reality and knowledge into one. There is always a tension between close physical contact and the notion of unbridgeable distinction. Being freed from the need to gain access to the essence, Abbey can afford to be playful with his signifiers.

The act of naming remains playful and unfinished, and in a sense there is no urgent need for naming the features of The Maze at all: “why name them? Vanity, vanity, nothing but vanity: the itch for naming things is almost as bad as the itch for possessing things” except for the fear that “if we don’t name them, somebody else surely will” (1992a, 256-257). Abbey is, of course, aware that his attempts to name The Maze are in no way official and

will not stick; they are a playful appropriation of nature that can be done by anyone in an unnamed and unsignified space. The resulting names are markers, not representations of reality. Abbey is aware of the problem that naming insinuates correspondence: “Through naming comes knowing; we grasp an object, mentally, by giving it a name—hension, prehension, apprehension. And thus through language create a whole world, corresponding to the other world out there. Or trust that it corresponds” (1992a, 257). Abbey here counteracts the cultural amnesia that equals names with correspondence and bring back the names to the sphere of culture and language.

#### 9.4 Heterotopia

The desert in *Desert Solitaire* is a heterotopian space, not an alternative to modern civilization but a space of crisis and temporary relief. Often the effect of the desert on the human mind resembles that of drugs. The most important aspect of a heterotopian space is its openness of signification and unstructuredness, demonstrated by the presence of danger and death.

In the episode of the Moon Eyed Horse, discussed above in the chapter on modernism, Abbey tries to convince the horse to return to civilization: “You’ve been out here in the wilderness long enough, old man. It’s time to go home” (1992a, 144). In another essay “Down the River with Henry Thoreau” Abbey’s takes up the theme of Moon Eyed Horse, and again ambivalence towards solitude is apparent. On a rafting trip he sees an obviously untended horse and entertains the thought that this may be the Moon Eyed Horse described in *Desert Solitaire*. His first reaction is to affirm the horse’s solitude. Abbey speaks of “survival with honor” and of “independence” (1991b, 18), but by the next paragraph he is already asking:

But solitude? Horses are gregarious beasts, like us. This lone horse on Tidwell Bottom may be paying a high price for its freedom, perhaps in some form of equine madness. A desolation of the soul corresponding to the grand desolation of the landscape that lies beyond these canyon walls. (1991b, 18)

Abbey reacts with equal ambivalence to the solitude of Thoreau, both admiring and rejecting it. When he describes the desolate landscape one has to keep in mind that Abbey



visits it temporarily and in company. He does not try to get out of civilization but has entered a heterotopian space.

That the desert is a space of open signification can at times be taken quite literally. Abbey describes how one learns to find water and mentions the smell of the cottonwood tree: “It signifies water, and not only water but also shade [...] *Signifies* water, which may or may not be on the surface, visible and available.” Abbey goes on to describe how to find water if it is not on the surface and points out that “you could possibly find no water at all, anywhere. The desert is a land of surprises, some of them terrible surprises. Terrible as derived from terror” (1992a, 114-115, emphasis Abbey’s). Danger and death confirm the heterotopian unstructuredness of the space and define its attractiveness: “Why anyone with any sense would volunteer to spend August in the furnace of the desert is a mystery to me; they must be mad, these brave tourists, as I am mad” (1992a, 207). Like in *Black Sun*, here Abbey associates psychological deviance with the experience of the desert. There are other forms of deviance that can be lived in the desert. Abbey’s friend has been drafted into the army, and “[a]s any true patriot would, I urge him to hide down here under the ledge. Even offer to bring him supplies at regular times, and the news, and anything else he might need” (1992a, 255).

Abbey describes the effect of the desert on the human mind:

Noontime here is like a drug. The light is psychedelic, the dry electric air narcotic. To me, the desert is stimulating, exciting, exacting; I feel no temptation to sleep or to relax into occult dreams but rather an opposite effect which sharpens and heightens vision, touch, hearing, taste and smell [...] Noon is the crucial hour: the desert reveals itself nakedly and cruelly, with no meaning but its own existence. (1992a, 135)

Like a drug, the heterotopian space of the desert de-familiarizes and creates a distance from the ordinary world. A similar experience is found in Abbey’s report of a trip into Havasu Canyon:<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Havasu Canyon and the waterfalls and pools of Havasu Falls in the Havasupai Indian Reservation are an example that *Desert Solitaire* can function as a travel guide. In 1991 I visited the Grand Canyon spontaneously with a friend, but the long line for a hiking permit in the National Park office discouraged us. I remembered Abbey’s essay “Havasuu,” found the place on the map, and so we drove to a trailhead. As described by Abbey, the Indians had refused permission for a road to their reservation. After an eight mile hike through a very hot canyon we came to the reservation and the incredibly beautiful waterfalls. It was not as lonely as Abbey had described, but the relatively unobtrusive tourism in a form of an undeveloped campground was pleasant, and the trip for me was much more impressive than the one to the Grand Canyon.

I [...] dreamed away days on the shore of the pool under the waterfall, wandered naked as Adam under the cottonwoods, inspecting my cactus gardens. The days became wild, strange, ambiguous—a sinister element pervaded the flow of time. I lived narcotic hours in which like the Taoist Chuang-tse I worried about butterflies and who was dreaming what [...] I slipped by degrees into lunacy, me and the moon, and lost to a certain extent the power to distinguish between what was and was not myself: looking at my hand I would see a leaf trembling on a branch. (1992a, 200)

As with drugs, the heterotopian space of the desert can be used to experience distance from the ordinary world. Abbey did not like LSD because he felt that he was not in control of his perceptions, but he did not mind experimenting with the mind-altering effects of space.

Abbey's trip down Havasu Canyon is an experiment that resembles the rabbit episode in some aspects. Aton points out that Abbey "slips by degrees into a kind of primal lunacy where he loses the power to distinguish between the self and object" (1981, 70). Walking around naked and purposeless he strips himself of humanity and enters a dreamlike state. The return to his human self, however, comes sudden and unexpectedly when he is trapped in a canyon after having slid down some slippery rocks that he cannot climb up again, and neither is it possible to climb down further. As Aton points out, "[r]educed to the simplest state of fear, confronted nakedly with death, Abbey miraculously climbs out and is reborn into a new awareness of love and life" (1981, 70). The restoration of his human self is caused not by re-entering the human world but by a sudden clash with external, non-human nature, reminding him of his distinction. David Oates sees the Havasu episode not as a temporal heterotopian experiment but as a regaining of a Paradise lost: "He makes wilderness quite literally his Paradise. On an extended solitary stay near Havasu [...] [Abbey] is 'Adam,' wandering naked whenever possible" (2003, 42). The problem here is that Oates sees Abbey motivated by a regaining of a Paradise Lost in the past rather than by finding a temporary and heterotopian Eden.

### 9.5 Education and administration

*Desert Solitaire* is marked by a dialectic of de-familiarization and familiarization. On the one hand, the aesthetics of natural spaces are characterized by de-familiarization and the experience of distinction and apartness. On the other hand, one of the main tasks of the book is to familiarize the reader with the desert. It is to a large degree a tour guide,

providing markers for specific sights and general advice how to explore the seemingly inhospitable land. In other words, it is the aim of the book to familiarize the reader with a landscape that they can experience in terms of de-familiarization. Providing markers and educating readers on the proper use of the desert bring about another seeming contradiction. On the one hand it is Abbey's aim to protect the desert from human impact, on the other his aim is to bring more people into it. As discussed above, this is not really a contradiction because Abbey sees certain uses as a problem, not human presence as such. A higher number of visitors is only a problem if it entails a development of the spaces in line with industrial tourism; however, Abbey thinks it is possible to decrease human impact and to increase the number of people through administrative measures.

In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey describes in detail not only where to find places to explore but also seemingly banal things such as how to spend a pleasant evening in the desert:

“Waiting for the fire to settle down to exactly where I want it, I spread a tarp on the ground close to the fire and place my bedroll on it for a cushion, sitting like a tailor. I'll not unroll the sleeping bag until I'm ready to sleep; I want to save that desert warmth stored up inside it” (1992a, 221) . He also explains what food is best suited for a desert trip: “fruits, nuts, cheese and raisins” (1992a, 222) and points out that on his trip “[a]side from the awkward footing the climb is simple enough, requiring no special equipment except heart and legs” (1992a, 223).

Abbey's main environmental aim is to preserve the heterotopian quality of desert spaces, and that means to keep them as unstructured as possible. The experience of de-familiarization will only be possible in a heterotopian unstructured space. How to do this? In several of his essays Abbey makes far-reaching but vague demands such as preserving half of the United States as wilderness or finding a way to curb the self-destructiveness of industrial society. Here he proposes to use the medieval city-states as a model. However, all these ideas are not applicable in a contemporary political context. In *Desert Solitaire*, however, especially in the essay “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks,” Abbey makes much more moderate, detailed and practical proposals. His central demand is to remove cars from the parks (Abbey proposes a bus shuttle service instead). Another demand is to use the park rangers to guide and educate tourists:

Put the park rangers to work. Lazy scheming loafers, they've wasted too many years selling tickets at toll booths and sitting behind desks filling out charts and tables in the vain effort to appease the mania for statistics [...] They will be needed on the trail. Once we outlaw the motors and stop the road-building and force the multitudes back on their feet, the people will need leaders. A venturesome minority will always be eager to set on their own, and no obstacles should be placed in their path [...] But the rest, the majority, most of them new to the out-of-doors, will need and welcome assistance, instruction and guidance [...] Whatever the cost, however financed, the benefits for park visitors in health and happiness—virtues unknown to the statisticians—would be immeasurable. (1992a, 55-57)

Abbey himself worked for many years as a park ranger, both selling tickets and assisting tourists, and knows what he is talking about. It can be assumed that many of his colleagues share his views. Whereas Abbey belongs to the “venturesome minority,” *Desert Solitaire* is a book also for the majority that needs assistance and guidance. The last sentence of the quote furthermore indicates that Abbey does not so much have an environmental as a social agenda. Environmentalism is not normally associated with attempting to bring more people into nature, and Abbey ironically comments on this during a hiking trip, when he encounters a register book for visitors in a seldom visited area: “‘Keep the tourists out,’ some tourist from Salt Lake City has written. As fellow tourists we heartily agree.” (1992a, 252). In another essay Abbey describes his educative role in more graphic terms: “The auto as tin can, the park ranger as opener” (1992a, 233).

*Desert Solitaire* contains some very detailed instructions such as one for hiking the undeveloped area of The Maze, which includes the driving instructions to the trailhead, a detailed description of the hike, and how to find water: “we find cottonwoods and shoals of damp, firm sand on the canyon floor. I dig a hole as big around as my fist and elbow-deep and come to wet gravel; a few more inches and I find water.” Furthermore Abbey explains how to drink it by improvising a straw: “There is a stand of wild cane nearby. I cut two stalks, a fat one and a thin one, and punch the pith out of the joints of the bigger one by using the smaller as a ramrod” (1992a, 259). Abbey’s aim of educating his readers complies with the human focus of his work.

## 10. *Fool's Progress*: A Fictional Autobiography

### 10.1 Introduction

Abbey wrote two “last novels.” He wrote *Hayduke Lives!* knowing that he was dying, but the earlier *Fool's Progress* was also written after Abbey had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, which is incurable. He decided to go on a last journey together with a friend, a journey that, in fictionalized form, is the basis for his picaresque novel. The cancer diagnosis later proved to be wrong (what Abbey was suffering from was actually pancreatitis, a condition that would kill him later nevertheless) (Temple 1993). In the novel there is an episode where the protagonist is informed about his diagnosis: “There’s nothing to be done, Henry. If it is really a pancreatic cancer—and that’s what it looks like—your chances of survival are zero” (1990b, 479). Abbey always saw the novel as a superior form of writing and always wanted to write a “fat masterpiece;” *Fool's Progress* can be seen as his attempt to write this masterpiece, and at more than 500 pages it is Abbey’s longest novel. Like many of Abbey’s texts it is strongly autobiographical; it contains his “last” journey in fictionalized form and long passages of almost pure autobiography. The main theme of the novel is the life of Henry Lightcap, a character that is Abbey’s *alter ego* with one crucial difference: like Abbey, Henry grew up on a farm, went to Italy as a military policeman, studied philosophy, worked as a part-time park ranger and fire lookout—but he never became a writer and did not experience the rise in class that Abbey did. *Fool's Progress* is a fictional autobiography in the sense that Abbey has written an autobiography imagining what would have happened, had he never become a writer.

Many of the episodes in the novel are taken directly from his journals or are only thinly veiled fictionally. The novel starts with an episode where an older Henry is left by his wife; in anger he shoots the refrigerator (Abbey shot his TV once) and, together with his dog, leaves for a last journey, revisiting the stations of his life. Both his dog’s and his own health are failing, and on the journey he furthermore struggles with the failing mechanics of his truck. At the end of the novel Henry, after having shot his dog and abandoned his truck, reaches his Appalachian hometown and is able to see the farm of his childhood and his brother who lives there but dies before he can reach it. This is an ironic reversal of the fate

of Moses: rather than looking at a future in a promised land, Henry looks for his past without being able to reach it.

The novel is structured by alternating chapters. The even chapters are about Henry's journey, which takes him to the places and the people of his past, further and further East (and finally, to the Appalachian farm of his childhood), the odd chapters retell his life, taking him further and further to the West, up to the point where he embarks on his last journey, starting with his moving away from home, his being a GI in Italy after the war, studying philosophy in New Mexico (made possible by the GI Bill, "his not dishonorable discharge from the wartime Army of the United States gave him a five-point veteran's preference over the other applicants" (1990b, 197)), living temporarily in New York, and spending most of his time as an underpaid park ranger in the West. The odd chapters about his past are generally much shorter than the even ones, betraying the main structural problem of the novel, the absence of plot or major characters other than the protagonist. The journey of the odd chapters is not enough to create a narrative coherence, and I would assume that many readers read the novel as a collection of semi-autobiographical essays. The novel never received much attention, and I would assume that this might have been different if Abbey had written a real autobiography. But despite its structural shortcomings, the text contains many interesting episodes that cast a light on Abbey's authorship.

*Fool's Progress* is an environmental book only in the sense that it focuses on how spaces and landscapes structure human experience; heterotopian spaces make it possible to escape from mainstream culture temporarily or permanently. On the one hand the novel uses space as a structuring device, but on the other hand, its protagonist is marked by placelessness: he is a drifter, unwilling to connect with his wives, friends, and also to the nature that surrounds him. The sense of distinction, of the otherness of his self, permeates his life, and distinction marks his skepticism towards spirituality and his view of modern life.

## 10.2 Spirituality

One theme of the novel is Abbey's mistrust of the countercultural spirituality of his age. Henry describes himself as the "only redneck intellectual in America who's not yet been analyzed, psychoanalyzed, rolfed, TMized, estered, sensory-deprived, reborn, spinologized

and had [his] colon irrigated. Never did get to know those spiritual amphibia crawling in and out of Esalen hot tubs” (1990b, 17). The following quotation is a scene where Henry has been invited to a group therapy session by his wife. Henry finds himself in a group, being interrogated by another participant:

Who are you? he asks again.

Well, the name’s Lightcap. Henry H. Lightcap.

Who are you?

What?

Who are you? He stared at me.

I get it. It’s a game. Okay, who am I?

Who are you?

I looked around: the other pairs were doing the same, one asking Who are you? over and over, the other responding in therapeutic manner. Only the session leader, a little hairy man from Topanga Canyon, California, was not taking direct part in the game. He lounged in a corner of the room supervising, a warm loving smile on his terribly sun-baked face. Too many years spent staring into the sun, I suppose, trying to dissolve the old subject-object dichotomy that Descartes (they say) imposed on us. It’s a “personal universe”; every window really a mirror. (They say). We are a bunch of windowless monads—nomads?—groping for return to the womb of total nullity. But let’s be open-minded about this.

Near the leader, leaning on the wall, was a bundle of foam-rubber bats; later these people would pound one another with foam rubber, venting their frustrations in harmless futility. What good is that? Impotence breeds fury.

But the leader looked pleased. Since there were eighteen customers (patients? clients? acolytes?) in the group, he’d just pocketed eighteen times \$25—\$450 in legal tender. Enough to pay for his first skin-cancer treatment. Bald-headed bushy-bearded fat-bellied little guru, no wonder he looked upon us with such warm regard. WE ARE ALL ONE, his T-shirt said. That’s a filthy lie, I thought, an insult to human potential. (1990b, 17-18).

Henry, like Abbey himself, likes to pose as a redneck. Like his rejection of his wife’s exotic cooking (“I mean beans and not bean sprouts” (1990b, 30)), he rejects the novelty and the pretentiousness of the esoteric exercise. The redneck, however, is a pose, as the reasons for his rejection do not lie primarily in his redneck style but in his philosophical views. Henry gives a voice to Abbey’s rejection of fashionable holistic re-contextualization and his conviction that distinction lies at the basis of humanity, preferring Cartesian dualism that is the basis for “human potential” to a “return to the womb” or the idea that “we are all one.”

One of the old friends Henry revisits during his journey is Morton Bildad, a study colleague from Albuquerque. Bildad has become a mystic and has retreated into the forest where Henry finally finds him, sitting in a cave and in trance. When Henry sets out to find

Bildad, the landscape at first appears to correspond to Bildad's pastoral and mystical retreat, not unlike the initial correspondence that Will experiences in *Black Sun*: "Ahead stands the sacred mountain. On my left is the dark lava-rock cleft of the river's canyon. Everywhere is sagebrush, a spacious silence, and the sweet exotic smell—like myrrh—of mysticism" (1990b, 234). When Henry finds him, Bildad is sitting motionless in a cave and does not react to Henry's questions: "There's a question I wanted to ask you. A very simple question, Mort, the oldest question of them all" (1990b, 240). There is very little equipment in the cave, and Henry exclaims that "Old Bildad has become pure spirit" (1990b, 241). Even Bildad's body appears to have lost its physicality: "Nor is there any extrusion of intestines, neatly coiled like a boat's bowline where he's been sitting" (1990b, 241). It is the absence of physicality more than Bildad's unresponsiveness that brings Henry to angrily utter the "oldest question:" "If the world, as you always proclaimed, is merely maya, nothing but illusion, why does it seem so bloody real? Eh? Why does it hurt so much?" (1990b, 242). Bildad's spirituality and idea of "Maya" is a modern version of Emersonian transcendentalism Abbey has refuted earlier through stating the problem of evil (see Abbey on Emerson in chapter 1.4).

The name "Bildad" refers to the Biblical story of Job; Job is struck by God and angry, accusing God of immorality. Bildad, however, defends God and argues that there must be a reason for his friend's suffering because there cannot be doubt about God's righteousness (Zapffe 1992, 51). Bildad further argues that Job should not think of revenge because of God's astronomical power (Zapffe 1992, 54). The passage where Henry and Bildad meet is an reenactment of the Biblical story, with Henry taking the position of Job with Henry complaining about an imperfect and immoral world. Other than in Job's story, however, Bildad remains silent because there is nothing to defend, with the immorality of nature so obvious. Bildad, the nature mystic who is in the process of giving up his physical existence has nothing to say to the inhabitants of the physical world.

Henry is angry at Bildad who found harmony in the spiritual world—not because harmony should be found in the material world but because harmony itself is an illusion. Angry about Bildad's spiritual escapism, Henry confronts him, sounding not unlike Jonathan Edwards' "creation groans with you:"



My current wife sleeping with a computer science professor [...] my friends mired in mortgages and indoor jobs and medical insurance, the hellhole of Africa, the black hole of Asia, the torture rack of Latin America, the glut and gloom and gluttony of North America [...] the ghost dance of the grizzly bears, the death march of the elephants, the Doomsday machines above our heads—I tell you, Bildad, I realize now why the universe [...] is receding from us in all directions [...] Red shift? No! Because of fear, that’s why. Fear, Bildad. The universe is afraid. We are the plague of the cosmos. (1990b, 242-243)

Rather than seeking a harmonic return to the womb, Henry confirms his distinction in an Jobian act of defiance. Looking at the sun he exclaims: “My curse upon you, little star. Twinkle, twinkle and to hell with you. I never want to see your light again. Go away. Expand and expire, become a red giant, a white dwarf, a supernova, what do I care?” (1990b, 243). Henry’s (and with him Abbey’s) frustration with the external world, of the feeling of solidarity of humans and other life forms confronting its indifference, is another example of Abbey’s existential conceptualization of nature, a conceptualization that is directed against holistic spirituality, for example that of Deep Ecology. Earlier in the novel Henry had quoted Camus: “There is no pain [...] which cannot be surmounted by scorn” (1990b, 215),<sup>58</sup> and his being angry at the sun is an expression of an existential conflict. Henry does not have Robinson Jeffers’ detached attitude of the poem “Be angry at the sun” (“Be angry at the sun / if these things bother you”); like Jeffers, Henry feels distinction from the world, but unlike Jeffers he feels alienated at gut level. When Henry leaves the forest, it has lost its mystical air: “What I see in the mirror is only the empty evening highway, the dark pines of Carson National Forest and the big goofy grin of one more dazzled idiot” (1990b, 244).

### 10.3 The modern city

Like Abbey, Henry works for some time as a welfare caseworker in New York. He describes the city as a Moloch: “Wherever he looked the view was the same: steel, cement, glass, iron, brick, asphalt, extending, as he knew from bitter experience, for miles [...] the world’s greatest labyrinth, full of Minotaurs” (1990b, 263). There are, however, other city descriptions in the novel that demonstrate Abbey’s ambivalence towards the city. Henry voices Abbey’s critique of the modern world from within. In his description of

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<sup>58</sup> The same quotation is used by the colonel in *Hayduke Lives!*

Albuquerque, New Mexico (where Abbey studied philosophy), he describes a vibrancy that Berman associates with earlier (street) modernism:

Across the river and under the arc lights. The Rio Grande rolls southward in a broad, silt-colored stream, fifty yards wide and a foot deep, quivering with quicksand. Beyond the bridge I enter the old central city—the dank and dingy bars, pawnshops, porn shops, basement poolrooms, skid row hotels, newsstands, cigar stores, even a barbershop—with a male barber! and a shoeshine boy! (eighty years old) sitting on his high throne reading—yes!—*The Sporting News*. The vista cheers my heart. The best part of the city still survives. Not all has been lost, not yet. (1990b, 211-212)

Abbey's description of the city is equally ecstatic as his earlier description of San Francisco. Like in his description of Hoboken, he sees the city and the natural space in similar terms and as intensifying each other. There is a continuity of experience connecting the Rio Grande and the city center. Rather than between nature and culture, there is an antagonism between city street and expressway modernism: "Now come the banks, the office buildings, the blank brutal façades of steel and Plexiglas, the necrosis at the core of the spreading metastasis. Space-age sleaze. High-tech slums" (1990b, 212). However, even in the expressway world there are traces of the city street: "But the streets and sidewalks are full of people, during business hours, and that too, like the poolrooms and cigar shops, is a pleasing sight. Here where the streets remain narrow (out of necessity) and the sidewalks wide, the human beings retain some rights" (1990b, 212). Like in his description of Hoboken and Oslo, Abbey describes the people of the city and stresses their variety: "the entire spectrum of the white, pink, brown, high yellow and mulatto beige, navy blue and Congolese black. They're all here, the beautiful and handsome, the cretinous, ugly and horrible, the deformed, the hungry, the hairy, the bald, the mad, the cunning and the idiot" (1990b, 212).

Like in his description of nature and the city, it is the contrast between the two that is valuable, and it is the difference between people that he celebrates. Abbey goes on to describe the human race, again in contrast to other beings: "The beast that came down from the trees, loped across the savannah and bashed the brains out of the first kudu it could catch. The anthropoid that later gave us Socrates' speech to the Athenian assembly, the Gregorian chants, the Upanishads and the Tao, discovered the tomato and the baking of bread" (1990b, 212). Abbey ends the episode with "All pleasure consists in variety, said Dr. Johnson" (1990b, 212). The notion of distinction, the feeling of never being quite at home, is at the basis not only of Abbey and his alter ego's personality, but also at the root

of his aesthetic perception. Both wilderness and city are the antipodes of modern life that structure it and provide sufficient contrast.

#### 10.4 Heterotopia

In a general sense, the entire West functions as a heterotopian space for Henry: here he can live his penniless bohemian life and support himself with seasonal work. In a more specific sense, both natural and cultural spaces can be heterotopian, for example an old drive-in movie theater that Henry encounters during his journey:

Great Bend Drive-In Movie Theater: an imposing edifice of six Corinthian columns with bell-shaped capitals feigning support of a towering façade of painted aluminum. Black letters on the white marquee announce the current attraction: FOR SALE 12 ACRES. Death of another passion pit. No more necking, no more heavy petting in the cockpit of Dad's LTD. (1990b, 344)

Abbey does not describe the movie theater in terms of its films, or its pretty architecture; these points are marginal since what counts is the role of the theater as a heterotopia of deviance where an otherwise unacceptable sexuality was tolerated. Like the cinema, the desert facilitates a love that would otherwise be unlikely. In the eighty page long chapter twenty of *Fool's Progress*, Henry falls in love with a younger woman, marries her, lives a life of intense happiness in the West, and finally loses her in an accident. In this chapter Abbey has recycled the story of *Black Sun* (and eventually the death of his wife Judy), and, like *Black Sun*, it is a love story in a natural heterotopian setting.

Henry meets his future wife, Claire, when he is working as a ranger patrolling a campground. During their short encounter, Claire shows some interest in Henry, which is reason enough for him to visit her in the city later. Henry quickly realizes that the city is different from his usual environment, and that his ranger uniform, his simplicity and roughness, although attractive in the desert, are interpreted as backwardness and lack of style in the city. Whereas the desert had temporarily leveled social differences, they are accentuated in the city. When Claire plays in a classical concert, Henry sits in the auditorium using his "7 x 50 U.S. government official forest ranger binoculars" (1990b, 358) instead of an opera glass. Later he meets Claire's mother and tries to impress her by striking a match with his thumbs and later his teeth. The mother is less than impressed by

what she sees as childish behavior: “That was clever. What else can you do?” (1990b, 361). She does not approve of her daughter’s relationship and sees deviance in Henry’s love: “There’s a quality of *enthusiasm* in you, Mr. Lightcap, that suggests madness. I think you are a dangerous man, Mr. Lightcap, and frankly would prefer that you not see my daughter” (1990b, 365, emphasis Abbey’s).

Despite their class and age difference and despite the resistance of her mother, Claire is drawn to Henry, and it is only logical that the two move to the desert where social boundaries are blurred and life is cheaper. Earlier in the novel Henry had followed his first wife to New York, a move that had not worked out, not at least because of Henry’s low social status and his unwillingness to pursue steady or well-paid work. As in *Black Sun*, life in the forest starts out as a romantic dream, and this is how Henry imagines their first meeting in a heterotopian space: “They’d picnic in the shade at the edge of the trees, they’d drink from the mountain brook, they’d walk up that soft brown lane that led into the depths of the aspen groves” (1990b, 368). Claire and Henry marry at “Point Imperial on the north rim of the Grand Canyon” (1990b, 384) and spend their honeymoon in the desert that, in the terminology of Foucault, is converted into an “impossible place.” In deviance and relief from social conventions, Claire and Henry enjoy their relationship: “He showed her his secret places, his treasured canyons, holy rivers, sacred mountains. Sleeping on a mattress in the bed of the pickup truck, they camped for a week by a cold bright creek in the San Miguel Mountains eating brook trout for breakfast” (1990b, 390). The desert not only provides a space for their love, it also blurs class differences. The same rough behavior and outdoor knowledge that converted Henry into a redneck laughing stock in the city, now maintain his authority as a ranger.

It is his special knowledge of the place and its relative unstructuredness that makes a heterotopian experience possible, and this is why Henry does not want it to be converted into a national park. Henry shows Claire some natural arches and she exclaims:

This place should be a national park.  
He put a finger on his lips and looked around. The walls have ears.  
And eyes. She smiled. Are we being selfish?  
You’re damn right. Let them others find this place like we did. By looking for it. By dreaming of it. (1990b, 391)

Their desert plateau is so unstructured that it is not even named: “The place had no name on the maps. Henry broke a bottle of wine on the rock and christened it Cape Claire” (1990b, 391). Here, as earlier, Abbey describes the act of naming as a playful appropriation of space. Claire and Henry’s heterotopian distance from social conventions is not limited to nature:

They found a short-cut through the Grand Wash Cliffs, camped under the Virgin Mountains and by noon of the second day reached a town named Mesquite and the paved highway that led to Las Vegas. By late afternoon they were lying together in a tub of hot soapy water in a room on the tenth floor of the Mint Hotel. They stayed there for two nights, saw Woody Allen at Cesar’s Palace, ate the bargain meals at the Stardust [and] admired the Las Vegas architecture. (1990b, 392)

There is a smooth transition from the most natural of spaces to the epitome of an artificial city, since both spaces share a heterotopian quality of temporariness and distance from other cultural spaces. Claire sees this temporariness, and both on the desert plateau and leaving Las Vegas states that she is frightened because “[w]e’re too lucky” (1990b, 392). Shortly afterwards their “economic honeymoon was over” (1990b, 393) and they have to consider long-term settlement: “Tucson, they decided, would do for the winter” (1990b, 393). When Abbey was writing the novel, he lived in Tucson himself.

Claire gets pregnant and later dies in a car accident on a remote desert road while Henry is trying to rush her to the hospital. Like after the disappearance of Sandy in *Black Sun*, the heterotopia of blissful deviance is converted into a heterotopia of crisis. Henry goes on a month-long rafting trip after the death of his wife:

He drifted down the river, built little fires, tried to eat. He drifted between the high walls of Labyrinth Canyon and Stillwater Canyon, under the White Rim and the spires of the Maze and could find no beauty in the land he had once loved more than any other. He drifted through the confluence with the Colorado River, in the center of everything and nothing, and could hardly lift his eye to see. (1990b, 432)

After the loss of Claire and after his initial trip down the river, Henry takes up work as a fire lookout and tries to isolate himself, but as in *Black Sun*, the forest has lost all its romantic qualities and has become a space of crisis: “he found himself again alone, far out on the rim of some awful desolation of forest or desert with a red sun descending in a blood-soaked carnage of clouds toward the apocalypse of night, jags of lightning overhead, thunder crashing” (1990b, 435). As with *Black Sun*, chapter twenty demonstrates the various heterotopian forms of interaction of individuals and space that can be a refuge, an

“impossible space,” a place for deviance and for crisis. Also in the other parts of the novel, natural spaces have heterotopian qualities, for example when Henry, after having been diagnosed with incurable cancer, “planned to do his weeping on the way [home], in the desert” (1990b, 481).

### 10.5 Social class

Social class is a central theme in *Fool's Progress*. When Henry and his first wife, Elaine, discuss feminism and the claim that most women have been victims throughout history, Henry exclaims: “For the women of the rich and powerful, life is different. Do you think the lady of the manor would change places with a male field hand? [...] The great division in the social pyramid is not between the sexes but between the classes. [...] Sixty percent of the wealth of the USA belongs to 2 percent of American families” (1990b, 40). Abbey's *alter ego* Henry grew up on a small farm, in an area that “[e]conomists would have called [...] a ‘depressed area.’ A land of marginal and submarginal farms, small coal mine operations, third-growth timber cutting.” Life on a farm is not idyllic, and the origins of that farm life are also marked by struggle and suppression, as the Indians were driven away from their land by “a Colonel George Rogers Clark who burned their villages, torched their cornfields and ruined the survivors with smallpox, alcohol and tuberculosis” (1990b, 44).

Already as a boy Henry wants to break out of the social dead-end of farm life. He does not like manual labor, and his teacher encourages his mother to focus on his education. His mother discusses with his father: “Mrs. Lingenfelter says that Henry's I.Q. is one hundred ten. She says Henry's the brightest pupil she's ever had,” and his father replies: “You mean he ain't dumb enough to be a farmer” (1990b, 49). His mother represents the intellectual side of the family, and through her Henry is introduced to “Chopin and Debussy” (1990b, 51) rather than to country music. The same theme is taken up in a later conversation between Henry's parents: “‘Henry ain't stupid though. That's what worries me. He's in for a life of lots of complicated complications.’ My mother smiled to herself. ‘At least it won't be a dull life.’” (1990b, 62).

Abbey's description of Henry's childhood is practically autobiographical. Henry breaks out from his life early, due to historical circumstances. The economic depression of the pre-war

era facilitated American participation in the war, as Henry's father argues: "there's ten million men out of work these days. Why do you think Roosevelt's fixin' to get us into another war?" (1990b, 58). Henry is drafted into the army and serves as a military policeman in post-war Italy. The army later pays for his study of philosophy through the GI Bill. His older brother Will also serves in the army, but unlike Henry, he joins up of his own accord and is stationed in Europe throughout the war. Although his father opposes the war ("'Serviceman,' he sneered. 'My son Will the serviceman.' Gonna serve Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt'" (1990b, 109)), and gives Will a hard time for joining the army, he is "[s]cowling, outraged, proud" (1990b, 111), the pride stemming from Will's increase in status.

Henry likes the army, first the training and later his post-VE life in Italy. Army life is ironically depicted through the perspective of a country boy: "Henry loved Kitchen Police. He enjoyed being a kitchen policeman, peeling spuds, scrubbing boilers, plucking chickens, mopping cool floors in the shade of the mess hall when the rest of the company was out in the hot stinking sun, in July, digging straddle trenches in the red clay of Alabama" (1990b, 157-158). Henry is fully aware of his low status in the army: "There was an official infantry song, something about 'Kings of the Highway,' but none of the boys would learn it, like it, sing it. We knew bullshit when we saw it. Smelled it. Stepped in it. Dog soldiers, foot soldiers were not kings of anything, they were the peons of war" (1990b, 157). Unlike his brother Will, Henry does not enjoy the army because of the status—he enjoys it because he is able to escape from home and see the world. As it is for Abbey, for Henry the army is the first of a number of government jobs in his life.

Whereas Henry's career path from country boy to soldier to student is not uncommon due to the GI Bill, he is "one of the few veterans of World War II who never did find full-time work." He does not want to be a farmer or administrator but a lover and a philosopher, but "employment counselors never mentioned such jobs" (1990b, 247). Like Abbey, Henry lives a marginal bohemian existence, marked by part-time jobs, but unlike Abbey, Henry never becomes a successful writer. One way to escape from both farm life and the steady jobs that the booming economy of the 1950s provided was to move to New Mexico. Henry takes a job as a caretaker for a house in Taos, which then was a remote place and had nothing of its artsy character of today. When his first wife, Myra, visits him for the first

time (coming from New York), Henry has to explain his motivation for moving to such a desolate place:

‘You bastard. You get me all the way out here, three thousand miles, to live in a mud icebox in the middle of a Mexican slum. [...] This is one of your economy moves, isn’t it?’ ‘Voluntary simplicity, Myra. [...] I want to be a philosopher, goddamnit [...]. There’s two ways to be rich: (1) sweat and scheme and grovel for money and never get it anyhow; or (2) the simple life.’ (1990b, 181)

Abbey, like his character Henry, belonged to the generation that re-discovered Thoreau and his way to maintain status in a materialistic world (thus the name “Henry” could be seen as an allusion to Thoreau). It is important to note that voluntary poverty of the kind that Henry lives does not imply a declassing; it is, on the contrary, a way to maintain status, not in the form of material wealth (which is becoming more common and therefore less of a status indicator) but by cultivating an independent lifestyle. Myra correctly observes that his move to New Mexico is motivated by its low cost of living, but she does not realize that it is a move to maintain Henry’s status.

Besides his job as a caretaker, Henry works as a teaching assistant in the philosophy department of the University of Albuquerque (Abbey worked as an English teacher himself). Despite the small paycheck, Henry sees fringe benefits in the job, including an increase in status: “[H]e would be paid \$ 150 a month. Plus free tuition. And the academic prestige. And other privileges pertaining, like a shared office and textbooks at discount and departmental coffee” (1990b, 185). Henry’s wife Myra does not share his x-class values: “He thought of voluntary simplicity and felt that she might come around again, hoped she’d accept him and his elected mode of living this time, stay with him on the rocky but rewarding road to self-reliance, independence and liberty” (1990b, 191). When Henry exclaims “This is life, sweetheart, this is art, life, the real thing, la vie bohème [...] what in the name of hell do you want from me?” she replies “A bathroom” (1990b, 188). Their marriage is bound to fail because both have a strong desire for status, but their status systems are based on different codes.

When Myra becomes pregnant, Henry decides to move to New York, despite his lifestyle preference: “How could he quit her now, simply because they had never been able to agree on the simplest things, like where to live (she preferred New York, he hankered after a



beach-front lean-to on the coast of Mexico,<sup>59</sup> or how to live (she wanted electricity, plumbing, stability, the full-time job for him with two-week annual vacation, pension plan, medical insurance, a mortgaged home—everything he hated, despised, condemned” (1990b, 253). But in New York there are different options. Henry quits his job as a technical writer for a company to work for the government, the New York City Welfare Department (which Abbey also did). Although he makes much less money, the motivation for this job change is not surprising, considering Henry’s values: “as a welfare worker he’d only have to spend two or three days a week in the office. The rest of the time he’d be out in the field, so to speak, investigating, as it were” (1990b, 262). The relative freedom of government jobs appeals to Henry despite the low pay. Henry later quits his job as a welfare worker because he is disappointed by the bureaucratic routine and appalled by real poverty. In an Emersonian fashion he links the fate of the welfare recipients to their dependence on the system and their lack of self-reliance rather than on social circumstances. When Henry discusses a difficult case, his supervisor states: “They’re always in terrible trouble. That’s why they’re on public welfare. They’re incompetent and degenerate people, Mr. Lightcap, the very dregs of our society” (1990b, 278).

After his separation from Myra, Henry moves back to the West and works as a ranger: “he began work as a seasonal park ranger at an obscure and very small federal park in the bleakest loneliest corner of the state once known as the Deseret.<sup>60</sup> He was the only ranger in the field, sole custodian of thirty-three thousand acres of stone and silence. The boss lived thirty miles off, behind a desk. I’ve found my niche, thought Henry Lightcap” (1990b, 245). In *The Journey Home*, Abbey describes the job that is the autobiographical basis for Henry’s job: “A couple of years ago I had a job. I worked for an outfit called Defenders of Fur Bearers (now known as Defenders of Wildlife). I was caretaker and head janitor of a 70,000-acre refuge in the vicinity of Aravaipa Canyon in Southern Arizona” (1991c, 236). Although Henry does not keep this job (“[h]e refused to work at any job for

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<sup>59</sup> In the cultural imagination of the United States, Mexico has long played the role of a heterotopia of deviation. The hero or the villain of the classic Western could always run to Mexico to escape the law, and Jimi Hendrix has used this myth in his song “Hey Joe;” after Joe has killed his wife, he is asked where he is going to run now and answers: “I’m going way down south / Way down to Mexico way / [...] / Way down where I can be free / Ain’t no one gonna find me.” Abbey expresses a similar idea when he describes the wilderness as a place to hide, “even for the murderer of the sweetest wife.”

<sup>60</sup> Abbey worked in Arches National Park, which then was quite unknown. His experience of that work is the basis for *Desert Solitaire*. The term “Deseret” is from the book of Mormon, originally refers to honey bees, and is now a frequently used geographical term in Utah. Here the term indicates that the park is situated in Utah.

more than half the year” (1990b, 245)), he goes on to work as a seasonal park ranger for the next fifteen years, “working five, six months a year in various national parks and national forests” (1990b, 329). He compares himself to Thoreau: “If as Henry Thoreau claimed that a man could get by on six weeks’ work a year, then Henry Lightcap—with the occasional odd wife and maybe a kid to support—should be able to manage on six months’ work a year” (1990b, 246). Unlike Abbey, who was able to make a living from his writing after the publication of *Desert Solitaire*, Henry remains in part-time jobs all his life. As Abbey did, however, Henry sees the increase of status through education, visible for example in this pun: “Like they say in Muleshoe, Texas, there’s only two kinds of music—country and late Bartók” (1990b, 439).

Henry’s life of “attractive low-paying untenured futureless upwardly immobile temporary jobs” (1990b, 398) allow a life of Thoreauvian independence and are a part of an alternative system of status, that of the bohemian x-class. Therefore Henry has managed to ascend in class, in contrast to his brother Will who remains on the farm and lives a stable life. However, there is a price to pay for all lifestyle choices: the novel opens with the description of an old, humiliated, alcoholic, and self-pitying Henry who has just been left by his last wife. This life looks far less attractive than that of the young assistant professor who lives in Taos. Furthermore, family life and relationships are difficult to maintain while leading a shiftless and penniless life. Abbey himself lived such a life as a young man during the 1950s and 60s but escaped Henry’s bitter end through economic success as a writer. Abbey never had to face the bank manager the way Henry does (having overdrawn his credit card): ““Yes, Henry, what can I do for you?” ‘He called me Henry. A bad start. This banker type is at least fifteen years younger than I’” (1990b, 77). It is therefore possible to read the novel as an ambiguous testament: it is both a defense of Abbey’s own life and a warning of the price to pay for his lifestyle and for his social – though not financial – ascendancy.

### 10.6 Place and placelessness

Henry is an extremely rootless character, and his sense of detachment from the world has an existentialist quality. Abbey mentions existentialism in *Fool’s Progress* when Henry takes his philosophy exam and is asked to give “a definition of existentialism” (1990b,

195). Although Abbey humorously describes Henry's confusion of existentialist ideas - he eventually fails the exam - it can be argued that Abbey was influenced by existentialist ideas more than he acknowledged. Abbey mentions Camus once in *Fool's Progress* ("There is no pain, Camus said, which cannot be surmounted by scorn (1990b, 215)). When Henry "realized with a shock of horror that he was at liberty to go anywhere he wished [and] [n]obody cared where he went" (1990b, 364), he embodies Sartre's idea that man is perpetually haunted by freedom.

In the novel there is a tension between Henry's placelessness and the detailed description of spaces and the physicality of experiencing them. On the one hand Henry is detached from the world, on the other he is physically involved in it. In this the novel parallels Camus' *The Outsider*, where the protagonist, despite being isolated from the world around him, physically experiences the material world, for example through his baths in the sea or his walks in the desert. A central theme in *Fool's Progress* is the coexistence of distinction or detachment from the world on the one hand and the physical experience of it on the other. The main element in Abbey's sense of distinction is the notion of transitoriness. As a human being Henry can never fully be one with the world, and his life accentuates the sense of distinction through his placelessness. The places described in the novel are transitory places. The only stable place is his brother Will's farm, a place that Henry approaches but never reaches. Henry lives in Italy, in New York, and, as a friend remarks, sees the West as his home: "the West is your home, people like you can't even get across the Mississippi River without a passport" (1990b, 137). Henry's West is the West of the frontier, and Abbey uses this archotypically American myth. When Henry dies he fantasizes a new journey, and the novel ends with the sentence: "The big brute motor will grumble like a lion, old, tired, hesitating, then catch fire and roar, eight-hearted in its block of iron, driving onward, westward always, into the sun..." (1990b, 513, original in italics). The last sentence of *Fool's Progress* is similar to the last sentence of Ole Edward Rølvaag's epic frontier novel *Giants in the Earth*, where Per Hansa, the restless frontiersman meets death with the words "his eyes were set towards the West." The West is a mixed symbol, evoking both the promise of movement and freedom (the West of the frontier) and death (the older symbol referring to the setting of the sun).

For Henry the West is a heterotopian space: it exists inside society but permits a life of restlessness and placelessness. The West has a function similar to the road or the railway

tracks for Henry. When he returns to the Appalachian mountains he walks the last few miles to his brother's farm on the tracks: "The railroad these days is what the American country road used to be: a quiet lane winding through the forest, following the riverside and contours of the hills—not gashing through them. Nobody bothers you on the railway, nobody watches, nobody worries about your business there" (1990b, 493). This quotation is an example of Abbey's ambivalence towards place: on the one hand he notices a place's physicality and is concerned about the use of space ("not gashing through them"), on the other the railroad tracks, like the road and the West, are placeless and isolate him from the world ("nobody bothers you").

Even at birth Henry already senses his future restless life and, in a burlesque scene, tries to retreat to the "dark radiant chamber of conception" (1990b, 42) before he is forced out by the doctor, an ironic comment on the holistic metaphor of "re-entering the womb." Henry describes his family lineage as an "antique strain of hillbillies, bowmen, thieves, peasants, woodcutters and deer poachers stretching back into the murk and misery of medieval England" (1990b, 47). His Indian grandfather hid in the woods to escape deportation, and his grandmother ran "away from a family of Pennsylvania Dutch (Germans) in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania" (1990b, 45). Henry's family is marked by rootlessness, and the only exception is his brother Will who feels called to convert the family farm into what Henry ironically calls a "museum display of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Americana" (1990b, 68).

The odd chapters of the novel are about Henry's journey from the West to his brother's Appalachian farm. On his way he visits old friends and with them past stations of his life: first he comes to Santa Fe where van Hoss lives, having become rich through real estate and cowboy art (1990b, 225). Henry is awed by the luxury of his friend's life but declines a job offer because he ultimately sees Hoss' lifestyle as superficial and materialistic. In his house he finds the "inevitable two-thousand dollar Navajo rug on the floor. The banalities of the Santa Fe (Holy Faith!) rich" (1990b, 231). The next friend he visits is Morton Bildad. He has become a mystic and lives in the mountains of New Mexico. After a long journey Henry finds him but is unable to communicate. Bildad is the opposite of van Hoss, all spirit and no physicality, and Henry finds Bildad's path of life equally unattractive. The life of Roggoway appears to be a middle way between crass materialism and spirituality. Roggoway is a political activist, but Henry also rejects his offer to join his cause and to change his life: "I know what he means. Transcend self-obsession. Find happiness through

service to a noble cause, peace for example. Justice, e.g., a clean environment, etc. Live not for thyself alone but for others. Why not? It seems simple enough. Very hard but clear. But—how to become a saint without becoming obnoxious?” (1990b, 219). Whereas his friends have found a niche in life, it becomes clear that Henry is not looking for one and will proceed with his restless life until the end. Henry is not trying to go back to his roots to find a new life but is recapitulating his life before he dies. Therefore it is only consequential that he never reaches his brother’s farm. The basis for the novel was a journey Abbey undertook with a friend after he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. As it was for Abbey, the point of Henry’s journey was to recapitulate his life, a journey that could have no other destination than death.

### 10.7 Henry, a tragic hero?

Whereas in the tradition of Deep Ecology, self-realization means the realization of belonging to a larger biosphere, it is also possible that self-realization leads to self-estrangement, as Eagleton explains: “The paradox of freedom is that it severs you from the world in which you practice it. Once again, self-realization involves self-estrangement. The price of liberty is eternal homelessness” (2003, 217). For Henry freedom results in distinction from the world, and in this respect he is a tragic character. There are different definitions of tragedy, but in the existentialist view, which Eagleton refers to and that Zapffe shares, tragedy is an inherent quality of humanity, and a tragic character is one that grasps his or her human distinction from the world.

Eagleton discusses the dilemma of the tragic hero, the dilemma that freedom disconnects one from the world:

Like the hidden God, the tragic hero is present and absent in the world at the same time, unable either to stay or to leave, bereft of an alternative for exactly the reasons which make him restive with what he has. [...] If God is fully present in his creation then he robs it of autonomous value, as well as depriving his creatures of freedom; but his absence equally plunders the world of meaning, and the tragic protagonist is caught in this metaphysical cross-fire. His freedom is assured, but for the same reason he can now practise it only in a paltry world. Moreover, God’s ominous silence, the loss of heaven, makes that world more precious at the very moment that it highlights its perishability. (2003, 208-209)

Eagleton provides the key for understanding Henry's apparently paradoxical attitudes of distinction and physical involvement. Henry lives in a godless world, a world devoid of metaphysical meaning but this meaninglessness also makes the physical world the only one that exists and thus precious. As discussed earlier, the idea that God is absent from his creation goes back to Calvinism, and Abbey's writing is marked by the idea that the physical world is devoid of metaphysical qualities. This insight is a source of freedom but also of disappointment. Life for the tragic protagonist oscillates between being paltry and precious exactly because of the ambivalence of human involvement in and distinction from the world.

It can only be speculated to which degree Abbey saw himself in the distinction and physicality of Henry's tragic life. Since especially the early episodes of Henry's life are virtually autobiographical, it can be assumed that Henry is an embodiment of one of Abbey's character traits, not unlike Will in *Black Sun*. Abbey's other work is also influenced by the tragic-existential view, and the human ambivalence of metaphysical distinction and physical involvement is Abbey's main theme. In Henry Abbey furthermore creates a character that is marked by an extreme placelessness, here connecting to the existentialist tradition but also the myth of the frontier. It is not without irony that Abbey saw the novel as the superior literary form but was unable to develop plot and characters other than the protagonist because of his autobiographical focus in the work that he saw as his "fat masterpiece."

## 11. Conclusion

*“Henry had many words for every subject, and no last word for any” (1991b, 47)*

Considering his environmental activism and his engaged descriptions of nature, Abbey can be labeled a nature writer. His conceptualization of nature, however, is unusual for the genre and clashes with the Deep Ecology inspired strains of radical environmentalism, environmental literature, and ecocriticism. This is remarkable since Abbey is an idol for radical environmentalists. However, the term “radical” in Abbey refers to the activist methods that he advocates, not to his conceptual ground. Although his relationship to radical environmentalism is symbiotic, his writing should be seen outside of an environmentalist context. A number of critics see Abbey in the tradition of a re-contextualizing version of romanticism and biocentrism, but such readings have to ignore “ninety percent” of his writing, as Abbey phrased it.

The most pervasive element in Abbey’s writing, and the one that sets him apart from Nature Writing, is his notion of distinction. He belongs to a tradition of writers who see human distinction from nature as the core element in defining humanity. Abbey’s writing is defined by a concurrence of physical proximity in the experience of nature and a notion of distinction from it. The notion of distinction could superficially be read as a regression to a Christian anthropocentrism in the sense that human beings have the right to “subdue the earth.” A historical perspective on anthropocentrism, however, shows that this Enlightenment concept is meant to emancipate humanity from God and a prescribed social order, not to define a new hierarchy. There is a danger that the re-spiritualization of the world will lead to a world where not God but Nature is made into a new authority beyond the human sphere. The strain of anthropocentrism that is found in Abbey does not elevate humanity over nature: it conceptualizes humanity as being both physically close and spiritually alienated from it, distinct but not separate. In Abbey’s texts human beings partake in a number of different natures and can be found at both sides of conceptual dichotomies. These distinction-creating dichotomies are found in the human vs. animal, transitory vs. eternal, biological vs. geological natures that create conflicts and prevent any feeling of being “at home” in nature. These distinctions create a sense of alienation that defines Abbey as more of a naturalist or existentialist than a pastoralist or romantic in the

re-contextualizing sense. One illustration of the human participation in both the human and the non-human world is Abbey's rabbit experiment in *Desert Solitaire*, where he temporarily gives up his human side. The human and the non-human nature exist side by side and the rift between them cannot be "healed." Extra-human nature, furthermore is not a source of morality because it is amoral.

Abbey resists the trend to re-infuse spirituality into nature, a trend promoted by a re-contextualizing strain of environmentalism. Although the physical world is accessible and can be described rationally (for example by science), it is devoid of any meaning beyond its physical order. The only source of meaning is the human sphere. In Abbey the human creation of meaning is not a project geared towards eternity but is marked by temporariness, it is earthbound: "Under the influence of cosmic rays I try for cosmic intuitions—and end up earthbound as always, with my vision not of the universal but of a small and mortal, particular, unique, and disparate... her smile, her eyes in the firelight, her touch" (Abbey 1992a, 227). Whereas Robinson Jeffers, Abbey's most important literary influence, mainly describes the world from a cosmic perspective thundering with meaninglessness, Abbey focuses on the human attempts to create temporary meaning in spite of that meaninglessness, i.e. to live in the world. Abbey's brand of spirituality is not a regression to a pre-lapsarian or to an animistic world, it is marked by a form of existential hyper-Calvinism, a world where physicality if felt, essences are unavailable, and meaning is temporary.

As Jeffers, Abbey is an inhumanist not in the sense of anti-humanism but of accepting the limitation of meaning to the human sphere and accepting the limitation of human importance. In this there lies an affirmation of the human: On the one hand only human beings can perceive their limitation, on the other side human values are affirmed inside the human sphere, as in Jeffers whose stone cutters are told that rock splits but nevertheless receive the affirmation that their "stones have stood for a thousand years." The conceptualization of nature that follows from such a view is not one of harsh and inimical nature; nature in Abbey is depicted as indifferent, independently of whether it is momentarily perceived as harsh or friendly by the protagonists. Abbey's nature is a nature with which humans can merge physically, e.g. in Abbey's description of the merging of molecules on the river. Nevertheless close physical interconnectedness and proximity do not cancel human distinction. When Abbey proposes a spiritual view of his own he stresses



that merging with nature is not reconciliation. The only way of overcoming distinction is death. Abbey's "hard and brutal mysticism" of the desert shares some parallels with Kate Chopin's ocean in *The Awakening*. In Chopin and Abbey the difference between the human and the non-human spheres is converted into a life force and into creativity, as in Chopin's description of swimming in the ocean or Abbey's descriptions of music, the abyss, or the non-responsive juniper tree. In all these instances the natural elements do not carry meaning in themselves but are translated into the human sphere.

Abbey conceptualizes nature both as conflicting poles of shifting dichotomies and as real spaces. These spaces exist both inside a cultural context and in creative tension to it, they are distinct but not separated from culture. These heterotopian spaces are often marked by a lower level of social control, and experiences of crisis, of release, of therapy, or deviation are possible. Seeing natural spaces as heterotopias has the advantage of not only describing how nature is represented or constructed but of answering the question why human beings go into nature, i.e. of the cultural value of nature. All cultures know heterotopian spaces, and in the modernized Western world, it is particularly tourism that expresses the human wish for contrast of experience. Tourism is, however, a double-edged sword. On the one hand seeing the necessity for contrast may protect heterotopian spaces, on the other hand there is a danger that heterotopias may be destroyed by touristic over-development. The phenomenon that Abbey calls industrial tourism can be understood as a manifestation of Berman's expressway modernism and is the result of a process that MacCannell describes as a sight transformation or sight obliteration, i.e. the alteration or destruction of a touristic sight through touristic activity that has been triggered by cultural markers. Abbey has produced touristic markers but has tried to interest people in nature (especially the desert of the Southwest) and to educate tourists towards a low-impact use of and appropriation of natural spaces i.e. a use that is more in line with the city street than with the expressway. What Abbey wants to protect is not so much a certain ecosystem or nature as such, it is an experience of nature that is linked to its heterotopian character, i.e. its openness of signification and a relative absence of social control.

Abbey's acts of temporary marking create unstable and shifting images of the external world, highlighting its openness of signification. In terms of marking there lies a paradox at the heart of Abbey's texts: on the one hand they are meant to educate and orient, i.e. to familiarize the reader with the desert as would a travel guide, and on the other this

familiarization is needed to experience de-familiarization. Abbey's detailed descriptions of nature do not contradict their essentially de-familiarizing and de-contextualizing character because, similar to the city street where structure is needed to experience the openness of modernity. Abbey exemplifies this apparent paradox with the structure of a wilderness area: "The boundary around a wilderness area may well be an artificial, self-imposed, sophisticated construction, but once inside that line you discover the artificiality beginning to drop away" (1991c, 230). What is important in a natural space, according to Abbey, is that individual acts of marking and of appropriation remain possible. One example of an individual and playful appropriation of natural spaces is Abbey's description of the act of naming. The act of naming does not imply correspondence with or representation of nature but remains in the human sphere. Naming is, as Abbey's writing, evocative but not representational.

Abbey focuses not so much on nature as on himself and his experience, his writing "was about Ed," as his sister put it. Most of Abbey's characters are notably autobiographic, and those who are not are often cartoonish types. Abbey's focus on himself also interferes with his novels, as he has difficulty developing credible plots. Ironically, and not untypical for his time, Abbey saw the novel as the superior literary form. Nevertheless, some of his novels deserve particular attention; one is *Black Sun*—where Abbey most clearly presents nature as a heterotopian space. The other important novels are *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and its sequel, *Hayduke Lives!*, where Abbey thematizes social class, which is visible in the form of the novel, the aspect of entertainment, language, spirituality, and the use of natural spaces. The notion of social class complicates the environmental struggle (as there are class divisions on each side) and converts natural spaces into contested spaces, contested also in terms of class.

Abbey's political viewpoints are marked by a Jeffersonian individualism that is developed into a form of anarchism, and he claims that a main theme in his writing is "[t]he human versus human institutions" (2005, xv). However, his political views are riddled with inconsistencies, most notably the problem that the protection of natural (and urban) heterotopian spaces needs planning, administration and government. Also the status of private land completely escapes Abbey's attention because he does not want an infringement of property rights. Some of his political views, like those on immigration and gun control, border on the reactionary. Even though Abbey is an inspiration for the

environmental movement and even though he presents detailed and sensible plans for the administration of National Parks, in general his individualism is not helpful in the context of environmental politics.

Abbey is an interesting figure in nature writing and in environmentalism because he introduces modern elements into the genre. Apart from the above-mentioned notions of distinction and alienation, he also advocates a form of modernism for the use and for the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Abbey shows that the protection of natural spaces can be seen in the context of competing modernisms, street vs. expressway modernism. He does not share the sweeping denunciation of Western culture and modernity that permeates environmental thought of the biocentric stripe. It is his very lack of conceptual radicalism that defines Abbey's position in the genres of nature writing and environmental literature.

Abbey's nature is marked by the experience of physicality coupled with the unattainability of essences. Essences remain elusive particularly because nature is experienced not as a coherent entity but in the form of shifting dichotomies. His texts are aimed at an undoing of what Elias calls the cultural amnesia in the creation of nature. Abbey's nature is dynamic and remains partially unstructured. Whereas the creation of meaning from nature remains a human enterprise and therefore cultural, in Abbey one is reminded of the presence of the physical world and its interference in this process of meaning creation. According to Elias, the term "natural space" has a counter-intuitive meaning, natural referring to the cultural synthesis of knowledge, and space to the extra-cultural external reality. In Abbey it can be seen how this "naturalness," i.e. synthesis, is undone, for example when the desert is seen as a space of open signification. This undoing of nature does not, however, question the existence of external reality, experienced in the form of space. When bumping into external reality, this encounter is translated into a form of knowledge and becomes cultural. This knowledge, what MacCannell calls a "marker" is subject to change: a change that is enacted in the individual appropriation and experience of external reality (or "sight"). Abbey's writing self-consciously documents the continuous creation of markers (or the synthesis of knowledge) through an exposure to the external world. Therefore there cannot be a "last word" in the depiction of the desert.

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