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What Does the Desert Say?: A Rhetorical Analysis of *Desert Solitaire*

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While Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* has suffered no dearth of critical attention since its publication in 1968, most of the discourse concerning this work has taken the form of literary criticism, with an increasingly ecocritical focus having been attended to over the course of the past decade. Little, if anything, however, has been published critiquing Abbey's masterwork from the perspective of rhetorical analysis. Such analysis, I will contend in what follows, casts new light on the work, and is instrumental in appreciating the more polemic elements of the text. I begin, therefore, with the observation that the author himself must have considered the book, at least partially, a polemic, having gone so far as grant the fifth chapter the less-than-romantic title: "Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks."

Richard Shelton, in his essay "Creeping up on *Desert Solitaire*," argues that the book was written by "an arch-romantic trying desperately not to be a romantic" (102). The tension between Abbey's romanticism and his cynical realism becomes an integral part of the persuasion driving the chapters narrated in the voice identified as Abbey's. The rhetor's voice mirrors the tensions plaguing the landscape he describes, and this tension serves to propagate Abbey's polemic persuasively. Shelton opines, "No character in any of his novels has the depth, the believability, the absolute feel of a real person that Ed Abbey in *Desert Solitaire* has" (104).

Not only do I concur with Shelton's argument, but I would take it one step further and posit that the rhetoric of *Desert Solitaire* is primarily based in the *ethos* crafted by its implied narrator. Viewed from within an Aristotelian matrix, this is not to argue that Abbey eschews *pathos* and *logos* arguments; he does not. However, the polemic of wilderness preservation is argued primarily via *ethos*: that the narrator's character refuses to be tamed is central to the argument that the landscape he describes should be left wild.

Clearly, the Abbey who emerges as the central character of his memoir is a different construct than the Abbey with whom I've recently become acquainted while studying his journals. This constructed narrator has been commented upon by a number of Abbey scholars, most notably Ann Ronald, who writes, "Only by distinguishing between the author, who is real, and the narrator, who is imagined, can we differentiate between the landscape that is real and the universe that is imagined. In other words, any discussion of Abbey's nonfiction must first

dispel the myth that the narrative voice is Edward Abbey himself.” (66). This should not surprise us, since Abbey once penned a definition of an author as “an imaginary person who writes real books” (Voice 65). He’d earlier expressed this sentiment in his journal of 1975, writing, “The Edward Abbey of my books is largely a fictional creation: the true adventures of an imaginary person. The real Edward Abbey? I think I hardly know him. A shy, retiring, very timid fellow, obviously. Somewhat of a recluse, emerging rarely from his fictional den only when lured by money, vice, the prospect of applause” (Confessions 246-7). Similarly, in the introduction to *Abbey’s Road* he wrote:

The writer puts the best of himself, not the whole, into the work; the author as seen on the pages of his own book is largely a fictional creation. Often the author’s best creation. The “Edward Abbey” of my own books, for example, bears only the dimmest resemblance to the shy, timid, reclusive, rather dapper little gentleman who, always correctly attired for his labors in coat and tie and starched detachable cuffs, sits down each night for precisely four hours to type out the further adventures of that arrogant blustering macho fraud who counterfeits his name. (xv)

Abbey-the-character functions as a heroic construct of Abbey-the-author. The character, sometimes referred to as “Cactus Ed” by scholars, is loosely derivative of the trope of the American nature sojourner. This trope, typified most famously by Henry David Thoreau, is necessarily a solitary¹ male who encounters “wilderness” alone as part of a philosophical project.

Desert Solitaire purports to be a series of reflections, written at the distance of ten years, on two summers Abbey spent “as a seasonal park ranger in a place called Arches National Monument near the little town of Moab in southeast Utah” (xi). In the book’s introduction the author leads the reader to believe that during his tenure there were few enough tourists to allow a backcountry ranger a largely contemplative lifestyle. He claims that “there was enough time for once to do nothing, or next to nothing, and most of the substance of this book is drawn, sometimes direct and unchanged, from the pages of the journals I kept and filled through the undivided, seamless days of those marvelous summers” (xii).

This wasn’t the only place where Abbey made the claim to have composed the book from the material in the journals. For example, in a published interview with James Hepworth nine years after *Desert Solitaire’s* debut, he stated, “I wanted to be a fiction writer, a novelist. Then I dashed off that *Desert Solitaire* thing because it was easy to do. All I did was copy out some journals that I’d kept” (56).

Abbey indeed filled parts of two journals during his time in Arches: Journal VIII (September 1953 to August 1956) and Journal IX (August 1956 to September 1957). Both are reposed in the special collections library of the University of

Arizona. A study of those journals reveals that very little text—especially in the form of complete sentences or paragraphs—went “direct and unchanged” from the journals to the published book. The longest unchanged section of text in the book that I’ve been able to identify as having originated in the journals is the four-stanza poem that begins on page 120 of *Desert Solitaire*, a poem that stands as a major exception to the rule.

David Peterson, editor of a one-volume compilation of extracts from Abbey’s journals, seems to concur with my judgment that very little came directly from them. In “Cactus Ed’s Moveable Feast: A Preview of *Confessions of a Barbarian: Pages from the Journals of Edward Abbey*,” published in *Western American Literature*², Peterson concludes, “. . .the total of this “Desert Journal” material falls far short of anything approaching even a coherent book outline, much less a text” (40).

Be that as it may, as a rhetorician I find myself less interested in what journal material was incorporated into the text than in what journal material was omitted from the text. The most striking omission from the book itself is family. Nowhere in *Desert Solitaire* does Abbey mention his family situation. In Journal VIII, on April 12th of 1956, Abbey wrote from Albuquerque, “Today I became a father. Eight pounds, twelve ounces and his name it is called—Joshua Nathaniel Abbey. May he be blessed by the sky and earth, Heaven and Home; may he be brave and lucky and good.” Ten years later, on the second page of *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey reported that during that same month of April he’d driven the 450 miles from Albuquerque to Moab, reaching his destination “after dark in cold, windy, clouded weather.” While he is able to recall the atmospheric disposition at the termination of his drive with precision, he neglects to inform the reader that at the beginning of the drive he’d left his wife, Rita, and his newborn son behind for the duration of the summer. Nor does he mention that, without his approval, his wife subsequently moved the child to Hoboken, New Jersey to be with her family.

In the journal, on May 16, 1956, Abbey wrote, “Christ, I’m lonely! At least at times I am; oh the long lonesome hours dreaming of Rita, whom I love and who has gone away. Why? Hoboken, New Jersey! She’d be closer on the moon.” In contrast to this, Abbey concludes the second chapter of his book—a chapter titled “Solitaire,” appropriately enough—with this sentence, “I am twenty miles or more from the nearest fellow human but instead of loneliness I feel loveliness. Loveliness and quiet exultation.”

There are dozens of passages in Journal VIII where Abbey writes of his loneliness. Indeed, word for word, the journal contains more text dealing with loneliness than text that would actually end up being transcribed into *Desert Solitaire*. And yet the biggest familial omission doesn’t come until Journal IX, when he writes on April 8th of 1957, at the beginning of his second summer on the job, “Back in Abbey’s country again. I walk in beauty. I go in beauty. Once

again. And this time my wife and my son shall share it with me.” Of course, there is no mention in the book that Abbey’s family accompanied him during one of his two summers in Arches.

The possibility must be considered that Abbey fails to mention that Rita accompanied him during his second season in the wilderness because, by the time he got around to writing *Desert Solitaire* in 1968, she had already divorced him. I would argue, however, that the omission occurs because the trope will not allow spousal accompaniment. The American Nature Sojourner must, of necessity, experience the wilderness alone. He—and I use this gendered pronoun intentionally because the trope until recently has been overwhelmingly male—need not be a lifelong bachelor according to the pattern of Thoreau; we are willing to delight in the sojourns of a married man such as John Muir or Enos Mills so long as he is heroic enough to leave wife and child at home when he ventures forth. The American Nature Sojourner is not a homesteader, not a pioneer, not a member of an expedition of discovery. He is, rather, a philosopher, generally a philosopher with transcendental leanings. While Abbey-as-character seemed willing to challenge the more numinous elements of the trope with what he called his “hard and brutal mysticism” (6), he so subscribed to the solitary nature of the trope itself that the book ultimately took its title from the central character trait of its implied narrator.

In her foreword to *Coyote in the Maze*, SueEllen Campbell poses the rhetorical question as to why none of the human characters in *Desert Solitaire* is female (36). She also criticizes the text for failing to mention the civil rights movement, the war in Vietnam, and the Cold War, all of which were an important cultural backdrop to the era in which the memoir is set. She makes an interesting point about Abbey’s omissions, stating, “It’s increasingly clear to me that environmental literature in general, and Abbey’s book as an example, works partly by shutting out social and cultural complexities—an omission that’s probably one source of the desire they embody and evoke” (44).

One of these cultural complexities is the second omission to which I’d direct the reader’s attention. It so happens that in April of 1956, the very month when his son was born, the same month when Abbey began his first season of work in what he would later call “Arches National Moneymint,” Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson had proposed a halt to the testing of atom bombs, thus bringing anti-nuclear sentiment to the forefront of American politics for the first time (Wittner 13). Nuclear fallout in general and Strontium 90 in particular were increasingly a part of the American consciousness despite assurances from the Eisenhower administration that the public had nothing to fear from the atmospheric testing programs. During Abbey’s first summer at Arches, Operation Redwing took place in the Pacific Proving Grounds where seventeen nuclear devices were exploded on the Bikini and Enewetak atolls. During Abbey’s second summer at Arches, Operation Plumbbob took place at the Nevada

Test Site, 300 miles upwind of Abbey's trailer in the national monument. Operation Plumbbob consisted of 29 detonations, all of which took place while Abbey was on station, and ended up being the largest and most controversial series of tests ever conducted at the Nevada Test Site. The Abbey family was close enough to have been able to see the flashes of pre-dawn detonations, and to have witnessed the remnants of mushroom clouds passing overhead during the daylight hours.

In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey mentions that one of his jobs was to empty the trash cans after the tourists departed, and that he regularly read the newspapers they'd left behind. Abbey references nuclear testing numerous times in his journals, and was clearly keeping up with the news of the various programs. In Journal VIII he wrote, "The British testing H-Bombs on *Christmas* Island! How delightfully a '*propos!*'" Immediately following this entry, he quotes Henry Miller: "The world is a place of indestructible order, beauty, and harmony, which we are free to accept as a paradise or convert into a purgatory."

Equally clear is that Abbey was aware of fallout. In Journal VIII, in April of 1955, a month when three above-ground tests took place at the Nevada Test Site, he wrote from Albuquerque "Breathe deeply of that good old radioactive air: get a good glow on." In Journal IX he wrote from Arches, "More atom-bombing in Nevada: maybe us men oughta start wearing lead codpieces." In another section, a list titled "SAFETY FIRST" includes the phrases: "Hiroshima Nagasaki Bikini," "Strontium 90," "The Clean H-Bomb," and "The Super-Bomb." However, none of the awareness reflected in the journal is ever carried even partially—let alone "direct and unchanged"—into *Desert Solitaire*.

Rhetorical analysis suggests that the reasons for this omission can once again be found in the realm of trope, in this case the trope of wilderness as paradise. In this trope, wilderness is in a state of perfection until contaminated by fallen humanity. Once contamination occurs, Nature no longer qualifies as "wilderness." A rhetorical analysis of this trope would insist that a polemic of wilderness preservation ceases to be persuasive if the landscape has previously been contaminated. Rather than argue to save a wilderness that, by nature of having been immediately and directly downwind of one hundred above-ground thermonuclear detonations, Abbey elected not mention the tests in his book even though he'd reflected on them in his journals. The trope of wilderness as paradise wouldn't allow the author to portray his desert sojourn as "a season in the wilderness" if he was also pursuing an argument that paradise had already been lost. The constraints of trope could not have been overcome at the point the argument became moot.

While the literary scholar might be interested in the above as a matter of textual history, such a person would probably not be overly concerned about disparity between the journals and the final text. Such development, after all, is a fairly standard matter of compositional practice. The rhetorician, however,

would want to return to the claim that the final text is little more than a transcription of the journal material. Specifically, how is a wilderness preservation argument propagated by the claim that the text containing that argument was casually constructed or, in Abbey's terms, "dashed off?" How does Abbey's claim that "All I did was copy out some journals that I'd kept" advance his polemic against industrial tourism?

It seems that the answer lies in the question of genre. If a reader perceives a text to be comprised of a series of crafted essays containing carefully constructed arguments, the reader's focus will turn to the logic of the arguments themselves. This is not where Abbey wants the focus to be. Abbey's polemic is primarily based in the character of the rhetor itself. Such an argument becomes persuasive only at the point where the audience feels that an intimate relationship with the rhetor has been established. In terms of genre, it is a much more intimate experience to read material from a writer's private journals than to read finished essays expressly written for publication. Hence the claim that most of the text originated in the journals.

Not only is the reader hoodwinked by Abbey's claim; many Abbey scholars have also been taken in, perhaps because access to the journals has been so restricted up to this point. James Bishop, for example, in his biography *Epitaph for a Desert Anarchist: The Life and Legacy of Edward Abbey*, writes: "Based on extensive notes he made during two seasons spent as a ranger at Arches National Monument in Utah in 1956 and 1957, as he turned thirty, the final draft was completed both in a bar in Hoboken, New Jersey and at a rangers fire lookout tower in the Petrified Forest" (147).

The point here is not to debunk Abbey's claim to have been inspired by the landscape he inhabited during the summers of 1956 and 1957. That he clearly was inspired is attested to by how eloquently he could write about his desert experiences a decade later, especially given a lack of specific journal material from which to reconstruct his memory. The point, rather, is to view *Desert Solitaire* as the crafted piece of rhetoric it is, a literary work composed by a budding novelist bent on propagating a polemic of wilderness preservation.

In his quest to develop a new rhetoric, Abbey sought out a new *ethos*. The saint would be replaced by the anarchist, the gentleman naturalist would be replaced by the inhumanist,³ the transcendentalist would be replaced by the nontheist, and the scholar would be replaced by a Yale dropout who would support himself via seasonal work with the National Park Service. Thus Cactus Ed was born.

Part of the fun of Cactus Ed's rhetoric is that it was composed by a man with a Masters in Philosophy. Granted, the degree came from the University of New Mexico, much less a blot on a rabble rouser's *Curriculum Vitae* than the type of school Thoreau and Emerson had attended, but it's difficult to maintain one's credentials as a redneck when one can quote Balzac, Nabokov and Jeffers

on one hand, and criticize Hegel, Eliot and Rilke on the other, all of which Abbey does in *Desert Solitaire*. For better or worse, Abbey was a bit too well read to eliminate such discourse from Cactus Ed's project; it all goes into the mix.

The mix can be dazzling. One paragraph late in the book begins with the observation that "The magpies and jays squawk among the pinyon pines...." The narrator moves from the fine crop of pine nuts to be had that year to the variety of asters blooming in the sand dunes:

...the flowers stand out against their background of rock and coral-red sand with what I can only describe as an existential assertion of life; they are almost audible. Heidegger was wrong, as usual; man is not the only living thing that *exists*. He might well have taken a tip from a fellow countryman: *Wovon man nicht sprachen Kann, darueber muss man schweigen*. (248)

Abbey doesn't bother to attribute the quote to its author, Wittgenstein, nor does he translate it.⁴ We are forced to ask what Abbey's rhetorical strategy was at the point when he decided to include these two sentences. The argument, were it to be developed sufficiently, an exercise that would require at least a page, fits into the overall project of the book. By refuting Heidegger's anthropocentric way of valuing the natural world, Abbey argues in favor of a biocentric land ethic where even asters have the right to exist. Instead of engaging Heidegger at any depth, however, Abbey dismisses him in a perfunctory way without explaining the philosophical significance of this dismissal to the reader. And the rhetor does it without any reference to the authority behind the refutation, that of Wittgenstein, a move that would leave classical rhetoricians aghast. Additionally, most rhetoricians would demand to know how the argument functions in terms of rhetorical situation, especially regarding the question of audience. We have to assume that a relatively small percentage of Abbey's readers would have been able to translate the quote for themselves, and that an infinitesimally small percentage might have been able to attribute the quote to its source. A logical appeal is clearly not being constructed here, nor is it an appeal that would hold emotional sway over anyone who hasn't struggled with Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* at a graduate level.

A possible solution to this puzzle can be found in the work of Kenneth Burke, author of *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Burke writes, "Insofar as a choice of *action* is restricted, rhetoric seeks rather to have a formative effect upon *attitude*..." (50). The example Burke uses in this instance is the condemned criminal who cannot choose to act in different ways, since he has no choice but to die, but who might be persuaded to adopt attitudes of repentance and resignation. Burke explains further:

Thus the notion of persuasion to attitude would permit the application of rhetorical terms to purely poetic structures; the study of lyrical devices might be classed under the head of rhetoric, when these devices

are considered for their power to induce or communicate states of mind to readers, even though the kinds of assent evoked have no overt, practical outcome. (50)

Burke's notion of persuasion to attitude fits with much of Abbey's rhetoric. The rhetor does not feel that anything he writes will ameliorate the problems he's writing about. The roads in Arches National Monument will still be paved, and Glen Canyon Dam will still be built no matter what persuasive strategies *Desert Solitaire* employs. The situation, like that of the condemned prisoner, is so grave that the best the rhetor can hope for, strategically, is to effect a change in the attitude of his audience. In Burke's terms, Abbey does not want us to *act* so much as he wants us to reform attitudinally.

This might explain why Abbey argues predominantly by constructing *ethos* rather than persuading on a basis of *logos* or *pathos*. Abbey is not only persuading the reader to adopt a certain attitude, but is modeling elements of what that attitude will look like. Above all, in the construction of Cactus Ed we come to realize that, attitudinally, our reformed *ethos* will not conform to existing models. What before was naturalist now has to be activist. What before was theist now must become, in Abbey's terminology, "earthiest" (184). What before was felt of forest and savannah must now be felt for desert. What before was predictable must now be anything but, because freedom cannot be preserved in the absence of wilderness. Park rangers, therefore, must begin to pull up survey stakes. Culture is the new enemy, as are purveyors of culture such as church, the government in general and the National Park Service in particular, not to mention the Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Reclamation.

Abbey warned us about this strategy back in the introduction to *Desert Solitaire*, back when the naïve among us thought he was just being provocative:

I quite agree that much of the book will seem coarse, rude, bad-tempered, violently prejudiced, unconstructive—even frankly antisocial in its point of view. Serious critics, serious librarians, serious associate professors of English will if they read this work dislike it intensely; at least I hope so. (xii)

Abbey's rhetorical strategy is clearly one of provocation, a strategy he may have appropriated from Nietzsche.⁵ Steve Norwick, in "Nietzschean Themes in the Works of Edward Abbey," goes to great length to point out parallels between the two writers, especially in terms of their common opposition to reading Nature in conventional ways. To Norwick's commentary I add, simply, that the writings of Nietzsche and Abbey not only share thematic and philosophical similarities, but a common rhetorical strategy as well, provoking the reader to move beyond the conventional.

Norwick points out that natural history essayists prior to Abbey "presented a rather puritanical persona." He observes that Thoreau, Muir and Austin were teetotalers, and adds, "Until recently, there was neither sex nor strong drink in

American nature writing. Then we were introduced to the persona of Abbey's essays: a swaggering, macho, physically strong, healthy, lusty, often drunken, nature loving, and, on a few occasions, mildly evil satyr"⁶ (190). Few would argue with this assessment, but it presents the rhetorician with a quandary: why, if Abbey worked so hard to break the mold of the American nature writer, did he allow himself to become entrapped by so many of his predecessors' tropes?

The claim can certainly be argued that Abbey was unsuccessful in breaking the mold completely. David Oates, in his book, *Paradise Wild: Reimagining American Nature* writes, "The hermit nature philosopher is a cultural cliché, not a naked adamic invention. Abbey carries a library of Western attitudes and perceptions in his head, and he can no more escape them than he can avoid thinking in English" (43). Oates argues that the "Paradise Lost" myth so shapes our minds when we encounter wilderness that we tend to see nature through a distorted lens (41). The reader can certainly find this problem in passages of *Desert Solitaire* where the elegiac tone of mourning for lost wilderness tends to overwhelm perceptions of the desert ecosystem itself. The writer ends up engaging more in romantic fantasy than empirical observation, writing sentences such as:

The desert waits outside, desolate and still and strange, unfamiliar and often grotesque in its forms and colors, inhabited by rare, furtive creatures of incredible hardiness and cunning, sparingly colonized by weird mutants from the plant kingdom, most of them as spiny, thorny, stunted and twisted as they are tenacious (241-2).

The elegiac tone is an intentional rhetoric. At the conclusion of the "Author's Introduction," Abbey addresses a "word of caution" to the reader that ends in a rhetorical question: "This is not a travel guide, but an elegy. A memorial. You're holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock. Don't drop it on your foot—throw it at something big and glassy. What do you have to lose?" (xiv).

From an ecocritical perspective, if Abbey fell short in transcribing his season in the wilderness it was in failing to critique the metanarrative of the story of Nature. He failed to examine the assumption that Nature is "back," as in "back to nature." In his narrative he views Nature one-dimensionally as the romantic reality from which we've come, our nostalgic past, not as a reality to which we're going. He too easily assumes that humanity was part of Nature at one point, back before whatever fall took place, and he fails to see how storytellers crafted our separation from the natural world by creating a metanarrative about a place, Nature, from which by definition we exclude ourselves.

There is a catch, in my criticism of Abbey, in that it may not indeed be possible to write outside of the Nature metanarrative. In "A Post-Historic Primitivism," Paul Shepard ruminates:

One wonders whether it is even possible to write about the deep past without nostalgia, or without creating a world that never existed. Its

images are a world of dreams and visions, infantile mnemonics, ethnographic misinformation, and attempts to locate mythological events in geographic space and recorded history. (47)

Not everyone agrees with Shepard's apparent pessimism, however. For example, in "Wilderness, Civilization and Language" Max Oelschlaeger writes, "...if it is through language that we have been alienated from nature, then reconciliation might also be effected through language" (271).

In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey's treatments of nature employ any number of classic tropes: Nature as Paradise; Wilderness as Virgin; Nature as Haven; Nature as Antithesis to Technology; Nature as Antithesis to Culture; Wilderness as Eden; Landscape as Living Entity; Earth as Mother/Nurturer; Nature as Home. The question of Abbey's reliance on these tropes is especially vexing if we assume, as Norwick makes the case that we should, that Abbey was intimately familiar with Nietzsche. He would certainly have been aware, as Norwick writes, that "one of Nietzsche's greatest contributions to Western thought is the idea that value and meaning are given by people to the world" (198). Nietzsche taught that it was absurd to praise nature or to read ultimate meaning into nature. Abbey appears to be in agreement, having written near the conclusion of *Desert Solitaire*, "we must beware of a danger well known to explorers of both the micro-and the macrocosmic—that of confusing the thing observed with the mind of the observer, of constructing not a picture of external reality but simply a mirror of the thinker" (240). But then, one paragraph later, he asks the question, "what does the desert say?"

We should close-read this discourse—a classical hypophora where the speaker poses a question that he himself will answer—from a rhetorical perspective. Abbey offers a preliminary answer, "The desert says nothing," and a few pages later restates the answer, paradoxically, in anthropomorphic language: "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" (243). Three pages later, even this puzzle is solved, when Abbey writes:

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 we trust that it corresponds. Or perhaps, like the German poet,⁷ we cease to care, becoming more concerned with the naming than the things named; the former becomes more real than the latter.

And so in the end the world is lost again. (257)

This is not the sort of linguistic turn one would expect a self-confessed barbarian to make, not even one who proclaims himself to be a "mildly evil satyr." Nor, for that matter, would we expect this type of reminiscence to originate in a seasonal park ranger's journal. And this shaking up of expectations is crucial to

Abbey's rhetoric. Old ways of thinking have not been true to the earth, and therefore must be rejected.

Unfortunately, at least from the perspective of his project, Abbey did not seem to have the inclination at that point in his career to write about nature outside of its timeworn tropes. On page six he declared that the personification of nature was the tendency he wished to eliminate from his writing, and then spent the next 263 pages not only personifying nature, but nearly deifying it. But he did so from outside the mold that had been created by the American transcendentalists.⁸ The reverence was still there, from place to place, but irreverence completed the package.

In the lexicon of *Desert Solitaire*, the wind breathes, the sun roars and daylight itself is full of tyranny. Gnats are described as "embittered little bastards," a turkey vulture is aptly described as "Cousin Buzzard," and quicksand has a "sinister glamour." The coyotes' repertoire, in part, is comprised of "occult music." The desert transmogrifies into "a pink world being sunburned to death." The Colorado River is not only "imperturbable," but is also described as having no false pride. At one point, four consecutive adjectival personifications will be needed to describe the "steady, powerful, unhurried, insouciant Colorado." Conversely, the personality of one of the Colorado's tributaries, the Escalante, somehow becomes "totally different, strange, unknown and unknowable, faintly malevolent" (179).

The reader would not have it any other way, for when Abbey forgets his project and allows himself the occasional anthropomorphism he is at his lyrical best, composing such lines as "Completely passive, acted upon but never acting, the desert lies there like the bare skeleton of Being, spare, sparse, austere, utterly worthless, inviting not love but contemplation" (240). His refusal to follow rules, even his own self-imposed rules, allows him to build his ethos as a keen observer of the desert, and he becomes one of the few writers who can sit at a typewriter in Nelson's Marine Bar in Hoboken and get away with composing lines such as: "the desert wears, at the same time, paradoxically, a veil of mystery" (241). Rhetorically, Abbey can make this work because of the persuasiveness of the implied author of *Desert Solitaire*. His literary predecessors could not have done so. Each of them, from Thoreau through Krutch, crafted the *ethos* of an amateur naturalist, an authorial trope rooted in the Victorian era.⁹ Abbey follows this convention to a point: like the others he not a biologist by profession; although an amateur he keeps a journal of his observations of the natural world; his sojourns into Nature are written up primarily as a series of excursions.¹⁰ Unlike the others, however, Abbey refuses to be constrained by Victorian precedent. To break out of this mold, he goes out of his way to portray himself as something of an anti-naturalist. The most infamous passage where he constructs this character is where, during an excursion down a seldom-visited canyon in Arches, he spots a rabbit sitting under a blackbrush bush. Abbey tells

us that he is “taken by a notion to experiment—on the rabbit” (33). Note the pseudo-scientific terminology, “experiment,” and note the grammatically unnecessary em-dash employed to create suspense. The narrator is clearly playing on the reader’s emotions, having just told us, “The rabbit huddles there, panting, ears back, one bright eye on me.”

Abbey’s experiment is obviously contrived. He assumes a hypothetical situation where he is out in the wilderness, starving, with no weapon but his bare hands. “What would you do?” he asks, using the second person personal pronoun rather than the first. He then devotes a paragraph—as if to build suspense—to the search for the stone while asking whether he should give the rabbit a sporting chance (33).

He opens the next paragraph by directing the reader to notice the terminology he is using, and defines a sportsman as “one who gives his quarry a chance to escape with its life.” He adds that animals have no sense of sportsmanship, a curious statement that seems to beg the question of whether man himself is an animal (33).

The following paragraph is nothing short of astonishing. Abbey declares, “Well, I’m a scientist not a sportsman and *we’ve* got an important experiment under way here, for which the rabbit has been volunteered. I rear back and throw the stone with all I’ve got straight at his furry head” (33, emphasis added).

The rabbit dies, of course.

Just as the reader was included in the experiment when the narrator asked “What would *you* do?” now the reader has little option but to collude with the narrator, who has pointed out that *we’ve* got an experiment under way. The reader functions as the antecedent of both personal pronouns. Meanwhile, Abbey, by making the spurious claim to be a scientist, manages to free himself of Victorian vestiges. We readers, for the remaining 236 pages, will not hold him to any expectations of behavior to which we’d hold any of gentleman naturalists who’ve preceded him.¹¹ This not only frees up his rhetoric, but it forces us to deal with the narrator outside of any box in which we’d normally want to captivate him.

Another place where Abbey develops his character as an anti-naturalist is in the chapter “Down the River,” where he’s exploring a side canyon one afternoon. He writes, “I accidentally start a brush fire, and am nearly cooked alive” (188). He attributes the fire to “sheer carelessness,” and never relates how he’d started the fire. I’d always thought it had something to do with lighting his pipe until James Cahalan’s biography came out in 2001, at which point the biographer reported that Abbey had been burning litter left behind by someone else (73). Knowing this, it becomes all the more significant that Abbey recorded the misdeed without relating the fact that he’d intended an environmental good deed in the first place.

In the end, Abbey succeeds at giving us a fresh perspective on what the

naturalist might look like freed from its genteel, transcendentalist bonds. However, he fails to give us a fresh perspective on nature itself. The points where he most forcefully attempts to propagate the rhetoric of wilderness preservation are the points where he becomes least creative in going beyond the tropes utilized by his predecessors. The argument is based so squarely in the *ethos* of the rhetor that it almost fails to examine the land ethic of the desert itself.

Gregory McNamee summarized *Desert Solitaire* as “a manifesto of the unchained soul, an inspired argument that human beings, like ecosystems, fare best when left alone” (21). But herein lies the problem: the polemic encourages a disengagement of humanity from wilderness. The problem of this approach has been examined by William Cronon in his essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness.”

The place where we are is the place nature is not. If this is so—if by definition wilderness leaves no place for human beings, save perhaps as contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie in God’s natural cathedral—then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us. (81)

This inability to offer solutions may be problematic for Abbey’s rhetoric, and may also explain his shift from the elegiac voice with which he began the book to the apocalyptic voice in which he ends it. In Cactus Ed’s penultimate entry, dated “October,” the narrator proclaims, “For tonight I prophesy a snow-storm” (266). He then reflects on his looming return to civilization, and claims:

I am almost prepared to believe that this sweet virginal primitive land will be grateful for my departure and the absence of the tourists, will breathe metaphorically a collective sigh of relief—like a whisper of wind—when we are all and finally gone and the place and its creations can return to their ancient procedures unobserved and undisturbed by the busy, anxious, brooding consciousness of man. (267)

Prophecy is ultimately a rhetorical device, one in which environmental discourse frequently engages. David Oates writes that, “The rhetoric of prophecy ought to remind us that beneath all the analysis, politics and ecology—most of which I agree with deeply—these are statements about how the world works, what its underlying story is, its myth” (64).

The prophecy with which Abbey closes the book, classical in its prayerful edifice, constructs a doomsday vision:

Let men in their madness blast every city on earth into black rubble and envelope the entire planet in a cloud of lethal gas—the canyons and the hills, the springs and rocks will still be there, the sunlight will filter through, water will form and warmth shall be upon the land and after sufficient time, no matter how long, somewhere, living things will emerge and join and stand once again, this time perhaps to take a different and better course. (268)

It’s little wonder that now, more than forty years after the publication of

Desert Solitaire, facing an ecological crisis almost as complex as Abbey's darkest visions, we continue to find his rhetoric so compelling. Although he was constrained by the trope of the American nature sojourner and, indeed, the Nature trope itself, he was able to break whatever molds constrained environmental discourse in accordance with Victorian discursive standards. Those constraints having been broken, deliberative rhetoric regarding the health of the biosphere will never again be the same.

Notes

¹While Thoreau stands as the greatest exemplar of this trope, we might more appropriately ascribe the necessity of its solitary nature to Thoreau's mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote, in his essay "Self-Reliance," "These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world." A paragraph later in the same essay, Emerson writes of the necessity to "shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me" (135).

²Writing in the same journal, Paul T. Bryant adds, "*Desert Solitaire*, then, does have a structure and unity that is much more than a random collation of journal-recorded experiences, Abbey's assertions to the contrary" (14).

³This term, coined by poet Robinson Jeffers, denotes someone who rejects humanist philosophical traditions. Two essays linking Abbey with Jeffers' inhumanism are Diane Wikoski's "Joining the Visionary 'Inhumanists,'" and James McClintock's "Edward Abbey's 'Antidotes to Despair'."

⁴From *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The definitive C.K. Ogden (1922) translation renders this: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."

⁵Alternately, Abbey may have learned this strategy from Emerson, or even Thoreau. In his Divinity School Address, Emerson claimed, "Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul" (66). Based on Norwick's work, however, I'd tend to favor Nietzsche as Abbey's inspiration, were I forced to make an educated guess.

⁶Nietzsche identified the satyr as the archetype of man (Nietzsche 63).

⁷Rilke. Abbey does not attribute the source, most probably because doing so would work against the "Cactus Ed" ethos he is attempting to construct.

⁸In no way do I mean to imply that the transcendentalists inaugurated the American genre of nature writing, but simply observe that the transcendentalists, especially Emerson and Thoreau, had a profound influence institutionalizing the reverential tone that had become an almost universal characteristic of the genre prior to Abbey. Critiques of this tone can be found in Joyce Carol Oates' classic essay, "Against Nature," in Rebecca Solnit's "The Thoreau Problem," and in David Taylor's "Giving Up On Language: Or Why I Stopped Reading Thoreau."

⁹An excellent study of the nineteenth century as the golden age of the amateur naturalist can be found in Lynn Merrill's *The Romance of Victorian Natural History*. Merrill focuses on how Victorian enthusiasm for natural history produced characteristic ways of conceptualizing the natural world, ultimately resulting in a distinct literary genre.

¹⁰The observation of a strong excursionary motif in American nature writing is not my own, but that of Stanford Professor Charles Junkerman, who was kind enough to serve as my thesis advisor and who posits that Abbey structures *Desert Solitaire* as a series of excursions similarly to how Thoreau structures *Walden* around his seasonal rambles. Junkerman, unfortunately, has not yet published his theory, and I am therefore unable to footnote more than his lecture on *Desert Solitaire* from the course, *Desert Practices*.

¹¹It should be noted that Abbey's rhetorical move here is not completely without precedent. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes of being overcome by the urge to devour a woodchuck raw, even to the point of chasing the poor animal down a path. While these two incidents have been compared often, I find the contrast even more striking. Thoreau's pursuit of the woodchuck was a moment of impulsive passion while Abbey's experiment with the rabbit was a moment of considered dispassion. And Thoreau's woodchuck lived to tell the tale.

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