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THE FOREST SEER

by

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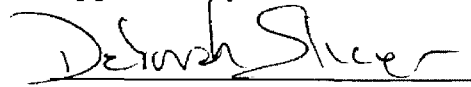
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Chairperson



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 The Forest Seer

Committee Chair: Deborah Slicer

Ralph Waldo Emerson's transcendentalism aims to demonstrate that Nature is infused with a higher spiritual reality, a view sharply at odds with a strictly scientific understanding of the world. That his philosophy is called transcendentalism implies that he was a Kantian. However, Emerson never read Kant and only acquired knowledge of his philosophy through secondary sources such as Coleridge. Emerson's philosophy is more rightly appraised as Neo-Platonic than Kantian. Kant's intuitive faculty never achieved knowledge of things-in-themselves, whereas Emerson posits intuition as the umbilical cord linking us directly to metaphysical realities. The intellect and mind are always primary in Emerson's thought and empirical knowledge is secondary, except in his formulation of the forest seer in his poem "Woodnotes I." Here, Emerson describes an archetype as well as a person who has an ideal relationship with nature. The forest seer serves as a bridge between the seemingly dichotomous worlds of mind and matter, humanity and nature, divinity and humanity, and the sacred and the profane.

Asking who or what a forest seer is is like asking what Zen is; in Emerson's writings the answer is everywhere and nowhere. The only explicit reference to such a title comes from a single poem of Emerson's, the rest remains implied in his writing. Henry David Thoreau and John Muir are the only trained naturalists and skilled nature poets that Emerson alludes to who might fulfill these qualifications. Therefore in order to further determine what Emerson meant by this obscure title, the lives and writings of Thoreau and Muir will be examined since they represent the living personification of the archetype of the forest seer. Next, the work of the Deep Ecologist Arne Naess will be considered since he appears to follow in the tradition of Thoreau and Muir.

Finally, the question is raised as to whether or not the concept of a forest seer is coherent and whether or not this person can successfully bridge human and non-human worlds. The criticism of Val Plumwood is critical to answering this question. The overall conclusion is that a forest seer based upon Emerson's Neo-Platonism is inherently flawed, but that a theistic interpretation of the forest seer as a naturalist who combines the modern principles of ecology with the findings of a natural theologian succeeds where Emerson fails. In an age that faces impending environmental crises, the forest seer offers a paradigm that is more respectful of free nature than the dominant Cartesian/Baconian worldview and therefore offers greater hope in solving these problems.

Table of Contents

I. The Forest Seer	p. 3
II. Emerson's Men	p. 5
a. Emerson's list	p. 5
b. the problem of recognition: who is a forest seer?	p. 7
c. the forest seer as hypothesis, as possibility	p. 8
III. What does Emerson mean by the term 'forest seer'?	p. 15
a. the forest seer as religious visionary	p. 15
b. the forest seer as naturalist	p. 19
c. the forest seer as harbinger	p. 21
d. the forest seer as lover and mystic	p. 23
e. the forest seer as minstrel and romantic poet	p. 26
f. the forest seer as speaker for the forest	p. 28
g. the forest seer as gaining access to border life and threshold places	p. 30
IV. Henry David Thoreau - "a word for nature, absolute freedom and wildness"	p. 37
a. Thoreau's qualifications	p. 37
b. transcending the instrumental paradigm of nature as commodity	p. 37
c. finding God in nature – Walden as paradise regained	p. 39
d. nature as a continuum of self	p. 41
e. nature as possessing degrees of wildness: Walden vs. Mt. Katahdin	p. 43
f. Thoreau's evolutionary insights	p. 46
V. John Muir – What the Stone said	p. 47
a. Muir's qualifications	p. 47
b. nature as the Word of God	p. 47
c. thinking like a tree: a windstorm in the forest	p. 50
d. Muir's ecological insights: the interconnectedness of all life	p. 51
e. animals as subjects of life	p. 52
f. preservationism and the establishment of national parks	p. 54
g. was Muir a pantheist?	p. 56
VI. Arne Naess and Deep Ecology's Ecological Self	p. 59
a. the forest seer's metamorphosis into the deep ecologist	p. 59
b. a systematic rethinking of how humans interact with nature	p. 61
c. the expanded ecological self that identifies with nature	p. 62
d. a holistic or gestalt approach to understanding nature	p. 65
e. the openness to non-Western traditions	p. 66
f. the attempt to rework the Christian tradition to be more eco-friendly	p. 69
g. combining theory with practice: environmental and political activism	p. 72

VII. Does the ecological self speak <i>about</i> nature or is nature speaking?	p. 73
a. the forest seer as an individual rather than institutional figure	p. 73
b. walking as the forest seer's vocation	p. 76
c. science vs. ecology: are humans separate or a part of nature?	p. 77
d. the consciousness of nature: does nature speak or is it spoken for?	p. 79
e. problems discerning the voice of the earth	p. 85
VIII. Val Plumwood's criticism of the Deep Ecologist's self	p. 88
a. criticism of the indistinguishability account of the self	p. 89
b. Is Naess's ecological self an expanded self or ethical egoist?	p. 93
XI. Reincarnating the lama – the need for forest seers	p. 99

And such I knew, a forest seer,
A minstrel of the natural year,
Foreteller of the vernal ides,
Wise harbinger of spheres and tides,
A lover true, who knew by heart
Each joy the mountain dales impart;
It seemed that Nature could not raise
A plant in any secret place,
In quaking bog, on snowy hill,
Beneath the grass that shades the rill,
Under the snow, between the rocks
In damp fields known to bird and fox,
But he would come in the very hour
It opened in its virgin bower,
As if a sunbeam showed the place,
And tell its long-descended race
It seemed as if the breezes brought him,
It seemed as if the sparrows taught him;
As if by secret sight he knew
Where, in far fields, the orchis grew.
Many haps fall in the field
Seldom seen by wishful eyes,
But all her shows did Nature yield,
To please and win this pilgrim wise.
He saw the partridge drum in the woods;
He heard the woodcock's evening hymn;
He found the tawny thrush's broods;
And the sky hawk did wait for him;
What others did at distance hear,
And guessed within the thicket's gloom,
Was showed to this philosopher,
And at his bidding seemed to come.¹

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Collected Poems and Translations*, ed. By Harold Bloom and Paul Kane (New York: The Library of America, 1994), "Woodnotes I," 36.

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization.²

--Henry David Thoreau

Divinity abounded...the day was divine and there was plenty of natural religion in the newborn landscapes that were being baptized in sunshine, and sermons in the glacial boulders on the beach where we landed.³

-- John Muir

There is a basic intuition in deep ecology that we have no right to destroy other living beings without sufficient reason. Another norm is that, with maturity, human beings will experience joy when other life forms experience joy and sorrow when other life forms experience sorrow. Not only will we feel sad when our brother or a dog or a cat feels sad, but we will grieve when living beings, including landscapes, are destroyed.⁴

-- Arne Naess

² Henry David Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau ed. by Carl Bode (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), in "Walking," 592.

³ John Muir, The Eight Wilderness-Discovery Books (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 2000), in "Travels in Alaska," 753.

⁴ George Sessions, Bill Devall, Deep Ecology (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), 75.

I. The Forest Seer

Emerson's concept of the "forest seer" is latent and undeveloped in his writing. He never explains what exactly a forest seer is, except indirectly. This thesis will attempt to elucidate and explain exactly what Emerson might have meant in using this concept. Seven characteristics of the forest seer will be examined: the forest seer as visionary, naturalist, harbinger, mystic, poet, speaker of the forest, and as having access to boundary zones. The writings of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, both of whom were candidates nominated as forest seers by Emerson, will be offered up for consideration to determine whether or not the idea of the forest seer as outlined stands.

Such an investigation will lead us to arrive at the determination that a forest seer is someone who fits the contemporary Deep Ecologists' definition of the ecological self as set forth by Arne Naess. The forest seer as such is a precursor to the modern ecologist who sees in nature an organic whole which is interrelated and something greater than the sum of its individual parts. Such a person has expanded the perimeters or boundaries of the human self and does not view the natural world as radically distinct nor other. It is therefore safe to conclude that the metamorphosis of the forest seer into Deep Ecology's ecological self appears to have its seeds in Emerson's philosophy of nature.

Next, the question will be raised whether it is possible to merge the voice of the forest seer/ecological self with the reality of the natural world. Can a person really speak *for* nature or an ecosystem that lacks the consciousness or will to speak for itself? If we are speaking on behalf of someone or something that lacks a human voice, how do we know that what we are saying is what our ward would wish to say if it could? The danger in speaking for another, in this case in speaking for the natural world, is of

projecting our own thoughts onto nature. Therefore it is critical to examine whether or not the forest seer 'sees' in nature something that most people don't that enables him or her to serve as a mouthpiece for the natural world.

Finally, it is the aim of this paper to examine whether the paradigm of the forest seer, with its emphasis on the continuity between nature and humans, humans and the divine, is strong enough to challenge the operating paradigms upon which scientific modernism is based, viz., those of Cartesian mind/body dualism and the Baconian interpretation of nature as basically mechanistic. Both have served to desacralize nature by reducing it to inert matter, an eco-machine merely producing resources for human consumption. The conclusion that is reached may be briefly stated as the following: that while Emerson's idealism is inherently flawed, the idea of the forest seer as a natural theologian driven by a more empirical than Neo-Platonic epistemology, succeeds where Emerson fails. This means that attempts to resolve the relationship between humans and nature are better resolved in a theistic way, rather than through some type of idealistic system which attempts to refute the Baconian vision of matter by claiming for matter some kind of divine constitution. A further paring back of claims to divinity will be addressed by Val Plumwood and her argument that distinctions between subjects and their gestalt backgrounds are not so easily dissolved by claims of mystical unity. Thus the definition of a forest seer will resemble a slightly scaled back version of Arne Naess's ecological Self, a self-in-relation-to-nature whose way of relating to nature is neither adversarial nor exploitative, but respectful and harmonious.

II. Emerson's Men

a. Emerson's List

In his essay *The Transcendentalist*, Emerson states the need for men and women with superior internal chronometers who are whole persons to help point the way and chart the course for the rest of humanity:

In society, besides farmers, sailors, and weavers, there must be a few persons of purer fire kept specially as gauges and meters of character; persons of a fine, detecting instinct...collectors of the heavenly spark, with power to convey the electricity to other...we should now and then encounter rare and gifted men, to compare the points of our spiritual compass, and verify our bearing from superior chronometers.⁵

In Emerson's Journal of June 1871 he lists the following under the label 'My Men' with no further explanation. While at first glance it may appear that most of these people are simply Emerson's inner circle, upon further examination each appears to possess some trait or characteristic that somehow demonstrates their being made out of a finer metal. Thus, the reason Emerson may list them is in the hope that they may serve as guides and examples for the rest of humanity to follow.

My Men. Thomas Carlyle, Louis Agassiz, E. Rockwood Hoar, J. Elliot Cabot, John M. Forbes, Charles K. Newcomb, Philip P. Randolph, Richard Hunt, Alvah Crocker, William B. Ogden, Samuel G. Ward, J.R. Lowell, Sampson Reed, Henry D. Thoreau, A.B. Alcott, Horatio Greenough, Oliver Wendell Holmes, John Muir.⁶

These men are a diverse lot. Carlyle was a writer and a good friend of Emerson's, Agassiz was a zoology professor at Harvard, Hoar was a lawyer, Cabot was a Harvard Law graduate and Emerson's literary executor and future biographer; Forbes, Ogden and Crocker built railroads, Newcomb was a Brook farm member and one of Emerson's

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), in "The Transcendentalist," 95.

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, ed. by Bliss Perry (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 331.

correspondents and disciples, Ward was a fellow Harvard graduate and banker who was interested in art, Lowell was a fellow Harvard intellectual and poet, Bronson Alcott was a schoolteacher and fellow transcendentalist, Greenough was a fellow Harvard graduate and sculptor who carved a statue of George Washington for the Capitol building, Reed was a disciple of Swedenborg who introduced his writings to the transcendentalists, and Oliver Wendell Holmes was a poet, medical doctor, and future biographer of Emerson. This list may comprise the contemporary court of ‘great men’ whom Emerson made reference to in *Representative Men*: “The world is upheld by the veracity of good men: they make the earth wholesome. They who lived with them found life glad and nutritious...The search after the great is the dream of youth, and the most serious occupation of manhood.” These are the men with whom Emerson surrounded himself and who provided him with the nutrition his intellectual and spiritual life demanded.

Why then aren’t there more naturalists? Why such worldly people included in his list? It must be remembered that Emerson’s Neo-Platonism make the intellect primary and the experience of nature secondary. Hence while the mind of God is still to be found in nature as its memory, our own intellect is closer to the emanating Over-soul than the physical world of nature. Therefore, out of all these people on Emerson’s list, only Thoreau and Muir are naturalists and hence possible candidates for the title of forest seer. Each is a writer who contributed his own fair share into the canon of environmental scripture. Neither sought the offices of society and its institutions; rather each seems to have followed the beat of his own drum. Therefore out of all Emerson’s friends, the “great men” found in his list, only Thoreau and Muir qualify as candidates for the title of forest seer.

b. the problem of recognition: who is a forest seer?

As stated, the Gnostic element in Emerson's idealism allowed him to find God just as easily sitting in his parlor simply by withdrawing into the drop of cosmic consciousness he called his soul; by knowing one's soul one knows the Over-soul. Not so for Thoreau or Muir. While both might claim to belong under the philosophical umbrella of transcendentalism, it must be understood that transcendentalism was a wide net lacking any rigid boundaries or definition. Whereas Emerson was clearly an idealist, it is not so easily asserted that Thoreau or Muir were. Emerson is clearly much more of a Platonist who used nature to confirm conclusions about God previously worked out in his parlor. Thoreau and Muir were much more empirical and hence Aristotelian in their approach to nature. They are not willing to relegate nature to a secondary status behind the intellect, but instead make the experience of nature the focal point of their studies. Hence they may be more rightly categorized as transcendental naturalists rather than transcendental idealists.

Thoreau seems unable to find God among men and often only in nature. With the exception of Agassiz, Thoreau and Muir are the only naturalists found in Emerson's list and herein lies the discrepancy between Emerson's thought and the forest seer's: Thoreau and Muir make the experience of nature their primary occupation, whereas Emerson makes the study of nature secondary to knowledge of oneself. Thoreau built the cabin on Emerson's land at Walden that Emerson had thought about doing, but never did. Emerson traveled to Yosemite and met Muir, but did not sleep out in the woods with him because in Muir's words, he was too "full of indoor philosophy," and his "house habit

was not to be overcome.”⁷ Thoreau and Muir are the natural theologians that Emerson admires from a distance, as it were, when they return from the woods to share his table.

It is interesting that Emerson can identify the traits and coin the name of a forest seer, but he himself is not fully one. But he is enough of one to know one when he sees one. Like Diogenes the Cynic walking through the ancient streets of Athens holding a lantern up to the faces that he meets, stating he is in search of an honest man, one wonders how he would recognize one if he met him. Clearly Diogenes had to know a thing or two about honesty if he hoped to recognize it in the men he interrogated.⁸

Similarly, Emerson is in search of an honest naturalist. David Hellyer, a pediatrician/naturalist, claims in his book *At the Forest's Edge* the ability to diagnose a future naturalist in much the same way he would diagnose a congenital condition, usually by identifying in small boys or girls an inclination “toward the slimy or earthy aspects of natural history.”⁹

c. the forest seer as hypothesis, as possibility

If the only place Emerson ever uses the term ‘forest seer’ is in his poem ‘Woodnotes I,’ can one assume that Emerson was attempting to define an actual vocation or way of being in the world? Was Emerson’s aim in claiming to know a forest seer an attempt to state that he actually knew a person whose essence this title captured? Or is Emerson simply using poetic license to dream up an imaginary person, a possibility whose actuality may not ever occur? A more cautious writer on the concept of the forest

⁷ The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Our National Parks,” 511-12.

⁸ The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, gen. ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), s.v. “Cynics.”

⁹ David Hellyer, At the Forest's Edge (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), 265-6.

seer may be reluctant to go out on a limb and build a theory on a concept Emerson uses only once, and in a poem at that.

Approaching the forest seer hypothetically is a more cautious approach than just proceeding as if we knew what Emerson were trying to say in 'Woodnotes I.' It requires us to consider the evidence first before proceeding under that assumption that the forest seer is indeed a real person and that Emerson is in fact not simply seeking to portray the forest seer as an archetype or mythical figure. This is logical since one does not want to build an entire case for the forest seer when Emerson nowhere explicitly asserts that this as his aim.

Although 'Woodnotes I' is the only place Emerson ever uses the term 'forest seer,' somehow all of his writings seem to point to the concept and serve as a base for its development. Asking where the forest seer is found in Emerson's writings is like asking what Zen is – it is everywhere and nowhere. The fact that the actual term is only found in one place is no reason to discredit the postulation of the forest seer as a being or as a way of viewing the world. As a Neo-Platonist, Emerson is prone to the belief that the macrocosm may be known by the microcosm, stating "A spirit may be known from only a single thought."¹⁰ For this reason a single poem, like a cell containing the whole body's DNA record, can be extrapolated upon and contain the whole thought of a single person. Similarly, that whole person's work can be condensed and contained in a single poem, thus illuminating the compactness and efficacy of poetry as the medium of language for the forest seer.

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), in "Representative Men," 673.

One wishes Emerson were still alive and one could simply ask him what he meant by the term. Fortunately, it appears that someone did inquire of Emerson on this issue and therefore we are afforded a toehold in this respect from which to gain a footing. Edward Waldo Emerson, the son of Emerson, compiled the Complete Works of his father and supplied them with notations. In ‘Woodnotes I’ section 2, the section elaborating on the forest seer, Edward makes the following note:

The passages about the forest seer fit Thoreau so well that the general belief that Mr. Emerson had him in mind may be accepted, but one member of the family recalls his saying that a part of this picture was drawn before he knew Thoreau’s gifts and experience.¹¹

This notation confirms that Emerson, although he wrote part of the poem before he knew Thoreau, wrote a large chunk of it *after* he knew Thoreau. In addition, by careful study of the poem it appears to suggest that the poem is based upon an actual person and not just a strictly theoretical undertaking. Emerson states “I knew a forest seer.” So what we need to know now is how much and what part Emerson wrote before he knew Thoreau, and what he wrote after, and whether or not what he wrote afterwards is somehow based upon “Thoreau’s gifts and experience.”

Unfortunately we don’t know exactly when Emerson first knew of Thoreau. Emerson moved to Concord in August of 1835. Gay Wilson Allen notes that since Thoreau lived in the center of town, it would have been very difficult for Emerson to not know who he was. But their first acquaintance probably occurred in 1836 when Emerson’s sister-in-law boarded with the Thoreau family.¹² The first documented record

¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, notes by Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1904), Vol IX, pg 45, note I.

¹² Albert J. von Frank, An Emerson Chronology (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1994), xxxi.

of Emerson's having known Thoreau came during the summer of 1837 when Emerson wrote a letter to the president of Harvard on behalf of Thoreau, seeking a grant for him to help with his finances.¹³ On Dec. 18, 1837, Emerson's wife Lidian wrote a letter to her sister, noting "Mr. E. has taken to Henry [Thoreau] with great interest & thinks him uncommon in mind & character."¹⁴ By 1838 Emerson and Thoreau are good friends, dining together and taking afternoon walks.

Putting a date on 'Woodnotes I' is aided by the fact that Emerson kept a poetry notebook with occasional dates. In it the first two lines of 'Woodnotes I' were made in an entry dating May 29, 1835. However, these are the first two lines of part 1 of 'Woodnotes I;' the section containing the forest seer is found in part 2, lines 42-74. These were first contained in a letter of March 14, 1836, written to Frederic Henry Hedge.¹⁵ By this time Emerson may have known Thoreau well enough to coin these lines, if in fact he did coin them about him, but it cannot be proven for sure. In October of 1840, Emerson publishes 'Woodnotes I' in the second edition of *The Dial*. In April of 1841, Thoreau moves in with the Emersons and takes Emerson out in a boat on Walden Pond. During this time Emerson writes 'Woodnotes II,' a continuation of 'Woodnotes I,' which he refers to as his "Waldenic poem."¹⁶ He finishes this poem on June 21, 1841 and submits it to Margaret Fuller for publication in *The Dial*.¹⁷

Another reason it is safe to infer that this poem was written about Henry David Thoreau are other references Emerson makes about Thoreau that correlate to verses found

¹³ Gay Wilson Allen, *Waldo Emerson* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 311.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. By Ralph H. Orth, Albert J. von Frank, Linda Allardt, and David W. Hill (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 973.

¹⁶ Allen, *Waldo Emerson*, 384.

¹⁷ von Frank, *An Emerson Chronology*, 161-2.

in the poem. The passage in the poem that serves as the clue is the verse “he would come in the very hour It opened in its virgin bower.” In his Journal, Emerson relates how Thoreau kept track in his journal the exact date and time various flowers and trees began to bloom. Emerson quips that if Thoreau had no idea what day it was, he could always tell time by examining the flowers to see what was in bloom that day.

Yesterday to the Sawmill Brook with Henry. He was in search of yellow violet (*pubescens*) and *menyanthes* which he waded into the water for; and which he concluded, on examination, had been out five days. Having found his flowers, he drew out of his breast pocket his diary and read the names of all the plants that should bloom this day, May 20; whereof he keeps account as a banker when his notes fall due...He thinks he could tell by the flowers what day of the month it is, within two days.¹⁸

Thus we can fairly accurately ascertain that Emerson wrote “Woodnotes I” and based his concept of the forest seer at least in part on the person of Thoreau. This person appears “as if the sparrows taught him.” Emerson clearly thinks this of Thoreau, stating that Thoreau’s “power of observation seemed to indicate additional senses.”¹⁹ But even if one is only willing to assert that any resemblance between Thoreau and the forest seer is mere coincidence, this does not detract from the idea that Emerson is suggesting an ideal which he hopes someone like Thoreau will emulate.

That Emerson based the ‘forest seer’ in “Woodnotes I” both on Thoreau as well as an archetype who maintains an ideal relationship with nature, illustrates the manner in which Emerson was a Neo-Platonist, arriving at the concept first through the contemplation of a Platonic universals, then on the basis of Thoreau as a particular who participates in this ideal. What does it mean to say that the concept of the forest seer is an ideal form or archetype? In his book, *The Concept of Faith*, Lad Sessions arrives at

¹⁸ Emerson, *The Heart of Emerson’s Journals*, 275-6.

¹⁹ Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, in “Thoreau,” 818.

six models of faith, his discovery of which he claims to be of “Platonic” origin. He states it in the following way:

It was as if they had called attention to themselves, not as if I had sought them out or imagined them into being, much less created them according to my own designs...It seemed to me that I was not making up structure and content – arbitrarily devising and combining possible sets of features – but rather that I was being constrained by something independent of me, something that transcended my thought about it and occasionally surprised me, something already “there,” something objective.²⁰

Similarly, stating that Emerson arrived at his concept of the Forest Seer through a ‘Platonic’ process suggests that the ‘forest seer’ is the ideal form or archetype for someone who personifies an ideal relationship with nature. That part of the concept is based upon the particular person of Henry David Thoreau may lead us to two possible interpretations: that Thoreau was merely a particular ‘participating’ in the form of the forest seer, or that the idea of the forest seer was itself derived in part from a particular individual. The latter emphasizes an Aristotelian approach to the formation of concepts and suggests that ideas are inferred from particulars. The fact that Emerson developed the concept of the forest seer in part Platonically demonstrates the influence of Neo-Platonic thought on Emerson. For Emerson, “Plato is philosophy, and philosophy, Plato.”²¹ This influence of Plato’s Forms is also evident in Emerson’s appropriation of Swedenborg’s theory of correspondence in his work *Nature*. Swedenborg sought to establish the spiritual reality that was behind and corresponded to the physical world. This theory of correspondence is none other than Plato’s theory of the Forms

The derivation of the concept also serves to illustrate the difference between Emerson and the forest seer. While Emerson seeks truly to foster a meaningful

²⁰ William Lad Sessions, *The Concept of Faith* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), vii.

²¹ Emerson, *The Essential Writings*, in “Plato, or, The Philosopher,” 421.

relationship with Nature and cultivate a meaningful sensuous experience of it, he however remains the great Platonist confined to his parlor, stuck contemplating rather than experiencing Nature. On the other hand the actual forest seer is much more empirically driven, basing their ideas and conclusions on a first hand experience of nature. Alan Hodder classified Thoreau as a “religious empiricist,” in that he sought God in an experiential, sensuous encounter with God’s effects.²²

If one asserts that the forest seer serves as an archetype or way of being in the world that has ‘objective existence’ independent of its particular manifestations then the essence of this archetype is that the person who embodies it has an ideal relationship with nature. That Emerson came to partial understanding of this archetype before he encountered Thoreau, who then served as the catalyst to complete Emerson’s full understanding of this archetype, demonstrates that a mind confined to the parlor does not have a wide enough aperture on the processes of Nature to complete the picture. Thoreau was the vehicle which enlarged Emerson’s view on the natural world. He supplied the missing pieces of the puzzle which Emerson could not arrive at Platonically.

Therefore, one can fairly safely conclude that though Emerson used the term ‘forest seer’ only once, he felt that this type of person was more than just a suggestive idea or interesting concept lacking embodiment. Just as it may be argued that Christ demonstrated the ideal relationship between the human and the divine, the forest seer may be considered Emerson’s archetype for the ideal relationship between the human and the natural worlds. Therefore the people who ‘participate’ in this form or archetype must be studied if one is to determine who or what Emerson meant by the term ‘forest seer.’

²² Alan Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 22.

III. What does Emerson mean by the term ‘forest seer’?

Even without knowing about Emerson’s relationship with Thoreau, or his naturalist traits, the poem itself still provides enough clues to solve the riddle of the forest seer. Emerson sought in his task as minister, lecturer, letter writer and benefactor to cultivate a new class of naturalist poets, or “athletic philosophers” as he called them. These poets were to provide a uniquely American vision of life which was fundamentally pastoral in theme. For this purpose, the concept of the forest seer may be an ideal which Emerson developed for the aspiring nature poets of his day to emulate. Emerson never accepted the orthodox antitheses between 1) God and humans, 2) humans and nature, 3) and mind and matter, and in the person of the forest seer, Emerson attempts to bridge these alleged opposites. There are several characteristics of the forest seer which present themselves as traits or qualities of the forest seer, not merely in Emerson’s poem but in a similar ‘Platonic’ fashion as necessarily belonging to this kind of archetype or category.

a. the forest seer as religious visionary

It seemed as if the breezes brought him,
It seemed as if the sparrows taught him;
As if by secret sight he knew
Where, in far fields, the orchis grew.²³

The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Why should we grope among the dry bones of the past?²⁴

Emerson’s thought must be put into context. He lived and wrote at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution when Enlightenment scientists were embracing a worldview of a mechanistic universe whose laws may be known through experience and observation

²³ Emerson, Collected Poems and Translations, “Woodnotes I,” 36.

²⁴ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” 3.

of the natural world. The Cartesian philosophy driving this worldview did not see mind or spirit as permeating matter, but conceived of matter as basically inanimate.²⁵ Emerson and the Transcendentalists sought to develop a worldview that took a more Neo-platonic understanding of nature, using as their guide the visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg was an eighteenth century mystic who was supposedly granted access to Heaven and Hell and the spirits therein by God. Hence he is Emerson's model of a seer, given his ability to 'see' into other worlds. Emerson refers to Swedenborg as a Charon-like figure, ferrying us across to the world of the dead in his essay on him in *Representative Men*.

The privilege of this caste is an access to the secrets and structures of nature, by some higher method than by experience...he sees, with the internal sight, the things that are in another life, more clearly than he sees the things which are here in the world.²⁶

Swedenborg's vision of deity posited no independently existing substance, since all being ultimately depends upon the inflow of the Lord. "We cannot move a step without the inflow of heaven," he writes.²⁷ Hence his vision of nature as well as his method of writing, being based in visions rather than on rational or scientific grounds, roots him in the Romantic tradition. Swedenborg asserts that everything in the natural world has its correspondence in the spiritual world, which makes the former a reflection of the latter. Hence, one is able to know God in and through Nature. Such a viewpoint stresses the radical immanence of God in the world, as opposed to a more orthodox theistic interpretation of deity which is essentially dualistic, stressing the transcendence of God in a spiritual realm independent of the world. Therefore it should come as no

²⁵ Emmanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, trans. By George F. Dole (West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2000), 33.

²⁶ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, in "Representative Men," 662, 675.

²⁷ Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, 28-30.

surprise that one of Swedenborg's conclusions is that heaven and hell are merely a continuation of life on earth, that the communities we form in this world continue into the next, and our mental state in this life basically determines our mental state in the next.

As a seer, Swedenborg provides us with some of the information we need in arriving at an understanding of who a forest seer is. The idea of a seer has its origins in the West in the Old Testament, particularly in the person and book of Samuel. Samuel is the prototypical seer and provides the basis for all the prophets that come after him. But one of the teachings of the evangelical Church is that prophecy ended with Jesus. Swedenborg as seer serves as an example to Emerson that seers and their visions are a possibility in any age. "Each age," Emerson wrote, "it is found, must write its own books...the books of an older period will not fit this,"²⁸ that "we too must write *Bibles*, to unite again the heavens and the earthly world."²⁹

However, the term 'seer' is not necessarily a Christian concept. Rather, the term seems to be found in several cultures of both Eastern and Western tradition. The very first chapter of *The Iliad* a plague is ravaging the Achaean camp so that the corpse-fires are burning day and night. Achilles sends for the seer Calchas, "the clearest by far of all the seers" to determine the cause of plague. The seer determines that it is Apollo's arrows that are the cause of the pain, being thrown in response to the prayers of one of Apollo's priest's, whose daughter has been taken by King Agamemnon as war booty.³⁰ That this book begins with the summons of a seer is all the more ironic considering *The Iliad* is the one book that Thoreau is said to have kept at his bedside table at Walden.

²⁸ Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, "The American Scholar," 46.

²⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. II* (New York: Bigelow, Brown and Co., Inc.), 414.

³⁰ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. By Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 79-80.

This is strange reading material for someone with such a peaceful nature and clearly if one were to find a character anywhere in the poem that resembled Thoreau, it would have to be the seer Calchas.

The concept of a 'seer' also has roots in the Hindu tradition, where the highest members of the caste system in India are known as Brahmins, or seers. Such people are "reflective, with a passion to understand and a keen intuitive grasp of the values that matter most in human life."³¹ The Brahmins would consist of society's philosophers, teachers, intellectuals, and philosophers. Similarly, it is the society of the Brahmins of Boston and New England, the Harvard elite and their religious leaders, in which Emerson circulates and finds his friends.

But due to Emerson's transcendental idealism, what he means by a 'seer' and 'seeing' is closer to the Eastern notion of the seer than it is to the Old Testament. Emerson's idealism is similar to that found in the Indian Vedas, so that what the seer sees simply with one's visual sense is God, since the enlightened recognize that all essentially exists as one mind. However, if one posits a transcendent Creator God like that in the Old Testament, then God is not seen with the senses. God is known only indirectly through the handiwork of God, or by a subjective mystical vision of God, which is not open to all except through the seer. Swedenborg's deity is more the God of the Old Testament since his visions posit a transcendent world not inherently open to all. So to this extent his theology is much less Platonic than Emerson's. But his theory of correspondences does provide the basis for a sympathetic natural theology, since nature is based upon God's design and reflects the mind of God. Hence, knowledge of God can be

³¹ Huston Smith, The Religions of Man (New York: Harper Perennial, 1986), 89.

obtained through knowledge of nature, since in the effects there is a correspondence of the cause.

b. forest seer as naturalist

It seemed that Nature could not raise
A plant in any secret place,
In quaking bog, on snowy hill,
Beneath the grass that shades the rill,
Under the snow, between the rocks
In damp fields known to bird and fox,
But he would come in the very hour
It opened in its virgin bower.

Notice that Emerson places a qualifier before the term ‘seer.’ He is interested not just in a seer, but in a forest seer, and his combining the forest with a term that traditionally has very rich religious overtones is no mistake. He intends for the forest seer to be someone of a deep religious nature, but one whose religion is not necessarily otherworldly, but is grounded in terrestrial manifestations of the divine. By combining the terms forest and seer together, Emerson is asserting his own fundamental belief that nature itself can be a revelation of the living God. Emerson argues that anyone who is open to the flow of God within themselves and nature can connect with this higher reality.

So who is shut off from this inflow? Those who are alienated from Nature, which is an increasing reality during the times of the Industrial Revolution as people moved from farms in the countryside to the city and a scientific understanding of nature took hold. This transition has forced a rupture between humans and Nature. The forest seer Emerson refers to in “Woodnotes I” is someone who has either repaired this rupture or never suffered it in the first place. The person Emerson is supposedly talking about in

this poem is a naturalist, a person immersed in the study of nature. Thoreau is remembered as a literary figure, but as a naturalist he is remembered as a pioneer in the field of forest ecology, publishing a paper entitled “The Succession of Forest Trees,” which was based entirely on his own personal observations of how pine stands are succeeded by oaks after logging, and vice versa.³²

One of Emerson’s friends and fellow transcendentalists, Louis Agassiz, was a professor of zoology at Harvard and did not like to use books to teach his students. Instead, he preferred to take them out and teach them through the direct experience of nature. This method of being taught in the classroom of nature clearly pervades Emerson’s thought.

No doctrine of God need appeal to a book...I feel the centipede in me, -
cayman, carp, eagle, fox. I am moved by strange sympathies; I say
continually ‘I will be a naturalist.’³³

It must also be noted that the naturalist may be more sensually driven and empirically grounded than Emerson. For this reason their thinking may be more Aristotelian than Platonist, but with a qualifier. The forest seer naturalist is not the type of Western modern scientist who views nature disinterestedly through the lens of an instrument. The forest seer naturalist may be a scientist, but of a romantic hue, and is not a reductionist who has severed the material world from the sacred, but views nature in all its concrete richness and continuity with the divine. Hence the term ‘forest’ can be wedded to a term with strong religious connotations, that of a ‘seer,’ since the forest seer sees in nature continuity with the sacred.

³² Burton V. Barnes, *Forest Ecology* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 447.

³³ Emerson, *The Heart of Emerson’s Journal*, 74-5.

c. the forest seer as harbinger

Foreteller of the vernal ides,
Wise harbinger of spheres and tides

One of the gifts often associated with a seer is ‘foresight,’ the ability to foretell the future. A notable example of this was when Sitting Bull claimed to have a vision prior to the battle at Little Big Horn, in which he saw soldiers falling into the Sioux and Cheyenne camp and a voice from above said to him “I give you these because they have no ears.”³⁴ The Hopis prophesied back in the 1600’s the coming of the whites and that they would ultimately destroy not only the land but also themselves.³⁵ Muir himself recalls the time he was on top of the North Dome in Yosemite when he “was suddenly and without warning, possessed with the notion that my friend, Professor J.D. Butler, of the State University of Wisconsin, was below me in the valley.”³⁶ After a full day’s walk, he found him the next morning. Muir speaks of his Indian guide Toyatte as “the old weather prophet...who had been attentively studying the sky, presaged rain and another southeaster for the morrow.”³⁷ In an age before weathermen and meteorologists, someone who possesses the ability to forecast the weather, like an old salt fisherman heading for shore hours before a storm approaches might also be considered a seer of sorts.

It is this pre-scientific ability to read and predict the weather, the tides and the night sky, which only someone who is in frequent contact with them could, that Emerson claims as a characteristic of the forest seer. A harbinger is someone who goes before, or foretells as if by premonition what is to come. To those who are not versed in tides or the

³⁴ James Welch, *Killing Custer* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1994), 51.

³⁵ Sessions and Devall, *Deep Ecology*, 97.

³⁶ Muir, *The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books*, in “My First Summer in the Sierra,” 255-8.

³⁷ Muir, *The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books*, in “Travels in Alaska,” 809.

change of the seasons, who are alienated from the study of the celestial heavens, the ability to read Nature and make predictions based upon one's own observances is not within the modern repertoire. Instead of becoming familiar with the rhythms of nature, one simply seeks to dominate and live outside nature's cycles through the use of technology, thus only deepening one's alienation from nature. One buys a wristwatch if one wants to know the time, or buys a chart of tide times, or consults a weatherman or satellite map to find out if a storm is approaching. But what is lost is the ability to tell time by the sun or to forecast the weather on the basis of one's own personal knowledge of natural events.

In Book XI of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine discusses whether or not the future exists, and thus the nature of prophecy, induction and prediction, all of which make claims about the future. To the extent that prophecy foretells the future, as did Ezekiel's passage about the future restoration of the exiled Jews in Babylon to the land of Israel (the parable of the Valley of Dry Bones), it does so by virtue of its reflection of divine intent.³⁸ Otherwise, Augustine states that the future has being only in that it is related to the present, for the causes of future events are evident in the present: "when future things are said to be seen, it is not the things themselves, which are not yet existent, that is, the things that are to come, but their causes, or perhaps signs of them, which already exist, that are seen."³⁹ The forest seer's ability to serve as a 'harbinger,' to anticipate future events, to 'see' where things are going and to sound the alarm if one foresees danger, is due to their immersion in the processes of nature and their knowledge of natural rhythms and cycles.

³⁸ Ezekiel 37:1-14

³⁹ St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. By John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 291-292.

Thus when Rachel Carson saw the dangers posed by widespread use of the pesticide DDT, she did so not by looking into a crystal ball but by being keenly aware of the events taking place in the environment around her. This hyperawareness of natural events allowed her to see as obvious what no one else saw, namely the harmful effects of DDT. Similarly, when contemporary scientists and ecologists ‘sound the alarm’ about the dangers of global warming, many claim they are simply extremists and state “the facts still aren’t in,” meaning, the future is not here yet, so how can you know whether or not the potentially catastrophic effects of global warming will occur? The answer to this is obvious; given what we know now, the scientific evidence is beginning to confirm that the earth is warming up due to the greenhouse effect due to the massive amounts of carbon dioxide and methane that have been injected into the atmosphere since the beginning of the industrial revolution. The year of 2003 was the warmest year on record in Europe in five hundred years, yet another sign confirming global warming. Awareness of the extent of widespread deforestation and climate change due to human causes, as well as the ability to present the facts systematically and infer the effects, is one of the abilities of the forest seer as harbinger of the natural world.

d. the forest seer as lover and mystic

A lover true, who knew by heart
Each joy the mountain dales impart

Since God does not exist in a vacuum outside the material universe, but rather emanates through all being, Emerson believes God can be found in the natural world. Thus Emerson lowers the bar for experiencing God. One of Emerson’s sermons in 1834 was entitled “The Miracle of our Being.” Emerson’s mysticism is not of the otherworldly kind. Instead, life itself, or the experience of life, which is open to all, is in a sense

mystical. Emerson loves life and loves the experience and joy of living. What Emerson does is energize and reconnect the common and ordinary with the wonder of being, recognizing the supernatural in the natural. The experience of Nature thus becomes joyous and mystical. Nature becomes “the apparition of God...the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual,” and the woods are the “plantations of God.”⁴⁰ Standing in the presence of the sublime beauty of nature precipitates mystic moments in which the self is consumed by the natural world.

There I feel that nothing can befall me in life – no disgrace, no calamity, which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a *transparent eyeball*; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.⁴¹

The ecstatic moment when one becomes a “transparent eyeball” occurs while in the presence of Nature, an experience virtually open to all of us. When Emerson was growing up in central Boston, he felt “imprisoned in streets and hindered from the fields and woods.”⁴² After leaving his position as minister at the Second Church of Boston in 1831 he moved out to Concord, which at that time was still a small farming town in the country. This allowed him the solitude and proximity to the woods which he so deeply coveted. Writing in his Journal, he noted “we need nature, and cities give the human senses not room enough. I go out daily and nightly to feed my eyes on the horizon and the sky.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” 32, 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴² Robert D. Richardson Jr., Emerson: The Mind on Fire (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 18.

⁴³ Sherman Paul, Emerson’s Angle of Vision (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 79.

Such a position might be considered “Nature Mysticism,” or “a dim feeling or sense of a ‘presence’ in nature which does not amount to a developed mystical experience but is a kind of sensitivity to the mystical.”⁴⁴ Emerson was widely read in the writings of the mystics (Plotinus, the Vedas, Swedenborg). One mystic, Jakob Boehme, whose works Emerson read, stated “I recognized God in grass and plants.”⁴⁵ Thoreau writes “Nature is mythical and mystical always.”⁴⁶ The feeling that “nothing is ‘really’ dead,” the presence of joy and the experience of the oneness of all things, as well as a sense of the sacred, are all core characteristics of mystical experiences.⁴⁷ As such, the forest seer qualifies as a mystic. John Muir confirms this in the following passage: “[D]ivinity abounded...the day was divine and there was plenty of natural religion in the newborn landscapes that were being baptized in sunshine, and sermons in the glacial boulders.”⁴⁸

It is this love of the natural world that prompts the forest seer to act. He wants to spend all his days in the presence of his beloved. *The Iliad* is perhaps the greatest poem ever written, but does it tell the tale of the quest for truth, the establishment of social justice, or the desire to know the rational creature within? No, it is about a ten-year battle for the love of a woman. Achilles’ refusal to take part in this battle is not due to any ethical debate over what does or does not constitute a just war, but because a woman has been taken from him. His subsequent return to arms that leads to his death is not due to any logical argument, but out of the passionate desire to avenge his friend’s death. The forest seer’s prose and poetry must be understood as being of a similar vein as *The Iliad*, but instead of Helen of Troy, the forest seer’s passion is for nature. In place of

⁴⁴ W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1960), 80.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁶ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, in “The Natural History of Massachusetts,” 51.

⁴⁷ Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 79.

⁴⁸ Muir, *The Eight Wilderness-Discovery Books*, “Travels in Alaska,” 753.

Patroclus, the forest seer's best friends are the trees and the eagles and the bears. One of Muir's more famous statements states "if a war of races should occur between the wild beasts and Lord Man, I would be tempted to sympathize with the bears."⁴⁹ A desire to protect the plants and animals and landscapes they love is what motivates and commits the forest seer to act.

e. the forest seer as minstrel and poet

And such I knew, a forest seer,
A minstrel of the natural year

The difficulty the mystic faces in attempting to put his or her experience into words is to find a language style or art form that does the experience justice. Thus another characteristic of the forest seer is that he or she is a nature poet, "a minstrel of the natural year." Thus the forest seer is not just a naturalist, a saintly hermit living alone in the woods, but also a wordsmith intricately involved in the hermeneutics of nature and the translation of this experience into words. The forest seer is not simply so immersed in the non-human world that he or she shuns others, but remains active in human affairs and works to "bring about a new order."⁵⁰ Thus nature is not simply for humans' aesthetic pleasure, nor is a forest seer simply someone who enjoys the experiences of nature. But as implied in Emerson's essay *Nature*, the devout naturalist follows an evolutionary process by which he or she develops a deeper understanding of Nature: from first regarding nature materially as a commodity, then as a source of beauty, then as a source of language, then as a field of study, and ultimately recognizing nature's

⁴⁹ Frederick Turner, John Muir -Rediscovering America (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1985), 104.

⁵⁰ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," 57.

marriage with spirit. Indeed, it is the forest seer who sees beyond a strictly instrumental, or what Emerson calls culinary, use of the world.⁵¹

Is it the lumberman, then, who is the friend and lover of the pine, stands nearest to it, and understands its nature best?...No! no! it is the poet; he it is who makes the truest use of the pine, - who does not fondle it with an axe, nor tickle it with a saw, nor stroke it with a plane...No, it is the poet, who loves them as his own shadow in the air, and lets them stand.⁵²

Of all the available means at Emerson's disposal he believes that poetry is the best medium for transmitting sacred truths. For Emerson poetry can address the whole individual in ways that prose and reason (or what Emerson terms the understanding) cannot. The wide range of emotions and faculties which are allowed to find voice in poetry allows it to express the intense emotions one feels while in the presence of nature. Emerson believed there are other elements in humans that need to be considered, elements other than the understanding. In this regard, he echoes the Romantic and later Existentialist position. Reason cannot capture or relate the joy and peace that a sublime landscape has upon the soul or the beauty of the sun over the ocean, whereas poetry can.

In seeking an alternative view of matter and nature, the transcendentalists chose not only to reject the Cartesian and Baconian paradigm which had taken over modern thinking, but also the rational form of argument which was used to support it. The adoption of other literary styles to describe the experience of nature is likewise a sign that nature is richer than any rational or scientific attempt to capture it. Emerson never accepted the ancient objection raised against poetry in Plato's *Republic*, that poetry should not be taken seriously since it is not grounded in rational argument.

⁵¹ Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, in "Representative Men," 674.

⁵² Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 164.

The mature naturalist, who is trained to listen, to hear nature, must merge this training with the skills of a poet and wordsmith in order to be a forest seer. Plato states that the “good poet cannot compose well unless he knows his subject.”⁵³ Thus to be a nature poet one must be versed in both nature and human culture and language. One must be part wildman and part bookworm, part Brahman and part shaman, a professor of both poetry and trout fishing. The aim of the good poet is to connect reality with language in a marriage of words with things. By nailing words to their sources, good poetry is effective because it has reality as its base. The good poet must “make the woods and fields his books,” so that “his thoughts will invest themselves with natural imagery.”⁵⁴ So adept should the nature poet be at his craft, that his “book should smell of pines.”⁵⁵

But when humans are alienated from nature or disconnected from the natural world, not only do they suffer but their linguistic and poetic skills deteriorate. When one lives in a world of concrete, glass and metal, one lacks a sense of connection with a more organic world. If one reads of walking in an old growth forest, or swimming in a clear, mountain stream, but never has because all the old growth has been cut down or all the streams are polluted, or one has never ventured outside the city, then these words lack reality and substance. There is no correspondence between the word and its reference.

f. the forest seer as speaker for the forest

Think me not unkind and rude
That I walk alone in grove and glen
I go to the god of the wood
To fetch his word to men⁵⁶

⁵³ Plato, The Republic, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: World Publishing Co., 1946), 355.

⁵⁴ Sherman, Emerson's Angle of Vision, 128.

⁵⁵ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 139.

⁵⁶ Emerson, Collected Poems and Translations, “The Apology,” 90.

When Muir met Emerson in Yosemite, he recalled a line from one of Emerson's poems, "Come listen what the pine tree saith," before showing him the park's sugar pines.⁵⁷ It is the forest seer's contention not only that nature can speak, but that humans can hear what is being spoken. For Emerson, it is the trained senses of the naturalist that allow him or her to hear nature speak, and the capabilities of a poet that can give this message a human voice. Emerson believed that language was rooted in nature and that the derivation of our words could be traced to their pictographic attempt to reflect nature. Thus Thoreau can refer to his journal as "gleanings from the field," meaning they contain fruit for the mind and the body.⁵⁸ This ability to communicate with nature and translate this experience into human words is one of the gifts the forest seer possesses.

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses...transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots.⁵⁹

The forest seer as the messenger of nature parallels the ancient biblical prophets who served as God's spokesman. But just as a prophet must beware lest they speak their own words while claiming they are God's, so the forest seer runs the risk of speaking for nature falsely. In speaking for nature, the forest seer, like the prophet for God, runs the risk of projecting his own thoughts onto the natural world and thus speaking falsely. The prophet must reflect only the will of God, just as the forest seer must reflect only nature. The prophet gains his authority from the fact that he is in direct communication with God just as the forest seer is in direct communication with nature, whereas the rest of the

⁵⁷ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in "Our National Parks," 512

⁵⁸ Hodder, Thoreau's Ecstatic Vision, 266.

⁵⁹ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in "Walking," 616.

people are not. If God had a message he wanted proclaimed publicly to the people, only the prophet had the authority to transmit this message.

If a king's official messenger were to go out and proclaim a message which the king had not written, he would be lying. And if another courtier – one who was not authorized to deliver royal messages – were to take even a true message and spread it about town, he would usurp the royal authority. In other words, any messenger must have two things before he can legitimately proclaim a message on behalf of another person: the message itself and the proper authorization to proclaim it.⁶⁰

The difference between a prophet and a mystic is that God tells a prophet what to say and who to say it to, whereas a mystic is not told by God to do anything. The mystic's words are not spoken by God, but are merely a human attempt to describe his or her experience of God. The difficulty the forest seer faces is whether he or she is speaking for nature like a prophet or is simply speaking about nature like a mystic. When Thoreau says that he wants "to speak a word *for* Nature," this is quite a different thing than speaking about nature. Anyone can speak about God; not everyone can speak for God. The two are quite different and *it is quite clear* that Emerson gives both duties to the forest seer, since the forest seer is not supposed to remain silent about his experiences in the forest or the type of divinity encountered there. The forest seer is supposed to translate these experiences into human words and relate them to others, in fulfillment of his role as religious visionary and romantic poet. Thus the forest seer goes into the "grove and glen" to see "the god of the wood to fetch his word to men." Thus the forest seer is more than just an inquirer, more than just a silent mystic, but indeed a kind of prophet of the natural world.

g. the forest seer as gaining access to border life and threshold places

Many haps fall in the field

⁶⁰ Bruce Yocum, *Prophecy* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1976), 75.

Seldom seen by wishful eyes,
But all her shows did Nature yield,
To please and win this pilgrim wise.
He saw the partridge drum in the woods;
He heard the woodcock's evening hymn;
He found the tawny thrush's broods;
And the shy hawk did wait for him;
What others did at distance hear,
And guess within the thicket's gloom,
Was showed to this philosopher,
And at his bidding seemed to come.

Emerson tells in his eulogy of Thoreau a story that Thoreau was talking to a stranger when he asked where Indian arrowheads might be found. Thoreau replied, "Everywhere," and thereupon proceeded to bend down, dig a little in the dirt, and quickly produced one.⁶¹ It is this knowledge of where to look and the apparent ability to find what one is looking for when others cannot that distinguishes the forest seer's access to border life. Where the past leaves off and the present picks up, or where the human ends and the non-human begin, these boundaries seem to be where the forest seer dwells.

Being a forest seer is a gradual movement away from the human core to the non-human core, but not so much that one's humanity is completely replaced by the non-human. Therefore the place in which the forest seer is to be found is on the boundary, neither fully one nor the other but in between, existing in the grey zone between both. Thoreau's threshold place is Walden Pond, for Muir it is Yosemite, and for Naess it is Tvergastein in the mountains of Norway. It is not Boston, nor San Francisco, nor Oslo, though this is the pole where each goes to fully encounter and ground themselves in the human core. But when they seek a threshold encounter with the forces of nature, it is to their respective wilderness retreats they go. In these wild places of border life the human forest seer encounters all of Nature's shows. Emerson enumerates the displays

⁶¹ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in "Thoreau," 815.

performed in honor of “this philosopher,” the forest seer, by the partridge, woodcock, thrush, and hawk as if they were done “at his bidding” or “to please and win” him.

Having experienced some of Nature’s shows, or somehow gained access to a place in nature where one can experience Nature, may cause one to seek a base camp, or some fixed place which stands at or near the entrance to Nature. Such a place may be called a border zone, a fixed point which is on the edge of the human and the wild. Such a place allows one not only access to border life, but also the opportunity to develop a relationship with a particular location or landscape. Thus one’s identity can grow organically with the land and become intertwined with its fate and feel concern for it like one would for one’s friend. This connection serves as the basis for a relationship with the natural world and becomes a type of threshold place in which the forest seer gains insight into another world. Naess states the role Tvergastein plays in his life in the following eloquent passage:

I like to sit at the living room window of my isolated mountain hut, Tvergastein, which offers an eagle’s eye view of the very Norwegian scenery of the Hardangervidda Plateau... [with] more than fifty thousand square miles of landscape within sight... At Tvergastein, I find serenity within me... I feel that kind of serenity only in the way of life here at Tvergastein. Nature seems to help us to find that kind of calm. Some seek the mountains, others the sea, and still others the forest.⁶²

What the cabin does, i.e., offer shelter to its inhabitants, is not as important as where it is, namely, situated at edge or border of the natural world. This allows its inhabitant a foothold to the threshold places where one gains access to the non-human other. In *Walden* Thoreau states that the “best” room in his house was the pine grove

⁶² Arne Naess, *Life’s Philosophy*, trans. By Roland Huntford (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 20-21.

behind it.⁶³ Normally one thinks of a ‘room’ as being inside the house, not outside. At these threshold places, traditional boundaries are turned inside out, much like the mystic’s ability to stand outside oneself in a moment of ecstasy. Such a state allows the seer to see things in a new light, to see things in a way that others do not. The following passage serves as an illustration of this. Through the simple removal of traditional boundaries one may see the earth in a new light, and view the earth as much our home as our cabin.

When my floor was dirty, I rose early, and setting all my furniture out of doors on the grass, bed and bedstead...It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy’s pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories. They seemed glad to get out themselves, and as if unwilling to be brought in.⁶⁴

This ecstatic “getting out of oneself” may be the defining characteristic of a threshold experience, because it involves leaving oneself and the familiar behind in order to experience the non-human other. But this cannot be done if one’s borders are so rigid and one’s membranes are so thick that one effectively walls off the experience of anything new and unfamiliar. Thoreau citing that the best room in his house is the field behind seems only to be fulfilled in this paragraph when he moves the furniture that commonly adorns his ‘only’ room out into his ‘favorite’ room and it is here that they seem most to belong, “unwilling to be brought in” and once again imprisoned in walls.

Japan is a country whose land is largely mountainous alps. Therefore there is a long tradition of constructing mountainous retreats. Obviously these structures are built quite differently than city dwellings, where one wants to present “an impenetrable face to

⁶³ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in “Visitors,” 392.

⁶⁴ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in “Sounds,” 364-5.

the street...[and keep] the busy city outside.”⁶⁵ But in the mountains one wants more porous walls, ones that let the beauty of nature flow in. The mountain huts have windows and shutters which can be removed and opaque paper shoji screens which slide open to allow the occupants to view the landscape as well as smell the trees. Thus the natural world is not intended to be ‘walled off’ from the person inside, but rather the aim is to foster a sense of continuity with the outside world, a sense of it flowing in and through the house. Naess states he can feel the serenity of the mountains flowing into him when he is at his mountain retreat. He claims that while at his mountain retreat, “everything becomes more alive.”⁶⁶ Thus where the cabin is situated is as important as how the cabin is designed and made. The mountain hut is simple yet refined, since it is “intended as a place from which the mountains can be admired, a place for drinking in nature – not its raw state, but in a managed way that is so characteristic of the Japanese approach to the natural world.”⁶⁷

The mountain retreat is built with considerable more structure than a tent, but intentionally lacking many of the technological devices of modern living, and should be constructed with the aim of favoring the primitive. This is because technological culture in general serves to dominate nature and subdue it, treating it as merely a resource for the production of commodities. Albert Borgmann demonstrates this process in his consideration of the device paradigm, which he sees as forcing a dichotomy between things themselves and the context in which they exist. Instead of experiencing the forest in the search for wood to bring warmth to one’s fireplace, the hearth of the house around which the family gathers, now a simple check in the mail to the gas company and an

⁶⁵ Alexandra Black, *The Japanese House* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 2000), 90.

⁶⁶ Naess, *Life’s Philosophy*, 22.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

occasional adjustment of the thermostat, is all that is needed to provide heat to one's house. But what is lost in the technological device of the modern furnace is an experience of the woods, for the thing is separated from its context.⁶⁸ The richness of the means and of the things themselves that are encountered in procuring the end of warmth is lost. Thus the wilderness retreat seeks to reconnect what one has lost in life in the suburbs and the disengagement from things themselves that a life of consuming commodities produces.

The technological universe is not hospitable to...the experience of something in its own right, of nature in its primeval character...a suburb...is a pretty display of commodities resting on a concealed machinery. There is warmth, food, cleanliness, entertainment, lawns, shrubs, and flowers, all of it procured by underground utilities, cables, station wagons, chemical fertilizers and weed killers, riding lawn mowers, and underground sprinklers.⁶⁹

The life the cabin tradition offers is in stark contrast to this picture of modern living. The mountain retreat offers one a chance to reengage with things again, to gain access to the border places between the human and the natural world. This is part of the mystique and charm of cabins in the woods. In his chapter on "The Ponds," Thoreau is fishing on Walden and after hooking a fish on the end of his line, asks whether it is a fish he has hooked or more appropriately some deeper communion with Nature.⁷⁰ What is lost in a life lived out in the consumption of commodities procured by technological devices is not the procurement of a fish, but the experience of fishing and the context in which the fish dwells. The fish itself may be purchased at a grocery store, but the act of engaging in fishing, which involves some deeper communion with nature, is bypassed.

⁶⁸ Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 41-2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 186, 189.

⁷⁰ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in "The Ponds," 424.

Often one goes fishing not even caring if one catches a fish; they just go for the experience of nature, as evidenced by the recent popularity of catch and release fishing. Nowadays one may go into a store or restaurant and buy halibut from Alaska, cod from Iceland, or sea bass from Chile, but what is lost is not only the experience of fishing and catching these fish oneself, but the experience of the background or context of the places in which these fish lived. Similarly, one can go into a builder's supply center and buy lumber from forest all over the world, but one is divorced from the rich context in which this lumber grew and was produced.

Thus the mountain cabin serves as a gateway to border life and is intentionally kept primitive and restrictive of technological devices not out of a romantic attachment to the past, but because such devices not only threaten the integrity of the natural world, but disengage and sever one's ability to experience nature in its raw state.⁷¹ The cabin in the woods is not simply a place one tows one's toys behind their Mercedes every holiday weekend to experience outdoor recreation. It is deliberately kept primitive to serve as a brake on technological culture, to offer a contrasting experience of the natural world and to aid in the reform of the technological paradigm. The forest seer is someone who is willing to forego the conveniences and gadgets of modern life in order to regain access to border life, to encounter nature on its own terms. "All her shows [does] nature yield...to this philosopher." The presence of technological devices prohibits such shows, and thus the cabin in the woods is deliberately kept simple and devoid of them.

⁷¹ Even seemingly innocuous technologies may present huge problems to the environment. Consider the fact that millions of birds die each year by flying into skyscrapers, radio, power, and cellphone towers. It is estimated that 40 million birds are killed each year just by communication towers alone. See Howard Youth, "Watching Birds Disappear," in State of the World 2003 (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003), 29.

IV. Henry David Thoreau – “a word for nature, absolute freedom and wildness”

a. Thoreau’s qualifications

As stated previously, it appears likely that the person of Thoreau serves as the basis of the forest seer. Even if he did not, he still would fulfill many of the qualifications Emerson has provided in his outline of the forest seer. When Thoreau states that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” this indictment of many of his peers can easily be attributed to their being cut off or alienated from nature, which Thoreau posits as the very marrow of life itself. Their remedy lies in a rediscovery of that from which they have been cut off. Rather than being a creature of habit concerned about social norms and status, Thoreau rejected his job as a schoolteacher, which was the least that was expected of a graduate of Harvard, to become a student of the swamp. He insists on being “the self-appointed inspector of snowstorms and rainstorms.”⁷² Emerson, in eulogizing the life of Thoreau at his death, lamented the fact “that he had no ambition,” that “instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party.”⁷³ But if history is the judge, it is Thoreau who is remembered more than Emerson as the champion of nature and whose insights into the heart of nature were so penetrating that they anticipated the future findings of evolution and natural selection.

b. transcending the instrumental paradigm of nature as commodity

The mission of men [in the Maine woods] seems to be, like so many busy demons, to drive the forest out of the country, from every solitary beaver-swamp and mountain-side, as soon as possible...But the pine is no more lumber than man is, and to be made into boards and houses is no more its true and highest use than the truest use of a man is to be cut down and made into manure. There is higher law affecting our relations to pines as well as to men. A pine cut down, a dead pine, is no more a pine than a dead human carcass is a man...Every creature is better alive than dead,

⁷² Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in “Economy,” 273.

⁷³ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in “Thoreau,” 823.

men and moose and pine-trees, and he who understands it aright will rather preserve its life than destroy it.⁷⁴

In going to Walden what Thoreau did was go where he experienced life most fully and to this day we remember him and not his townsfolk for doing so. Thoreau says he went to Walden to “suck out all the marrow of life.” This type of experience of nature is quite different from viewing nature as an ecomachine producing goods and resources. Thoreau’s euphoric experience of nature is similar to that of a mystical encounter with the divine. As previously stated, feelings of blessedness, joy, beauty, being perfectly happy and at peace, accompany both intense experiences of the sublime in nature and those of God.

The danger of Thoreau’s elixir of nature is its being developed, since it always runs the risk that that it might be logged and mined for its resources, which to some extent it already has. But if Walden were completely handed over to human use, it could no longer serve as the source of Thoreau’s ecstatic moments; instead, it would become a place where Thoreau would feel violated and his feelings of joy would be replaced by feelings of anger, dismay, and outrage. David Strong demonstrates this same reaction when he finds out the Crazy Mountains are to be logged. Arne Naess similarly states: “This place is part of myself...If this place is destroyed something in me is destroyed.”⁷⁵

As one would expect of the prototypical forest seer, Thoreau ‘sees’ in the forest more than just the possibility for economic gain, more than mere commodity or a culinary interest in satisfying his appetites. In contrast, the only time Thoreau finds his fellow townsfolk in the woods is when they need something and are in search of

⁷⁴ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 4, 163-4.

⁷⁵ Arne Naess, in “Self-realization,” *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, edited by George Sessions (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1995), 231.

firewood, lumber, game, or ice from the pond. These people only see nature through the lens of economics and focus on the material and instrumental uses of nature, entirely missing its deeper spiritual and metaphysical qualities. In *Walden* the biggest chapter is on 'Economy,' and it is obvious from Thoreau's experience of the economically minded townsfolk that his message to them is simply, "Simplify, simplify."⁷⁶ By doing so, Thoreau is able to substitute the money economy of the townsfolk for the nature economy of a sustainable lifestyle where nature provides all one's basic needs. In this fashion, Thoreau escapes the need for employment since he does not need money. He states "I was rich, if not in money, in sunny hours and summer days."⁷⁷ Emerson notes of Thoreau, "a fine house, dress, the manners and talk of highly cultivated people were all thrown away on him. He much preferred a good Indian."⁷⁸

c. finding God in nature – Walden as paradise regained

Perhaps on that spring morning when Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden Walden Pond was already in existence, and...had not heard of the fall."⁷⁹

What Thoreau sees in Walden is the Garden of Eden before the fall. To Thoreau humans are restored not by the redemption of Christ, but through immersion in nature. He believes that Walden is "perennially young," as if it never fell. In describing a walk through a simple meadow, he states that "nothing was wanting to make [it] a paradise,"⁸⁰ and "I should be ashamed to think that Adam in paradise was more favorably situated on the whole than the backwoodsman in this country."⁸¹

⁷⁶ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in "Where I lived, and what I lived for," 344.

⁷⁷ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in "The Ponds," 440.

⁷⁸ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in "Thoreau," 810-11.

⁷⁹ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in "The Ponds," 441, 428.

⁸⁰ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in "Walking," 629.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 608.

Indeed, the Garden of Walden is so imbued with divinity now that the two seem indistinct, i.e., one cannot be recognized independently of or easily divorced from the other. They are not oil and water, substances of incompatible natures, but rather dissolve readily with each other, more like sugar and water. Thoreau states “the earth is all alive” and “there is nothing inorganic...Nature is ‘in full blast’ within.”⁸²

In the sketch of Emanuel Swedenborg in *Representative Men*, Emerson cites Swedenborg belief that “Man is a kind of very minute heaven, corresponding to the world of spirits and to heaven.”⁸³ Alternatively, for Swedenborg man can also be a kind of minute hell as well, a point Emerson leaves out due to his Neo-Platonic denial of evil’s substance. Thoreau certainly read these words of Emerson’s, if not Swedenborg’s own as well, and was influenced by them. The project at Walden itself might then be considered an attempt by Thoreau to build his very own Garden of Eden, one that corresponded to the Biblical one, in which he was a new Adam in New England, dwelling and communing with God as Adam did before the fall. Thus Walden is Paradise regained, but to what extent Walden is God, or God’s immanence is cast in Walden, is not as clear, but one can feel safe in saying that Thoreau feels more open to the inflow of the divine good there than anywhere else.

Thoreau’s comparing Walden to the Garden of Eden entails some type of theological commitment to understanding what the Garden was if one wants to examine whether or not the analogy is worthy. In the *City of God*, St. Augustine argues that in order to live in the Garden of Eden what was required was obedience to God. That Adam was driven out of the Garden is testimony to his unwillingness to do so. Thus the Garden

⁸² Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, in “Spring,” 542, 548.

⁸³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men* (Philadelphia: David McKay, Publisher, 1892), 118.

is not just simply a cornucopia supplying all one's human needs. It is first and foremost a place in which one's relationship with God is put in order. Then and only then do the material fruits of Paradise offer themselves to its occupants. Augustine lists the following qualities that Paradise afforded Adam and Eve before the fall:

His life was free from want...there were food and drink to keep away hunger and thirst...Not a sickness assailed him from within...Of sorrows there was none at all...a perpetual joy that was genuine flowed from the presence of God.⁸⁴

From such a description of Paradise we can see that anyone acquainted with *Walden* would surely agree that the account Thoreau provides of his life at Walden Pond clearly parallels Augustine's account of Paradise before the fall. The almost monastic simplicity with which Thoreau lives, his advocating "one day's work and six days 'off,'" the apparent joy that accompanies all of life at Walden, as well as his constant attention to and awareness of the divinity all around him, seem to indicate that, yes, Thoreau was a kind of saint living in his own personal paradise.⁸⁵ In his Eulogy of Thoreau, Emerson says that he was "a person incapable of profanation, by act or by thought."⁸⁶ If the original Adam had been as faithful in his Paradise as Thoreau was in his, one can only imagine how the human race might have fared.

d. nature as continuum of self

It was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans.⁸⁷

Thoreau begs for more than just a visit to the woods. He asks for engagement, to be rapt in awe and fresh discovery of life in the woods, to see nature not as other but as a

⁸⁴ St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. By Gerald Walsh, Demetrius Zema, Grace Monahan, and Daniel Honan (New York: Image Books, 1958), bk. 14, chap. 26, 317-318.

⁸⁵ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, ix.

⁸⁶ Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, in "Thoreau," 822.

⁸⁷ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, in "The Bean Field," 408.

continuum of the self. This requires more than just placing one's physical body within the woods; it requires a state of mind that is aware of its surroundings and fully immersed in the woods. One can be alienated from nature mentally even if one is physically present in the woods.

I am alarmed when it happens that I have walked a mile into the woods bodily, without getting there in spirit...But it sometimes happens that I cannot easily shake off the village.

In order for the self to fully merge with nature, civilization must be left behind. Once one has shaken off the village, one frees up the mind for the influx of nature. The absence of boundaries once this happens is a frequent metaphor in Thoreau's writing. Elsewhere in his Journal he states, "I lie out indistinct as a heath at noon-day – I am evaporating airs ascending into the sun," and "I am dissolved in the haze."⁸⁸ These passages echo Emerson's 'transparent eyeball' passage and may be seen as the transcendentalist's attempt to show the self as continuous with nature as opposed to separate from it. The fact that the name 'Walden' is synonymous with the name 'Thoreau' today, demonstrates how much Thoreau achieved unity with Walden and took on the identity of the land, thus becoming virtually indistinguishable it.

David Strong raises the point that modern devices such as cars and jets only serve to further sever one's relationship with things. He cites a passage in Robert Pirsig's book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* which claims seeing nature through an automobile is akin to watching television, in which one looks out the window as a passive observer like a picture on the screen. Strong argues that "devices have come between [people] and the mountains, impoverishing their experience of them and insulating them

⁸⁸ Hodder, *Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness*, 64-5.

from the possibility of encountering the depths of the place.”⁸⁹ Thoreau’s and Strong’s vision of nature offers an experience that is much more active and engaging than the device paradigm and hence more continuous with the self.

e. nature as possessing degrees of wildness: Walden vs. Mt. Ktaadn

Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful... This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man’s garden, but the unhandseled globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland... 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, not for him to tread on, or be buried in... There was clearly felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. It was a place for heathenism and superstitious rites, - to be inhabited by men nearer of kin to the rocks and to wild animals than we... here not even the surface had been scarred by man, but it was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world.⁹⁰

One tends to equate the idyllic New England countryside of Thoreau’s *Walden* with what Thoreau stood for - wildness. But this is quite far from the truth. At the time of Thoreau’s writing, Europeans had been assimilating into the new world for well over two centuries. There is as much a quantum leap in the ecological formula of New England of today compared to Thoreau’s time as there was from the pre-European New England to Thoreau’s New England. Walden Pond as pure, undisturbed nature is a romantic idealization Thoreau might like to have us believe. But it is far from the truth. Walden Pond and the surrounding area of Concord had been thoroughly logged and developed into farms. In “Baker Farm” Thoreau states “I know but one small grove of sizable trees left in the township.”⁹¹ His cabin is close to town and the railroad tracks transect the pond’s edge. His experiment of ‘life in the woods’ can hardly be equated to a mountain man’s journey into wilderness. When Muir visited Walden, he remarked “It is

⁸⁹ David Strong, *Crazy Mountains* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 28-9.

⁹⁰ Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, 94-5.

⁹¹ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, in “Baker Farm,” 449.

only about one and a half or two miles from Concord, a mere saunter, and how people should regard Thoreau as a hermit on account of his little delightful stay here I cannot guess.”⁹² He complains that Thoreau sees “forests in orchards...and oceans in ponds.”⁹³

While living at Walden Pond Thoreau traveled to Maine to climb Mt. Ktaadn. This was his first experience of true wilderness where “the primitive wood is always and everywhere damp and mossy.”⁹⁴ Ktaadn represents the forest at full blast, pure wildness, “the most alive,”⁹⁵ whereas Walden is only a shade of its previous glory, tamed like a New England town. Thoreau now recognizes this. His taste of the Maine woods now informs him what true wilderness is.

Writing in his journal after *Walden* was published, Thoreau compared his New England to the New England described in William Wood’s book of 1633 *New England’s Prospect*. He now perceives that even his wilderness retreat at Walden has undergone a substantial domestication. He writes “When I consider that the nobler animals have been exterminated here, - the cougar, panther, lynx, wolverene, wolf, bear, moose, deer, the beaver, the turkey, etc., etc., - I cannot but feel as if I lived in a tamed, and, as it were, emasculated country...Is it not a maimed and imperfect nature that I am conversant with?”⁹⁶

In asserting his desire for Walden to be pure wilderness and yet the Garden restored, Thoreau faces an internal contradiction. He seems to forget that a garden is domesticated landscape cultivated for human use, providing for human needs. A garden’s

⁹² Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 320.

⁹³ Muir, *The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books*, in “Our National Parks,” 459.

⁹⁴ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, “The Maine Woods,” 93

⁹⁵ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, in “Walking,” 611.

⁹⁶ William Cronon, *Changes in the land – Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 4.

wild nature has been tamed, shaped, managed and developed. Thoreau seems to want his Garden wild, uncultivated, uncivilized, and undeveloped. “Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps.”⁹⁷ One can only conclude that Thoreau’s idea of a garden is pure wilderness, yet this seems incompatible with a garden, since a garden is organically shaped by humans. But it is precisely humans that Thoreau wants to shut out from his garden.

Nowadays almost all man’s improvements, so called, as the building of houses and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap.⁹⁸

This internal tension between true wildness and the desire to remain within the comforts of civilization is also present in Emerson: “I wish to have rural strength and religion for my children, and I wish to city facility and polish. I find chagrin that I cannot have both.”⁹⁹ Is this contradiction fatal to their position if the forest seer wishes to be a voice for wild nature? The answer is no, it is not, because in order to be a forest seer one needs to be both wild and domesticated, non-human and human, existing in “a sort of border life” between the two in order to serve as their bridge. Thoreau concludes, “I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated: part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest.”¹⁰⁰ Thus nature, as the continuum of the human self, does not swallow whole the ego and turn it completely wild, nor does the ego invade nature to such an extent that it now reflects human ordering and has surrendered its wildness and

⁹⁷ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in “Baker Farm,” 449.

⁹⁸ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in “Walking,” 598.

⁹⁹ Emerson, The Heart of Emerson’s Journals, 208.

¹⁰⁰ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in “Walking,” 625, 622.

become a garden. Therefore there seems to be a point at which the two exist in relation to one another, mutually respecting the other's being without trying to change it.

f. Thoreau's evolutionary insights

What is man but a mass of thawing clay?...There is nothing inorganic...The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit, not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic.¹⁰¹

These words were written before Darwin ever published *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection* in 1859, but predate many of its findings. Thoreau as naturalist had an astute understanding that all organic life forms were continuous and dependent upon the inorganic for their existence. Thoreau rails against a strictly scientific interpretation of matter which views matter as dead and inert. In a world in which the concept of evolution had not yet been worked out, Thoreau somehow senses its findings yet isn't able to fully work out its details. He realizes that the interface between the organic and the inorganic is much more porous and interactive than scientists of his time asserted. As such, many of his writings contain intuitions which stab at the idea of evolution to explain fossils and the differences in animal and plant life and the earth from which they have arose.

Thoreau did however live long enough to read the revolutionary ideas of Darwin in January of 1860. Shortly afterwards he published his short paper on "The Succession of Forest Trees," showing that evolution has favored those pine trees with light seeds that can be dispersed by wind, and those oak trees whose seeds are dispersed by animals. This is why oaks spring up after a pine forest is disturbed, and *vice versa*.

¹⁰¹ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, in "Spring," 547-9.

While the wind is conveying the seeds of pines into hard woods and open lands, the squirrels and other animals are conveying the seeds of oaks and walnuts into the pine woods, and thus a rotation of crops is kept up.¹⁰²

These insights into evolutionary processes that parallel and predate Darwin's theory, demonstrate how far developed Thoreau's naturalist abilities were. This trait substantiates the forest seer's claim to be a harbinger, for obviously Thoreau's insights were on the cutting edge and ahead of his time. This example serves to substantiate the forest seer's claim of 'foresight,' or the ability to 'see' in the present what others won't 'see' until the future.

V. John Muir – What the Stone said

a. Muir's qualifications

Muir's qualifications as a forest seer rest in his unremitting desire to live in and be a witness to wild nature. As a naturalist he was without equal at times, pioneering the study of glaciers and their influence upon the land and its ecology. His writings often merely record his walks through nature and list the species of plants and animals he finds there, as well as his ruminations about them. But he is more than just a naturalist. He is a philosopher as well, constructing arguments on why wild nature ought to be preserved. His attempts to penetrate the non-human otherness of animals and landscapes and become their ally are a testament to why his nature writing is and ought to be considered a voice of the forest.

b. Nature as the Word of God

When I reached Yosemite, all the rocks seemed talkative, and more telling and lovable than ever. They are dear friends, and seemed to have

¹⁰² Henry David Thoreau, Wild Apples and Other Natural History Essays ed. by William Rossi (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2002), 98.

warm blood gushing through their granite flesh; and I love them with a love intensified by long and close companionship.¹⁰³

In looking through God's great stone books made up of records reaching back millions and millions of years, it is a great comfort to learn that vast multitudes of creatures, great and small and infinite in number, lived and had a good time in God's love before man was created.¹⁰⁴

John Muir continued the transcendental tradition, but in his own unique way.

Emerson not only stamped Muir with the imprimatur of being one of "his men," but also blessed Muir with the laying on of hands by a visit to him in Yosemite in 1871. If Thoreau had Walden, then Muir had Yosemite and it was here that he came to worship. Muir's description of Yosemite invokes much of the religious language that Thoreau uses, the only difference being that Muir does not frame his religious imagery in Eastern or Oriental metaphors, perhaps as a result of his Scottish roots and Calvinist upbringing. But he is willing to take up the Garden idiom of Walden and compares those who want to flood the Hetch Hetchy valley as being of the same temperament as the devil who sought to destroy the first garden.

These temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar.

Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well as dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.¹⁰⁵

Muir's naturalist undertakings were in direct defiance of his father, Daniel Muir, who told him "I want you to be like Paul, who said that he desired to know nothing among men but Christ and Him crucified."¹⁰⁶ But Muir is more interested in "Nature's

¹⁰³ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in "Steep Trails," 877.

¹⁰⁴ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in "The Story of my Boyhood and Youth," 51.

¹⁰⁵ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in "The Yosemite," 716.

¹⁰⁶ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in "The Story of my Boyhood and Youth," 102.

Bible” than the Bible of his father.¹⁰⁷ Though it is hard to claim that Muir is an idealist in the same sense as Emerson, his vision of nature allows for the possibility of “terrestrial manifestations of God.”¹⁰⁸ He finds that “stones are talkative, sympathetic, brotherly.”¹⁰⁹ The beauty of nature led him to believe in an indwelling presence of the divine, that this world wasn’t just “a place of trial and temptation possessing little intrinsic interest.”¹¹⁰ By deciding his vocation would be to bear “witness to all of nature’s doings” and to “preach Nature like an apostle,” Muir was viewed by his father as abandoning the Word of God for a type of paganism.¹¹¹ Muir saw it another way. Contrary to his father’s beliefs, Muir felt that Christianity “and mountainanity are streams from the same fountain.”¹¹² Writing towards the end of his life, he compared his life to that of John the Baptist’s: “Heaven knows that John Bap was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God’s mountains.”¹¹³

Muir recognized that bookish knowledge cannot be substituted for first hand experience with nature. While growing up in Scotland and on a farm in Wisconsin, Muir stated that “Nature saw to it that besides school lessons and church lessons some of her own lessons should be learned.”¹¹⁴ As an adult wandering the glaciers of Alaska and the forests of California, Muir taught himself to read from the Gospel of stones and ice-mountains. Stones have stories he believed, and the trained naturalist can read them. Stones are geological clocks that tick and tell time, but not the time of seconds, and hours and days, but the time of ages: “God’s great stone books [are] made up of records

¹⁰⁷ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Travels in Alaska,” 747.

¹⁰⁸ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “The Mountains of California,” 319.

¹⁰⁹ Sessions and Devall, Deep Ecology, 110.

¹¹⁰ Turner, John Muir, Rediscovering America, 147.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 170, 120.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 222.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 341.

¹¹⁴ Muir, The Eight Wilderness-Discovery Books, in “The Story of my Boyhood and Youth,” 41.

reaching back millions of years.”¹¹⁵ It was these books that Muir chose to read and included under the title ‘The Word of God.’

c. thinking like a tree – a windstorm in the forest

Never before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion. The slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent, bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round...the gale was spiced to a very tonic degree...For this wind came first from the sea, rubbing against its fresh, briny waves, then distilled through the redwoods...Winds are advertisements of all they touch, however much or little we may be able to read them; telling their wanderings even by their scents alone... We all travel the milky way together, trees and men; but it never occurred to me until this storm-day, while swinging in the wind.¹¹⁶

Like Leopold, Muir desires to “think like a mountain.” In the middle of a windstorm in the mountains of California, Muir climbs a tree in order to gain an understanding of what it’s like to think like a tree and to experience what a tree experiences during a blowing storm. This passage demonstrates perfectly how the forest seer attempts to expand beyond the periphery of human culture to gain a greater understanding of non-human life forms. By undergoing this experience, Muir exposes himself to all the natural forces that wildlife face without the aid of civilization. This and other experiences make him realize the dangers that storms pose to wildlife, and the fact that “many birds lose their lives in storms.”¹¹⁷

Muir’s inspiration to climb the tree may well have come from reading a passage in Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” which Muir quotes in its entirety at the beginning of his book *Our National Parks*. It demonstrates how the forest seer may build on the works of previous naturalists in their search for a culture and literary style which resonates with their own experience of the natural world.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹¹⁶ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “The Mountains of California,” 399-401.

¹¹⁷ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “The Story of my Boyhood and Youth,” 66.

Speaking of the benefits of tree-climbing, Thoreau says: 'I found my account in climbing a tree once. It was a tall white pine, on the top of a hill; and though I got well pitched, I was well paid for it.'¹¹⁸

Thus we see the continuity the forest seers play in establishing their thought, reading and building upon those who have gone before them. It is almost as if they work together as members on a relay race, passing off the baton to the next runner after they have taken it as far as they could. If the aim in Muir's passage is to "think like a tree," than Thoreau's purpose at Walden could just as well be stated as "thinking like a pond." But the aim in both is the same, to combine the Aristotelian essence of humanity, of thought, with the essence of various aspects of nature. Very few experience what it is like to be a tree or a pond in a storm, for the human response in a storm is typically to seek shelter. We all know what it is like to be a human in a storm, but not a tree or a mountain. Thus these passages seek to penetrate into the world of the non-human other, to explore the border life between the two.

d. Muir's ecological insights: the interconnectedness of all life

No Sierra landscape that I have seen holds anything truly dead or dull... When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.¹¹⁹

Muir's conclusions about nature are very holistic in the sense that everything is interconnected and that the whole is something very different than just the sum of its parts. He wrote in his journal, the "man of science too often loses sight of the essential oneness of all living beings..." but the "Poet, the Seer, never closes on the kinship of all God's creatures."¹²⁰ If there is a single common theme among the writings of the forest seers, it is this - the unity and interconnectedness of all living things, which just so

¹¹⁸ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in "Our National Parks," 526.

¹¹⁹ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in "My First Summer in the Sierra," 248.

¹²⁰ Turner, John Muir, Rediscovering America, 335.

happens to be one of the fundamental principles of ecology. By simply tinkering or eradicating any one life form in an interdependent whole, one affects the rest of the whole. Muir offers an example of this, noting that “hares and rabbits were seldom seen when we first settled in the Wisconsin woods, but they multiplied rapidly after the animals that preyed upon them had been thinned out or exterminated.”¹²¹

Muir wrote before the science of ecology had been developed and many of his findings anticipate its later development. Like the ecologists, Muir focuses on the role each species plays in the community. Like Thoreau and later Leopold, he asserts that all of creation is wrapped up in the life-making process, including the abiotic as well as the biotic. “In the making of every animal the presence of every other animal has been recognized. Indeed, every atom in creation may be said to be acquainted with and married to every other.”¹²² He is also aware of the consequences of the accelerating deforestation that is taking place during his life. He notes that the many of the Sequoia tree’s roots in the Sierra serve as sponges which soak up water. The result of their being cut down is that “for every grove cut down a stream is dried up.”¹²³ Muir’s insights into the interconnectedness of all life foreshadow the findings of the science of ecology. This is another example of the forest seer as harbinger, as being ahead of his time, of being fresh on the path of discovery, so much so that he arrives at conclusions that others won’t reach until much later.

e. animals as subjects of life

Each ox and cow and calf had individual character...Of the many advantages of farm life for boys one of the greatest is the gaining a real knowledge of animals as fellow-mortals, learning to respect them and love

¹²¹ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “The Story of My Boyhood and Youth,” 80.

¹²² Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Steep Trails,” 874.

¹²³ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Our National Parks,” 591.

them, and even to win some of their love. Thus godlike sympathy grows and thrives and spreads far beyond the teachings of churches and schools, where too often the mean, blinding, loveless doctrine is taught that animals have neither mind nor soul, have no rights that we are bound to respect, and were made only for man, to be petted, spoiled, slaughtered, or enslaved.¹²⁴

Muir reached this insight through his interactions with animals growing up on a farm in central Wisconsin. Unfortunately, this empathetic relationship has been lost as animals have been replaced with machines to accomplish much of our farm work. As a child, Muir “wondered at the Indian’s knowledge of animals when we saw them go direct to trees on our farm, chop holes in them with their tomahawks and take out coons, of the existence of which we had never noticed the slightest trace.”¹²⁵ In contrast, Muir states the white “man has injured every animal he has touched.”¹²⁶ He notes Duncan and David Brown, the bear killers. As of 1875, Duncan had killed forty-nine bears in the Yosemite over a nine year period, although “he wanted to kill an even hundred.”¹²⁷

In regarding nature as a community and emphasizing the importance each part plays in it, Muir asserts the intrinsic value of each life form, independent of human value. “What are rattlesnakes good for?” he asks. “As if nothing that does not obviously make for the benefit of man had any right to exist.”¹²⁸ By asserting that each life form has its own purpose and plays its own part in creation, Muir is one of the earliest environmental ethicists arguing that human ethics must be extended to include non-human life forms.

If we regard each life form as having inherent value in its native ecosystem, and recognize that each species plays its own part and occupies its own niche in its

¹²⁴ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, “The Story of my Boyhood and Youth,” 53, 59.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹²⁶ Turner, John Muir, Rediscovering America, 169.

¹²⁷ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Our National Parks,” 530.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 481.

community, or that the loss of a single species could be devastating to the entire community, then individual life forms and individual species should be respected out of concern for the whole. Muir asserts not only that animals are subjects of life and hence ought to be respected, but by emphasizing the individual's niche in a community of organisms, he thereby asserts a holistic argument as well, which may explain why he worked so passionately for the establishment of national parks to protect and preserve vast ecosystems.

f. preservation and the establishment of national parks

The fate of the remnant of our forests is in the hands of the federal government, and that if the remnant is to be saved at all, it must be saved quickly. Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away...Few that fell trees plant them; nor would planting avail much towards getting back anything like the noble primeval forests. During a man's life only saplings can be grown, in the place of the old trees – tens of centuries old – that been destroyed...God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools – only Uncle Sam can do that.¹²⁹

To Thoreau, the problem with private property and the subsequent fencing of it off is that it turns the naturalist's practice of walking into trespassing. Another fault of private property is that the land must be worked economically in order to be bought and paid for. Unless one is inherently wealthy and can pay the upkeep on taxes, it is doubtful the land will be left alone or escape development. Therefore it is likely that what is left of the wilderness is the commons and will fall into hands of the government. Therefore the government is forced to confront the issue of how best to manage its wilderness. The best management policy is not clearly self-evident, since many values present themselves

¹²⁹ Ibid., 604-5.

for consideration: beauty, utility, commodity, ecological health, and the desire to let natural processes take their course.

Since Muir objected to the damming of Hetch Hetchy, it is clear that he is not a big supporter of utility and commodity. But neither does he advocate a strictly wild wilderness independent of human beings, since he proposes a national park system which allows humans to recreate in these wild areas. Muir favors a park system which holistically protects entire landscapes, not just life, but the land which supports the life - rocks, streams, soils, and air. In this respect, he anticipates the Leopold land ethic which is not just biocentric, but ecocentric, since it includes protecting the inorganic as well as the organic. Such a viewpoint recognizes that animals do not exist in a vacuum – they exist in and need habitat. If one were to cut down all the trees surrounding an eagle’s nest out of concern for the eagle, clearly this would not result in the type of neighborhood the eagle would want to live in. Though the individual eagle has not been harmed, by taking away its habitat one has effectively taken away the means for the eagle to sustain itself. Thus preserving animal habitat is just as important as respecting individual organism’s right to exist.

This explains why the preservation of wilderness and free nature is of such concern to Muir and Thoreau. It demonstrates why we are to take seriously Thoreau’s statement that “in Wildness is the preservation of the World.”¹³⁰ In 1901 Muir stated “When, like a merchant taking a list of his goods, we take stock of our wildness, we are glad to see how much of even the most destructible kind is still unspoiled [and have escaped] the clearing, trampling work of civilization.”¹³¹ Much has changed since Muir’s

¹³⁰ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, “Walking,” 609.

¹³¹ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Our National Parks,” 460.

time. In the last hundred years this remnant of wildness has suffered the clearing, trampling work of bulldozers and logging equipment. The Deep Ecologists note the fact that an old-growth forest is the result of millions of years of natural processes unfolding. It cannot be reproduced. Even if an old-growth forest is cut, it cannot be restored to its original state by well-meaning human beings due to its degree of biodiversity and age. Some old-growth forests contain hundreds of different species of plant and animal life. Logging these forests and replacing them with an industrial tree farm loses a genetic pool that took centuries upon centuries to evolve.

Bayard Taylor, writing of California after the miners and loggers had had their way with her, wrote “Nature here reminds one of a princess fallen into the hands of robbers, who cut off her fingers for the sake of the jewels she wears.”¹³² Muir’s concern for the preservation of this nation’s jewels demonstrates the role of forest seer as guardian of forest life and biodiversity, and champion of the cause of free nature. The forest seer sees in the forest more than commodities, more than simply “jewels” there for the taking. The forest seer also warns of the danger that results when those who seek only to get rich are allowed to have their way with nature. Not only are her riches surrendered, but she is permanently disfigured and part of her function is lost.

g. was Muir a pantheist?

Benevolent, solemn, fateful, pervaded with divine light, every landscape glows like a countenance hallowed in eternal repose; and every one of its living creatures, clad in flesh and leaves, and every crystal of its rocks, whether on the surface shining in sun or buried miles deep in what we call darkness, is throbbing and pulsing with the heartbeats of God.¹³³

¹³² Turner, John Muir, Rediscovering America, 246.

¹³³ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Our National Parks,” 489.

Was Muir a pantheist? There are many commentators who say he was. But because Muir was not a systematic theologian or philosopher, we don't know for sure because he never comes out and directly says so one way or the other. Instead we only have statements here and there from which to draw our conclusions, and unfortunately many of these statements aren't really clear. Sayings such as "Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees,"¹³⁴ may sound religious, but can also be interpreted in a strictly materialistic manner. More explicit religious comparisons, such as the following, hint at pantheism, but aren't necessarily so: "the solemn monotone of the stream sifting through the woods seemed like the very voice of God, humanized, terrestrialized."¹³⁵ In addition, Muir frequently personifies nature as if it were talking to him, as in this example: "setting sail, we were driven wildly up the fiord, as if the storm-wind were saying, 'Go, then, if you will, into my icy chamber; but you shall stay in until I am ready to let you out.'"¹³⁶ At other times, "the mountain seems uncommunicative."¹³⁷

In all of the passages just cited one can see that Muir hedges his bets and doesn't speak definitively. He doesn't say that Nature spoke directly to him, but usually uses an analogy to state the experience: "*as if* the storm-wind were saying," or "the woods *seemed like* the very voice of God," and "the mountain *seems* uncommunicative." He does this time and time again: "Every tree *seemed* religious and conscious of the presence of God,"¹³⁸ and "[the earthquake shook] *as if* the whole earth, like a living creature, had at last found a voice and were calling to her sister planets,"¹³⁹ "parks fair as

¹³⁴ Ibid., 481.

¹³⁵ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, "Travels in Alaska," 749.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 788.

¹³⁷ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in "Steep Trails," 901.

¹³⁸ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in "Our National Parks," 580.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 564.

Eden – places in which *one might* expect to meet angels rather than bears,”¹⁴⁰ and “the whole mountain *appears* as one glorious manifestation of divine power.”¹⁴¹

These passages demonstrate the ambiguous position Muir takes, never fully able to adopt a pantheistic, animated nature which is fully divine or Neo-Platonic in origin, nor willing to leave behind his father’s Calvinistic theology which is essentially theistic. He uses a great deal of religious allegory and metaphors which borrow from religious writings in order to develop a vocabulary of god-talk to surround his nature writing, but to what extent these metaphors can be taken literally is uncertain. So does this mean Muir is not a pantheist? One could argue it is easy to *feel like* a pantheist in Yosemite or Alaska, but this doesn’t mean that one is a pantheist. All one can really conclude for sure is that Muir is a natural theologian using the religious language he was indoctrinated with to describe his wilderness journeys and that his powerful experiences of the sublime leave him spiritually uplifted, much as one would feel after a religious revival. Passages that follow the argument from design in pointing to God’s handiwork as evidence of God’s design appear to confirm this conclusion: “Every feature glowed with intention, reflecting the plans of God.”¹⁴²

If Muir were a pantheist then he would believe that God is everything. Why then should it matter if the earth’s landscape is wild or industrialized, Hetch Hetchy dammed rather than left alone? If it’s all God, why should it matter what form God takes? This is the difference between Muir and Emerson. A natural theologian sees God’s intent in wild nature and man’s intent in civilization. A different handiwork is evident in both; one sees in tree farms man’s design, whereas one sees in old growth God’s design.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 527.

¹⁴¹ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Steep Trails,” 980.

¹⁴² Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Travels in Alaska,” 752.

Emerson is a Gnostic and idealist who is able to find God in his parlor. But for the forest seer, who is driven by the sensuous experience of nature, only the experience of truly wild nature will do. For a natural theologian who seeks God outside of revelation or self-gnosis, only God's undefiled handiwork will do.

Muir's attempt to discern God as revealed in and through the physical world demonstrates that Muir was more of a natural theologian in search of a theistic God, than he was a Neo-Platonist asserting a God known primarily through the mind. Thus his objection that Emerson was too full of "indoor philosophy" might be interpreted as a rejection of Emerson's Neo-Platonism. Muir's whole epistemology is based not upon deriving ideas from universals known through the intelligible world of the mind, but from the vast experience one collects over a lifetime in encountering nature's concrete particulars. Muir is not some disembodied intellect seeking knowledge by retreating into the mind and the intuitive faculty which serves as the connecting rod between that mind and God. Muir clearly seeks knowledge through his body and through his senses, as does Thoreau, and because of this their writings are less abstract and more 'earthy' than Emerson's, which in the end demonstrates why they qualify as examples of forest seers and Emerson does not (although Emerson may admire them 'from afar' as it were).

VI. Arne Naess and Deep Ecology's Ecological Self

a. the forest seer's metamorphosis into the deep ecologist

Emerson hoped his writings would serve as an antidote to a strictly materialistic interpretation of matter, or the postulation of a deistic universe. He hoped that the revival of a Neo-Platonic interpretation of the universe might serve as a counterweight to the momentum of scientific reductionism. However, he was not very successful in this

undertaking. Transcendental idealism never survived much beyond Emerson's New England inner circle. Whitehead notes that the idealistic school has largely been ignored and has "failed to disturb the dominant current of thought" which regards nature as a mechanism.¹⁴³ In addition, many of Emerson's other ideas, such as the goodness of humanity, the denial of evil, the radical immanence of God, the innate divinity in all of us ("God in us worships God"), the radical capacity of intuition to know God based upon a faulty interpretation of Kant's understanding of the intuition, and his pantheistic understanding of matter have never really gained acceptance.¹⁴⁴

In addition, without an awareness of the current environmental crisis, one is left in the more optimistic mindset of the nineteenth century transcendentalists and the immediate need for environmental concern and activism appears muted. Although Thoreau and Muir appeared to be among the first to foresee the dangers of treating nature as an ecomachine turning out products, the ecological disaster we now face is daunting: global warming, nuclear waste, acid rain and air pollution, overflowing landfills, urban sprawl, oil spills, congested highways and widespread deforestation. Such problems have led many to conclude that while scientific knowledge may be advancing, human culture and civilization in general is declining. Part of this reason is because advancement in scientific know-how does not entail progress in moral values.

If the proclamations of the forest seer serve as some kind of oracle for the age, then the voices of the twentieth century clearly are no longer singing the verses of Paradise restored. The optimism of Emerson has turned into the pessimism of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the Cambridge astronomer Martin Rees' *Our Final Hour* to

¹⁴³ Alfred North Whitehead, Science and the Modern World (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 75.

¹⁴⁴ Emerson, The Heart of Emerson's Journals, 51.

such an extent that religious apocalyptic language is now being used to describe current environmental problems. This literary strain seems to support the Hopi premonition that ecological catastrophe looms on the horizon. Thus Emerson's ideas must be updated and revised in order to address the problems of the twenty-first century. The passing of the torch from Emerson to Thoreau to Muir appears to continue in the teachings of the Deep Ecologists and the person of Arne Naess. For this reason, Max Oelschlaeger calls Thoreau and Muir (and Aldo Leopald) "seminal deep ecologists."¹⁴⁵

b. a systematic rethinking of how humans interact with nature

Emerson's idealism may be seen as an attempt to resolve the orthodox antithesis between God and humans. Emerson finds in nature the balance or correspondence between God and humans. He did not embrace a deistic vision of the world that saw nature as fixed or static, the byproduct of a watchmaker god that abandoned his creation. The theology of a transcendent God unable to be experienced in this world, known only through the distant recordings of a long-ago revelation, did not strike home with Emerson. Instead, he sought to establish a teaching which was truer to his own personal understanding of God and nature. Emerson felt the presence of God more fully in a snowstorm than in the entrenched rituals of church. Therefore, it was his aim to systematically redefine metaphysics as grounded in the experience of self and nature.

Similarly, Arne Naess believes that a piecemeal attempt to reform environmental thought is not enough; indeed, this is the mark of a shallow ecology. Instead, what is needed is an ecological revolution that takes gradual reformatory steps towards a greener future, leaving behind the current Western anthropocentric and scientific paradigm which

¹⁴⁵ Max Oelschlaeger, The Idea of Wilderness (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 301.

tends to treat nature as a resource.¹⁴⁶ Naess offers Ecosophy T (Eco-sophy meaning wisdom of the earth, wisdom of the forest or philosophy of ecology; T for Tvergastein) as his own personal vision of a way of life that needs to be adopted in order to achieve a more ecologically conscious society. The central question for Naess is “how are the ecologically destructive, but firmly established ways of production and consumption to be changed?”¹⁴⁷ Naess compares the practices of mankind during the last 900 years to a pioneering invading species, one that is aggressive and attempts to suppress if not exterminate other species.¹⁴⁸ Wayland Drew, in his essay “Killing Wilderness,” goes even further. He sees civilization as a cancer upon the earth that will ultimately “destroy itself by destroying its host.”¹⁴⁹ Thus an ecological commitment to protect the environment piecemeal or through a shallow ecology that remains anthropocentric is insufficient. What is needed is an entire reevaluation of the man-nature relationship and the adoption of a new paradigm for interacting with nature in a deeper ecological framework which does not seek to dominate or control nature. This is what he means when he says he seeks the preservation of free nature. His paradigm is one that allows the processes of evolution to continue without human interference.

c. the expanded ecological self that identifies with nature

Arne Naess was one of the first to develop an ecological ontology and assert the concept of an ecological self. Such a position argues that we underestimate who we are when we identify our selves with simply our ego or our body. Such a position is myopic and denies the fact that we are part of an organic whole which is something greater than

¹⁴⁶ Arne Naess, Ecology, community and lifestyle, translated and edited by David Rothenberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 156.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 182-3.

¹⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, Wayland Drew, “Killing Wilderness,” in Deep Ecology for the 21st Century, 118.

the sum of its parts. Self-realization involves a reexamination of what it means to be an existing individual. For Naess the highest level of self-realization occurs when the self *identifies* with the non-human world, recognizing that there are no distinct, bifurcated boundaries between the two.¹⁵⁰ This is the process of self-realization, a process which is never complete but always moving outward from the base of the self in the direction of the larger organic whole, or Self. The ecological self is the realization of the self-in-Self, the human self that exists *in relationship to and in identification with* the natural world.¹⁵¹

What is discovered in the process of self-realization is that “parts of nature are parts of ourselves.”¹⁵² Through the realization that “every living being is intimately connected” we come to see that our continued existence is dependent upon the continued existence of non-human life forms and ecosystems.¹⁵³ Hence the slogan “no one is saved until we are all saved.”¹⁵⁴ Self-love becomes love of and identification of the self with the larger organic whole of which one is a part. One would not cut down rain forests if they recognized that they are in essence one’s external lungs.

Helen and Scott Nearing, in their book *The Good Life*, argue that the medical community approaches health from the wrong starting point. Rather than considering the treatment of disease as the focus of medicine, the Nearings believe that the aim of medicine should be to establish health. They believe that the establishment of health is achieved holistically through a proper relationship to the earth. Healthy ecosystems produce healthy individuals, whereas neglected and mismanaged land produces disease.

¹⁵⁰ Donald Van DeVeer and Christine Pierce, eds., *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book*, “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” by Arne Naess, 227.

¹⁵¹ Naess, *Ecology, community, and lifestyle*, 7-9

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁵³ Naess, *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, in “Self-realization,” 233.

¹⁵⁴ Sessions and Devall, *Deep Ecology*, 66.

The aim of medicine should therefore not be focused on the treatment of disease, but to promote the health and safety of the environment in which individuals live.¹⁵⁵ By treating the cause of the disease, i.e., polluted, degraded and stressed ecosystems, one prevents disease from occurring in the first place. Since we are what we eat, their chief concern is that our water be kept clean and pure and free from contamination, and our soil protected against erosion, improper cultivation, and the excessive use of fertilizer.

Thus as an understanding of the self evolves in the process of self-realization, one learns to recognize that one's self is connected to natural processes all around them, and that the self is in some sense a product of and continuation of those processes. Emerson's idea of the 'transparent eyeball,' in which the ego is dissolved in "the currents of the Universal Being," could be compared to Naess's self-realization, since what is happening in the ecstatic experience of nature is the ego becomes dissolved in awareness of ego's ecological background. This mystical dissolution of the ego is not necessarily a religious statement, for one can assert that what is being dissolved is the ego not into God but into nature. Thoreau's statement, "it was no longer beans that I hoed, nor I that hoed beans," bears evidence of this.¹⁵⁶ Emerson similarly makes the analogy that we drink in the external world just as we ingest food, thus blurring the inner/outer distinction so commonly drawn between the two. "The sky is the daily bread of the eyes." The forest seer that drinks in the experience of nature becomes Naess's ecological self. In both instances, identification with the natural world blurs the distinction between subject and object until the two become one. In this manner the forest seer's voice becomes a voice

¹⁵⁵ Helen and Scott Nearing, The Good Life (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 117-121.

¹⁵⁶ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in "The Bean Field," 408.

for nature by becoming nature. Emerson states “A painter told me that nobody could draw a tree without in some sort becoming a tree.”¹⁵⁷

d. a holistic or gestalt approach to understanding nature

The findings of both modern ecology and psychology seem to support an understanding of the individual organism as inextricably linked to its environment. Perceptual gestalts in which one can only distinguish the forefront in relation to its background demonstrates that “there is no completely isolatable I.”¹⁵⁸ Gestalts bind together the I and the not-I into a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Thus all the cells in the human body when taken collectively make up a human being, something quite different than each individual cell, yet at the same time requiring the participation of each cell. Similarly, the study of ecological principles is an attempt to show how “everything hangs together,” that animals, plants, and ecosystems are all interrelated in an organic whole that makes each important.¹⁵⁹ This is a fundamental teaching of ecology as outlined in today’s textbooks:

Organisms do not stand on their own; they evolve and exist in the context of ecological systems that confer those properties called life. The panda is part of the mountain bamboo-forest ecosystem and can only be preserved as such. The polar bear is a vital part of the Arctic marine ecosystem and will not survive without it. Ducks are creatures born of marshes. Biology without its ecological context is dead.¹⁶⁰

This position allows Naess to state his overwhelming conclusion: “We are not outside the rest of nature and therefore cannot do with it as we please without changing ourselves.”¹⁶¹ Thus Naess sees ecological processes something “which have endured for

¹⁵⁷ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History,” 119.

¹⁵⁸ Naess, Ecology, community and lifestyle, 164, 60, 79.

¹⁵⁹ Naess, Deep Ecology for the 21st Century, in “Ecosophy and Gestalt Ontology,” 240.

¹⁶⁰ Barnes, Forest Ecology, 7.

¹⁶¹ Naess, Ecology, community and lifestyle, 165.

millions of years” as one of the principles linking humans and nature together.¹⁶²

Emerson reaches similar conclusions but for different reasons, perhaps because the fields of ecology and psychology were not yet developed when he wrote. What unifies alleged opposites for Emerson is not millions of years of natural processes evolving together, but the underlying substance of spirit. Naess too sees God’s spirit in nature and states that his understanding of matter is derived from Spinoza’s panentheism, which allows him to assert a transcendent and immanent God at the same time: “God is *in* everything, and everything is *in* God.”¹⁶³ Therefore it is doubtful that he would find any reason to object to Emerson seeking to demonstrate the fundamental unity of all things through God:

[All] are of one pattern made; bird, beast, and flower,
Song, picture, form, space, thought, and character,
Deceive us, seeming to be many things,
And are but one. Beheld far off, they differ
As God and devil bring them to the mind,
They dull its edge with their monotony.
To know one element, explore another,
And in the second reappears the first.
The specious panorama of a year
But multiplies the image of a day,-
A belt of mirrors round a taper’s flame;
And universal Nature, through her vast
And crowded whole, an infinite paroquet,
Repeats one note.¹⁶⁴

e. the openness to non-Western traditions

The compatibility of Emerson’s forest seer with the concepts of the Deep Ecologists is due to several reasons, foremost among them the openness to non-Western traditions. The transcendentalists were among the first thinkers in America to draw upon the ideas of the East. The reason for this, as Emerson states, is that “the East loved

¹⁶² Naess, The Environmental and Ethics Policy Book, in “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” 230.

¹⁶³ Naess, Life’s Philosophy, 83.

¹⁶⁴ Emerson, Collected Poems and Translation, “Xenophanes,” 110.

infinity, [whereas] the West delighted in boundaries.”¹⁶⁵ In each issue of *The Dial* a section entitled “Scripture” would contain passages from any one of the following: the Bhagavad-Gita, the Laws of Menu, Confucius, the Koran, the Hindu Vedas and Buddhist dharma. This practice reflected the transcendentalist fondness for the study of comparative religions in the belief that “the religion of the future would combine the best feature of all existing religions.”¹⁶⁶ This is also recognition of the Hindu belief in there being multiple paths to the summit where they all converge. God is the summit, not the path, and hence not to be identified with any one particular religion.¹⁶⁷

The Deep Ecologists similarly prefer Buddhist and Hindu concepts of the self. What Naess likes about Eastern traditions is that they do not make the inner-outer distinction that the West does. When the individual identifies strictly with the internal ego or the physical body of the organism, the result is “alienation from the mountain.”¹⁶⁸ The self of the Western tradition Naess terms the narrow self, whereas the deeper ecological self is based upon the Hindu concept of *atman*, or the larger universal self which Naess sees as the organic whole. Sessions and Devall find the ecological self to be very similar to what the Chinese term the Tao.¹⁶⁹ Hence one of the central concepts of Deep Ecology is drawn from the East.

This sense of self is also promoted in Robert Pirsig’s book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. In his book, Pirsig states “The real cycle you’re working on is a cycle called yourself. The machine that appears to be ‘out there’ and the person that

¹⁶⁵ Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, “Plato; or, The Philosopher,” 427.

¹⁶⁶ William R. Hutchison, *The Transcendentalist Ministers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 152.

¹⁶⁷ Smith, *The Religions of Man*, 114.

¹⁶⁸ Naess, *Ecology, community and lifestyle*, 90

¹⁶⁹ Sessions and Devall, *Deep Ecology*, 76.

appears to be ‘in here’ are not two separate things.”¹⁷⁰ Thus Pirsig argues that the distinction between the inner self as narrowly conceived and the outer world is not really as discontinuous as conventional wisdom teaches. Their being in relation to one another essentially unites them. This assertion is essentially no different than Emerson’s statement “the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.”¹⁷¹

To the mechanic who has taken apart and rebuilt a motorcycle, tightening every nut and bolt on it, driving down the highway on that motorcycle is a radically different experience than for the rider who has bought that machine from a dealer. Again, subjectivity enters into how one relates to an objective experience. The mechanic ‘sees’ in his mind the pistons moving up and down, the timing of the firing of the sparkplug, and the metal scraping against metal, lubricated by a thin film of oil which somehow prevents the whole process from collapsing into a melted hunk of metal. It may be said that the motorcycle is an extension of the mechanic’s mind, possessing an independent objective existence apart from him, but also to a certain extent contingent upon the mechanic for its ‘coming to life.’ The greater the mechanic’s insight into the processes of the motorcycle’s operation, the greater the motorcycle is in some sense a continuation of the mechanic, intertwining his subjectivity with the objectivity of the machine. Similarly, a naturalist’s insight into the processes of nature connects or engages him or her to the natural world in a deeper way than someone who merely approaches nature in a disinterested way.

¹⁷⁰ Robert Pirsig, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (New York: Bantam Books, 1982) 293.

¹⁷¹ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Over-Soul,” 237.

Nevertheless, Naess prefers a more organic metaphor than a technological device to demonstrate intersubjectivity between the self and other. He cites the Buddha's teaching that human beings should embrace all living things the way a mother cares for her son.¹⁷² A doctor may view a child objectively, having quantifiable vital statistics and various physical properties such as height, weight, and color of hair. But when this child is viewed through the subjectivity of the mother, the relationship is radically changed. The mother may see in the child a bond which transcends our ability to discuss it.

f. the attempt to rework the Christian tradition to be more eco-friendly

Emerson boldly asserts an idealistic vision of nature which is essentially pantheistic because it essentially asserts that God's mind is the only absolute reality. "What is there of the divine in a load of bricks?" he asks. "What is there of the divine in a barber's shop? Much. All."¹⁷³ Naess as well embraces a similar view of nature which is based on his favorite philosopher, Spinoza. Naess states, "For him God, *Deus*, is 'immanent' – not something outside our world. God is constantly creating the world by *being* the creative force in Nature."¹⁷⁴ Naess offers a vision of the organic, ecological interrelatedness of all things which is based upon Spinoza's monism, although he doesn't always state this explicitly.

He also tries to work within the Christian mainframe, not denouncing it for its alleged antipathy towards nature, but instead emphasizing those traditions and Biblical passages that are empathetic to the natural world and assert man's ecological responsibilities. He argues that the dominion over the earth given to man by God in Genesis 1:28 ("Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of

¹⁷² Naess, The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book, in "Self-Realization," 229.

¹⁷³ Emerson, The Heart of Emerson's Journals, 85.

¹⁷⁴ Naess, Life's Philosophy, 8.

the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground) is a far cry from allowing us to do anything we like. Rather, the role God charges us with keeping is that of guardian or keeper of the Garden, administrator not tyrant, and ultimately we are simply stewards answering to God for our actions.¹⁷⁵ This point is supported by the many parables Jesus told concerning a vineyard and the faithful or unfaithful servants who tended it.¹⁷⁶ The fact that God brought all the species of animals into Noah's Ark, not just humans, demonstrates God's ecocentric concern for all the living creatures of earth. In addition, Sessions and Devall cite some Christians' proposal for an Eleventh Commandment, which they believe has biblical support. It would read as follows:

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof: Thou shall not despoil the earth, nor destroy the life thereon.¹⁷⁷

Naess's endorsement of the Norwegian cabin tradition, in which he retreats from society to commune with nature on top of a mountain, is indeed a continuation of Muir's mountain climbs and Thoreau's building his cabin on Walden. This flight into the wilderness also has strong roots in Christianity. Thoreau states that "out of such a wilderness comes the Reformer eating locusts and wild honey."¹⁷⁸ Thoreau's message to "Simplify" is not much different from the asceticism of the monastic lifestyle or the voluntary impoverishment of St. Francis. For this reason Ellery Channing called Thoreau "an anchorite, a recluse."¹⁷⁹ The emphasis on the religious refinement of the soul as well as concern for the natural world is also maintained by the Deep Ecologists, Bill Devall

¹⁷⁵ Naess, Ecology, community and lifestyle, 183-4.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁷⁷ Sessions and Devall, Deep Ecology, 34.

¹⁷⁸ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in "Walking," 613.

¹⁷⁹ Hodder, Thoreau's Ecstatic Witness, 15.

and George Sessions, who seek not “the multiplication of wants but the purification of human character.”¹⁸⁰

Our vital material needs are probably more simple than many realize. In technocratic-industrial societies there is overwhelming propaganda and advertising which encourages false needs and destructive desires designed to foster increased production and consumption of goods. Most of this actually diverts us from facing reality in an objective way and from beginning the ‘real work’ of spiritual growth and maturity.¹⁸¹

St. Antony left the comfort of the cities of Egypt to lead the ascetic life of a hermit in prayer, living at first in a crag in the desert and later atop a mountain among the ruins of an old, abandoned fort.¹⁸² Like Muir, he took into the wilderness with him only bread. While Thoreau too would qualify as an ascetic in regard to the pleasures of high society, when it came to the experience of the natural world he gave himself over to unbridled sensuous experience, for it was here that he found his joy. So rather than asserting the metaphor of the forest seer as some kind of anchorite or monk seeking escape from this world, perhaps a better metaphor would be to consider them as Penitents of the natural world than deniers of the flesh. The forest seer as Penitent would thus focus on the role each plays as an intermediary between the human world and the natural world, rather than this world and the next. The forest seer as Penitent serves as a type of Christ figure seeking forgiveness of sins for the transgressions of mankind not against God, but the natural world. Like the sinless Christ, the forest seer too may stand before nature without blame, but as intercessor of the human race may seek absolution for the sins of all mankind against the natural world throughout the course of history.

¹⁸⁰ Sessions and Devall, *Deep Ecology*, 117.

¹⁸¹ Sessions and Devall, *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book*, in “Deep Ecology,” 223.

¹⁸² Kristen E. White, *A Guide to the Saints* (New York: Ivy Books, 1991), 18.

Emerson completes the analogy. Not only is the forest seer a penitent seeking forgiveness of sins from the natural world, but by his immersion in nature he is cleansed of his own sins against God, thereby achieving a state of justification or grace. Thus Emerson claims for nature the same ability to atone for sins as that usually reserved for Christ's atonement upon the cross. Thus nature assumes the role of a sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible grace capable of cleansing humans of their sin, and why should it not be? Does not Muir frequently claim that nature is a revelation of God just as authoritative as the Bible?

Whoso walketh in solitude
And inhabiteth the wood,
Choosing light, wave, rock, and bird,
Before the money-loving herd,
Into that forester shall pass,
From these companions, power and grace.
Clean shall he be, without, within
From the old adhering sin.¹⁸³

g. combining theory with practice: environmental and political activist

Emerson's forest seer, as he envisioned it, is not just a hermit living peacefully in the woods, but also actively engaged in issues of social justice. Emerson saw a fault in Thoreau's alleged retreat from society and self-absorbed withdrawal into the natural world. What Emerson believed Thoreau lacked was ambition and the activism of a John Brown. However, it may be argued that Thoreau's flight from society was his own way of saying that he did not agree with many of its laws and practices. Thoreau writes in *Civil Disobedience*, "Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined."¹⁸⁴

¹⁸³ Emerson, *Collected Poems and Translations*, "Woodnotes II," 42.

¹⁸⁴ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, "Civil Disobedience," 125.

The Deep Ecologist believes that morality is slowly continuing to evolve, so that even the non-human elements of life will eventually fall under the umbrella of ethics. Thus this new morality should be reflected in one's vision of society and political decisions in order to protect what is left of free nature in order to let evolution continue. This may be accomplished not only by the formation of green political parties, but also by political action in which lawmakers mobilize laws against unecological decisions.¹⁸⁵ Green political decision-making should not be guided by the standard of economic growth or a higher standard of living, but by the quality of life and the health of the environment. The foremost question that needs to be addressed is "what would be a greener line in politics at the moment within issue x and how could it be realized?"¹⁸⁶ Naess believes that the naturalist has a civic duty to participate in the affairs of the state and to work to preserve free nature by promoting softer technologies and limiting human population growth. Indeed, several of the eight points of Deep Ecology state that we have a moral obligation to work to change the basic economic, technological, and ideological structures in order to bring about this end.¹⁸⁷

VII. Does the forest seer/ecological self speak *for* nature or *about* nature?

a. the forest seer as an individual rather than institutional figure

Nature is not an abstract theory, although science does seek to find fundamental laws which govern it. But to a person who does not see nature through the lens of an instrument, it is something rich and concrete which must be deeply experienced on the personal level to be fully appreciated. Thoreau states "while we are confined to books...we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak

¹⁸⁵ Naess, Ecology, community and lifestyle, 153-4, 146.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁸⁷ Naess, Deep Ecology for the 21st Century, in "The Deep Ecological Movement," 68.

without metaphor,” which is the direct experience of a life lived in relation to nature.¹⁸⁸ But in order to immerse oneself fully in the experience of nature, without interference, one must go alone into the woods. For this reason the forest seer is often a solitary figure. Alan Hodder notes that Thoreau read Jamblichus’s account of the life of Pythagoras and believes that he may have been influenced by the advice Pythagoras gave to his disciples “to seek out solitude so as to better support their philosophical meditations.”¹⁸⁹

One reason Kierkegaard (and perhaps Thoreau) never held an institutional position was because he was afraid it would blur the distinction between what he stood for and what the institution stood for. On his gravestone he chose to have written “That Individual.” Similarly, Emerson urges us to leave the crowd and “act singly.”¹⁹⁰

These are the voices which we hear in solitude, but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of everyone of its members... Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist... I am ashamed to think how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions... Your conformity explains nothing... I must be myself.¹⁹¹

These passages assert the forest seer’s need to stand as an individual, perhaps due to the fact that nature is not a human institution, but also because the path of the forest seer leads away from homocentric thinking. The danger of having a forest seer who is easily influenced by human thought or under the guidance of a human institution appears twofold: 1) that human or homocentric bias will interfere with the forest seer’s acting as a voice for nature and 2) that the environmentalist may simply “become institutionalized as an appendage of the very system whose structure and methods it professes to

¹⁸⁸ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in “Sounds,” 363.

¹⁸⁹ Hodder, Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness, 86.

¹⁹⁰ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 139.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 134, 135, 145.

oppose.”¹⁹² Muir was accused of hypocrisy simply because he once worked at a sawmill in the Sierras.

The biocentric thinker, as defender of the rights of non-human life forms and voice for the voiceless, will often enter into conflict with his or her fellow humans when the rights of the natural world have been abused. An authentic forest seer recognizes a bear’s right to exist without human interference and to roam freely, unmolested in the mountains and not be hunted, killed, stuffed and displayed in a sporting stores or airport. This puts the forest seer in the uneasy position of appearing misanthropic. When Emerson refers to Thoreau as “the attorney of indigenous plants,” this is exactly the type of role a forest seer should be fulfilling as defender of the rights of the natural world.¹⁹³

The forest seer avoids the mass consciousness of the crowd that governs the insect world and ants in particular, where one is a member of a colony whose sole aim is to build up the colony. In this respect, an anthill is like a human city or town, and the danger of being a part of it is that the sole task assigned to one is simply to build up and serve the human anthill without ever questioning whether or not it is good or what one is doing is right. The analogy is even more apt considering Thoreau uses it himself, citing a battle he witnessed in “Brute Neighbors” between “two races of ants,” one black and the other red. At the end of the day, Thoreau states he felt he had witnessed “a human battle before my door.”¹⁹⁴ To simply fall into the human routine and behave like a programmed ant is to run the risk of being like the mass of men leading lives of quiet desperation, never really knowing who they are or why they do what they do. It is to lose one’s identity in the masses and become faceless. As Thoreau wrote, “We are not prepared to

¹⁹² Sessions and Devall, *Deep Ecology*, 3.

¹⁹³ Emerson, *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, in “Thoreau,” 817.

¹⁹⁴ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, in “Brute Neighbors,” 474-478.

believe that every private soldier in a Roman army had a name of his own – because we have not supposed that he had a character of his own.”¹⁹⁵

b. Walking as the forest seer’s vocation

Only by going alone in silence, without baggage, can one truly get into the heart of the wilderness.¹⁹⁶

Thoreau spent a great part of each day walking in the wilderness: “I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least – and it is commonly more than that – sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields.”¹⁹⁷ In his book *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness*, Alan Hodder sets forth his thesis that Thoreau found he was most susceptible to states of ecstasy when he was walking through the woods. Thus his walks in the woods take on the form of a spiritual quest aimed at the ecstatic experience of nature in which his ego is merged in a “progressive identification of consciousness with natural forms.”¹⁹⁸

Muir’s journeys often are walking trips through the mountains and glaciers. His book *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf* is about his experiences walking from Wisconsin to the Gulf of Mexico and his encounters with the people and plants he met along the way. For this reason, Muir claims he had left the University of Wisconsin for another, the “University of the Wilderness.”¹⁹⁹ The wilderness is not in a classroom, nor in Boston or Madison. In order to see the wilderness you have to go to it. The wilderness is experienced experientially, not abstractly. For this reason, Thoreau states “He who sits

¹⁹⁵ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, in “Walking,” 620.

¹⁹⁶ Sessions and Devall, *Deep Ecology*, 114.

¹⁹⁷ Thoreau, *The Portable Thoreau*, in “Walking,” 594

¹⁹⁸ Hodder, *Thoreau’s Ecstatic Witness*, 65

¹⁹⁹ Muir, *The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books*, in “The Story of my Boyhood and Youth,” 111.

still in a house all the time may be the greatest vagrant of all.”²⁰⁰ In order to learn about the wild animals, one must leave society and go to the wilderness where they live. For this reason Muir stresses the importance of preserving it. Just as one would not tear down the library at a university, so should the book of wilderness be preserved.

You should take a walk into a few of the tertiary volumes of the grand geological library of the park, and see how God writes history.²⁰¹

c. science vs. ecology: are humans separate or a part of nature

More and more, in a place like this, we feel ourselves part of wild Nature, kin to everything.²⁰²

Modern science is based on Cartesian mind/body (subject/object) dualism and claims that the mind constitutes a different substance from the body since it is not divisible in the way that the body is. If science allows for any type of God it is usually a deistic god who created the universe in a mechanistic fashion which is governed by regulative or natural laws. Such a view forces a sharp divorce between God and creation, so that God is fully transcendent from the world. Theists maintain God’s transcendence yet immanence, but still maintain God’s division and separateness from matter. Therefore the scientific concern with matter is to an extent an endeavor devoid of any spiritual content.

The attempt to transcend this view and bridge this rift is the work of many postmodern writers, beginning with the Romantics. Whitehead notes Wordsworth, Milton, Pope and Tennyson as notable writers wrestling with the new worldview proposed by science. He argues that these writers saw something in nature “that failed to receive expression in science” and their writings attempt to give voice to these muted

²⁰⁰ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Our National Parks,” 593.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 482.

²⁰² Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “My First Summer in the Sierra,” 279.

aspects of nature which are overlooked by the scientific method.²⁰³ If it were only the scientist whom we allowed the voice of nature to speak through, then such a voice would be a mere abstraction, a relationship of quantities, a formula arrived at through the lens of an instrument. What is lost is the concrete experience of the subjective observer, something objective science is not concerned with. Consider the following statement by a scientist and ask yourself whether the voice of nature can be heard in it:

The total ecosystem metabolic flux per unit area, Be , is influenced by the number of organisms of a given size, Mi , and their respective metabolic rates, Bi . To account for the allometric dependence of Be , we conduct the summation of Bi across n discrete body size classes, indexed by j , from the smallest sizes ($m1$) to the largest sizes (mn). Here mi is the average mass within a given arbitrary bin or size class used to resolve the size distribution. Specifically, the whole-system metabolism is the summation of the average metabolic rate of all organisms within each size class, Bj , and their associated total population density.²⁰⁴

Clearly this passage does not embrace a vision of nature the romantics would endorse. This scientific approach to nature seems to necessitate the divorce of nature from aesthetic and religious values. The romantic writer on the other hand seeks to emphasize the role of the subjective human encounter with nature, as opposed to the scientific method's emphasis on objective knowledge. In the process, romantic nature poets have paved the way for alternative paradigms to challenge a strictly scientific approach to nature.

The Deep Ecologists are heirs to the movement begun by the romantic nature poets. They too oppose in a certain way various principles upon which modern science is founded. Deep ecologists are ecologists who are not just strictly scientists; they are not just concerned with the 'facts' of existence. Instead, they combine value with that which

²⁰³ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 83.

²⁰⁴ Brian Enquist, et al, "Scaling metabolism from organisms to ecosystems," *Nature* Vol. 423, (June 5, 2003): 639.

is, seeking to make an argument that what is, namely natural ecological principles, are what ought to be. In the process, they reach beyond science and enter into the world of ethics. In addition, Deep Ecologists seek to overcome the subject/object split of modern science through the use of an ecological understanding of the interrelationship of all life rather than the disconnectedness of the two. Thus it may be said that the Deep Ecologists are in search of the ever elusive elusive pineal gland that connects and unites mind and matter into a more harmonious, interacting whole. Deep Ecologists seek to replace the mind/matter distinction of the ghost in the machine and the metaphor of nature as mechanism with that of nature as organism which is the result of evolving processes.

d. the consciousness of nature: does nature speak or is it spoken for?

I am that part of the rain forest recently emerged into thinking.²⁰⁵

A major problem with the God/messenger analogy is the fact that the forest is not easily asserted as a being that possesses consciousness, whereas God is. Therefore, the messenger is more like a guardian speaking on behalf of an individual or nonhuman other who lacks the capacity to do so themselves. It may be said that the human element provides the missing dimension to the forest's existence, namely an evolved brain that can articulate through language and human vocal cords the forest's being. This is where the forest seer comes in. The forest seer completes the forest by giving it a voice. What sings through the medium of the forest seer is the forest using the seer's subjectivity and vocal cords. But the message is the forest's. Without the forest the forest seer would have no message, since the forest is the subject of the seer's senses. Similarly, without

²⁰⁵ John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess, Thinking like a mountain: Towards a council of all beings (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988), 36.

the messenger, the message cannot be stated. In the gestalt relationship the duality of subjectivity and objectivity, mind and matter, mother and child, mechanic and motorcycle, forest and seer are inextricably related. As David Chalmers stated in his lecture at the University of Montana on consciousness, “you can’t change one without changing the other.”

So when the forest seer speaks for the forest, who is doing the speaking? Both the forest and the seer, for the two have become intertwined. The attempt to isolate one or the other and claim they are doing the talking is to fall into the same old trap of subject/object dualism. This is the reasoning behind the higher ecological self of Deep Ecology who has become ‘the forest made conscious of itself.’ Or, to say it another way, ‘I, the forest seer, am conscious of the forest and am conscious of the fact that I am conscious of the forest. In speaking, my thoughts reflect the forest and without the forest I would have nothing to say for my being is intertwined with the forest and the two of us cannot be considered in isolation from one another.’ This view recognizes that the sum of the parts is something greater than the whole, so that the forest seer/ecological self now talking for the forest is neither simply human nor simply forest, but some sort of forest person which is something different from either. It is as if Treebeard has leapt off the pages of *The Lord of the Rings* and incarnated himself.

A view of forest ecosystems which imparts consciousness to the forest as a collective whole seems to be implied if the term ‘ecosystem’ is replaced by its precedent, the ‘supraorganism.’ Perhaps one reason the change was made is because calling an ecosystem an organism seems to imply that it possesses a certain degree of consciousness. Strict materialists might object to the notion of consciousness being

asserted to the forest because it lacks a highly developed brain to serve as the seat of its consciousness.

The forest may not have reflective consciousness until a higher order of consciousness is introduced, viz., human beings, but it still may be said to have some type of consciousness. What is clear is that the forest cannot speak on its own or at least in human terms, because it lacks the capacity for speech. One never sees the forest 'speaking,' at least in human terms. It needs a human consciousness with a higher order consciousness. Max Oelschlaeger interprets Thoreau's statement in his journal that "all nature will fable" to mean that nature will "speak through a person if that person will but let natural phenomena have voice, and such a speaking will be as if literally true, alive and organic."²⁰⁶ This voice is achieved through a vision of the underlying unity of all things.

If we recognize the human self as part and parcel of nature, as the product which grew side by side with the same evolutionary forces that created the forest and nature, and that human beings are the self-reflective consciousness of these evolutionary forces, then the ecological self which has achieved an organic unity with wildness becomes the personification of nature and therefore the human voice for nature. This viewpoint allows us to see the forest seer as continuous with the same natural process that gave rise to the forest. Hence the forest seer or ecological self does not see him or herself as a being separate from nature, but as part and parcel of nature. Nature is one of the causes of the forest seer's coming into existence and therefore part of the forest seer's being.

Hence, it is possible to adopt the viewpoint that the forest can speak and that a literature can be developed that gives expression to nature. This leads us to ask if the

²⁰⁶ Oelschlaeger, The Idea of Wilderness, 157-8.

forest could speak what would it say, and what language form would it take? Would it consist of scientific data and analysis of nutrients and graphs that detail the functioning of an ecosystem? Or would it be a poetic, romantic hymn of the feelings aroused within humans while in the presence of nature? Or would it be a cry of rape, that it doesn't want to be mined and logged and developed and used anymore? Or does the communion with nature transcend the ability of words to capture it, thereby rendering the words of the forest seer ineffective? If one believes it doesn't even make sense to ask if the forest could speak at all, then these questions are mute. One will then agree with the critics of Deep Ecology that their writings are nothing more than mystical consciousness gibberish. Such a position would strictly relegate the forest seer to speaking *about* the forest as at most a type of guardian for the forest, a scientific naturalist whose discussion of the forest is based upon empirical, quantifiable, objective evidence, but should never be considered as the voice *of* the forest or the *forest itself speaking*.

It has also been argued by some that the Deep Ecologist's desire to speak for nature is an anthropocentric attempt to give the forest human qualities, namely, consciousness, speech, and thought. This only serves to affirm the Western cultural assumption that nature is passive and cannot speak for itself. The forest seer, in attempting to speak for nature, gives off the appearance that nature is incapable of speaking for itself and thus belongs in the category of other inanimate objects also incapable of speech.²⁰⁷ Another objection argues that instead of trying to speak for nature, we would be better off listening to nature and entering into conversation with her instead of merely attempting to impose our constructs upon her.

²⁰⁷ Karla Armbruster, "Speaking for Nature," in Literature of Nature, ed. Patrick D. Murphy (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998), 432.

Finally, there is the objection that the experience of nature is inherently ineffable and cannot be put into words. Muir felt that his words about nature were merely “dead bone-heaps” in comparison to the real experience of nature to which the words refer. As a preacher of mountains and ice, Muir sought to entice others to experience nature for themselves. His experiences were not to serve as a substitute for the real thing. His words are only pointers intended to direct his readers’ attention to their reference. In responding to Jeanne Carr, who was urging him to write articles detailing his travels, he wrote:

When I am free in the wilds I discover some rare beauty in lake or cataract or mountain form, and instantly seek to sketch it with my pencil, but...there is the same infinite shortcoming. The few hard words make but a skeleton, fleshless, heartless, and when you read, the dead bony words rattle in one’s teeth.²⁰⁸

Emerson similarly states, “When I look at the sweeping sleet amid the pine woods, my sentences look very contemptible, and I think I will write no more.”²⁰⁹ This dissatisfaction with the ability of language to capture one’s experiences may demonstrate why some mystics simply choose to remain silent about their experiences, fearful that language inevitably objectifies what is at heart a unifying experience. This approach however does not render the forest seer mute. Mystical experiences may be ineffable, the essence of the experience never fully translatable into concepts, but this does not mean that all mystics must remain silent. They can still say something about their experience and at the same time recognize that what they say will always fall short of the experience.

The forest is represented most eloquently when it speaks for itself. No book can sing the message the wind does as it ruffles through the cottonwood and alder along the Peninsula’s green rivers, a luxuriant carpet

²⁰⁸ Turner, *John Muir, Rediscovering America*, 201.

²⁰⁹ Emerson, *The Heart of Emerson’s Journals*, 158.

of dark conifers climbing the ridges behind. No photograph can capture the complex smell of fir needles and wood dust and moist, yeasty decay.²¹⁰

Ultimately, the message the forest seer brings back to the villagers from the forest is “Come and see me for yourself.” Muir writes “And so I might go on, writing words, words, words; but to what purpose? Go see [the water ouzel] and love him, and through him as through a window look into Nature’s warm heart.”²¹¹ Like a mother telling her son to go visit his grandmother, no words can be substituted for the visit itself. Such a message recognizes the inadequacy of words and the second-hand status of symbols that can never fully be substituted for their reference. Muir states “no words will ever describe the exquisite beauty and charm of this mountain park [Yosemite].”²¹² This is a frequent claim by the transcendentalists, that second-hand accounts of God and nature will not suffice and that only a firsthand experience of both satisfies. Words are only useful in inviting others to experience nature for themselves.

Canst thou copy in verse one chime
Of the wood-bell’s peal and cry,
Write in a book the morning’s prime,
Or match with words that tender sky?

Wandering voices in the air,
And murmurs in the wold,
Speak what I cannot declare,
Yet cannot all withhold.²¹³

²¹⁰ William Dietrich, The Final Forest (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 285.

²¹¹ Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “Our National Parks,” 555.

²¹² Muir, The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books, in “My First Summer in the Sierra,” 266.

²¹³ Emerson, Collected Poems and Translations, “My Garden,” 180-181.

e. problems discerning who should be the voice of/for the forest

“The axe was always destroying his forest.”²¹⁴

As a prophet’s words are often disputed because they claim to speak for God, so asking who truly speaks for the forest can be the cause of much controversy and debate. Assuming that the earth can be spoken for, who should speak for it is not so self-evident. David Strong’s book *Crazy Mountains* is a perfect example of this. The book is written in reaction to the Forest Service’s decision to log the Cottonwood Canyon in the Crazy Mountains of Montana, citing a spruce budworm and mountain pine beetle infestation there. Since the Forest Service has the government authority to manage this nation’s forests, one would think it is acting and speaking on behalf of the forest. But David Strong questions their motives and wants the area to be left alone in the name of natural processes and wildness. Lacking the institutional authority and forestry credentials of the Forest Service foresters, Strong’s greatest tie to the Crazies is his own personal relationship with them, as he grew up hiking its canyons. Thus both Strong and the Forest Service appear to be acting in the best interests of the forest. Who then is the true voice of the Crazy Mountains and what should be done about the bark beetles?

The argument Strong uses to try and thwart the logging of diseased trees in the Crazies is based on the belief that the reason the Forest Service advocates such logging is out of adherence to “a life of consumption and *against* the wild land.”²¹⁵ Without having read the *Resource Area Analysis* which the Forest Service developed concerning this proposed timber sale, it is difficult to fully calculate the risk these insects pose. But it is quite clear in the citation that Strong provides that the reason the Forest Service cites for

²¹⁴ Emerson, The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, in “Thoreau,” 824.

²¹⁵ Strong, Crazy Mountains, 21.

the timber sale is not to promote resource development but to prevent an insect infestation which can be very harmful to the forest ecology of the Crazies.

Granted industrial society as a whole may value a life of commodities and consumption, but this does not mean that the Forest Service is in error here, or that this particular timber sale is not warranted. For Strong to infer that the Forest Service's motive is simply self-seeking and not in the interest of the forest requires more proof, proof that Strong doesn't provide. Leveled at society at large, this accusation might stand; but the evidence in favor of the Forest Service's approach to controlling this infestation is not as contrary to reason as Strong might have us believe. If Strong had gone into the Cottonwood Canyon himself and failed to find evidence of an insect infestation, then his case might have been more strengthened, but he did not.

Strong's fault lies in identifying human action with harm. In the past harm and action most often did go hand in hand, and past human actions might be one of the reasons the Cottonwood and other areas face these bark beetle infestations. Global warming may cause drought, and when combined with fire suppression, thick underbrush may replace otherwise naturally thinned old-growth areas, thus stressing older trees and their abilities to pitch out beetles. But human actions meant to simulate natural action, such as thinning of the understory, are not necessarily harmful or unwarranted.

Ecological health is the reason the Forest Service cited for logging in the *Resource Area Analysis*, not beauty, not commodities, not economic gain. Sure some people log for these reasons, but that's not the reason in this case. Aldo Leopold's land ethic urges us to view the land holistically, from an ecological viewpoint: "quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem...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.”²¹⁶ Which is exactly what the Forest Service did in the case of the Cottonwood Canyon; they cited ecologically sound reasons for logging, not monetary ones (although we cannot be certain that this is not merely a pretext for logging).

It is true that the Forest Service once viewed old growth forest (or wilderness) as merely declining, senescent, non-fiber producing land and thought the best way to manage it was to log it and replace it with producing forests. For this the Forest Service has a storied history of being a promoter of road building and logging, not of preservation. But the discovery in the 1980’s and 90’s of certain wildlife species’ dependence upon old-growth forest for their own unique ecological niche has led to many changes in Forest Service policy and to our understanding of the value these forests hold for biodiversity. William Dietrich’s book *The Final Forest* is an excellent account of the role old-growth plays for the spotted owl in the Olympic Peninsula.²¹⁷

Any human act is not automatically bad if it interferes with nature; some human actions can be beneficial, particularly those aimed at restoration. Other human actions that mimic natural processes, such as thinning the forest to simulate natural fire regimes that have been suppressed, or to mimic natural insect control due to extinct bird species such as the Ivory-billed Woodpecker (which used to eat bark beetles), can have a beneficial effect on the health of an ecosystem. While the Forest Service’s actions in this particular instance can not necessarily be considered an unwarranted intrusion into the events of nature, one must agree with Strong that the human attempt to dominate and control all of nature’s processes poses as much of a threat to nature as do insect

²¹⁶ Leopald, The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book, “The Land Ethic,” 183.

²¹⁷ Dietrich, The Final Forest, 72-86.

infestations. But as to which side is right, Strong or the Forest Service, there isn't enough evidence as the case is outlined in *Crazy Mountains*. Therefore, who should be allowed to speak for the Crazies or act on its behalf has yet to be adequately determined.

VIII. Val Plumwood's criticism of the Deep Ecologist's self

The term 'Deep Ecology' is a very large net, allowing for many different starting points and accepted premises, whether they are of Eastern, Western, philosophical, or religious origin. Just because one particular Deep Ecologist says one thing, does not mean you must hold another Deep Ecologist to it, simply because both are 'Deep Ecologists.' Similarly, the terms 'feminism' or 'transcendentalism' cast just as wide a net, containing many different viewpoints within either one. Therefore, to say that Deep Ecologists and feminists basically agree, or that the Deep Ecologists continue transcendentalist thought, is too large a statement to make. One is better off in considering positions from each camp in focusing squarely on one particular individual's thought and how it relates to others, than merely making blanket characterizations of any of these movements as a whole.

In her essay "Nature, Self and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism," Val Plumwood argues that the Deep Ecologists give three different accounts of the self in the ecological self: the indistinguishability self, the expanded self, and the transcended or transpersonal self.²¹⁸ The indistinguishability account of the self will be addressed in this section. It basically argues that the Deep Ecologist's solution to heal the division between humans and nature is to "obliterate" all distinctions between them. Plumwood clearly feels this approach is unacceptable and

²¹⁸ Plumwood, *The Environmental Ethics & Policy Book*, ed. by Donald VanDeVeer and Christine Pierce (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1998), in "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism," 246.

argues for a new approach in which relation, not identification, mediates polar opposites. The second account of the self is the expanded self, which Plumwood sees as basically an expanded ego that balloons in size to incorporate or identify with the non-human other. Thus defense of nature is in essence defense of one's self. This account will be considered in the section on whether or not the ecological self is an ethical egoist. The third account of the self is the transpersonal or transcended self. This self attains a sort of detachment from the particulars of the ego and is a type of universal self. However, this type of self is put forth by other Deep Ecologists, not Naess, since Naess can be very rooted and grounded in a particular place given his belief in the cabin tradition. Therefore this account of the self will not be considered here.

a. criticism of the indistinguishability account of the self

Val Plumwood's main objection to the ecological self as defined by the Deep Ecologists is that it swallows up dualities so that the opposite poles become virtually indistinguishable from one another. The Deep Ecologists attempt to overcome the human/nature divide by positing an ecological self that identifies with, or is indistinguishable from, nature. Plumwood however feels that dissolving the opposites of humans and nature into one another is not the answer to the environmental crisis. She states, "we need to recognize not only our human continuity with the natural but also its distinctness and independence from us." Rather than the Deep Ecologist's attempt to dissolve the ego into its gestalt background of nature, she prefers "nonholistic but relational accounts of the self, as developed in some feminist and social philosophy,

[which] enable a rejection of dualism, including human/nature dualism, without denying the independence or distinguishability of the other.”²¹⁹

Plumwood is willing to accept continuity between humans and nature, but not to the extent that all boundaries are done away with. She would be unwilling to grant the kind of ontological validity to the following statement made by Naess that is needed if the ecological self is to be affirmed: “I do not step into the river, as the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus saw it. I *am* the river.”²²⁰ Clearly, this statement does appear to be guilty of overreaching, of the ecological self claiming too much reality and being for itself. Plumwood would only allow this statement if it were restated as “I am in a harmonious and peaceful relationship with the river which does not seek to make it my own.” One must grant Plumwood the metaphysical high ground here. Naess’s statement almost seems as silly as the Indian fakir who attends a wedding and who by a process of identification with all things thinks that it is he who is being married.

Thus Plumwood is less concerned with merging opposites than she is in finding the proper way for them to relate. What she is interested in is more the relationship between the two, how they interact with one another. Humans are encouraged to interact harmoniously with nature, not as master would treat a slave, but in a way that is respectful of one another and does not seek to exploit the other or use them instrumentally. Thus nature still remains nature and humans still remain humans. Thus what has changed is the relationship between them, not them.

This is a valid point and may serve to explain why many of Emerson’s attempts to bridge the gap between the mind and the body, God and humans, and sin and grace have

²¹⁹ Ibid., 247-8.

²²⁰ Naess, Life’s Philosophy, 3.

failed. Emerson is also subject to Plumwood's criticisms here since, as Oelschlaeger has noted, the transcendentalists may be considered 'seminal Deep Ecologists.' Emerson is especially relevant here since he attempts to resolve dualities in the same way that the Deep Ecologists do. Naess's ecological self sounds very much like Emerson's transparent eyeball, in which the narrow self is rendered indistinguishable from the larger Self in some kind of mystical unity. Whether it be the human self and God, or the human self and nature, any attempt to do away with the distinction between the two does damage to either one; either God is brought down to the level of man, or man is elevated to the level of God. Thus Plumwood's criticism, though leveled at a metaphysical distinction of the self's relation to nature, nonetheless has theological implications.

One of the obstacles which have always faced any pantheistic interpretation of nature is the problem of evil – if God is everything and God is good, then how do you explain the existence of evil in the world without somehow implicating God in that evil? To simply define evil as a privation of the good with no substance in and of itself, is to deny the reality of evil and this is exactly what Emerson does. The Transcendentalists it must be remembered stemmed from a Unitarian movement which rejected the Calvinist doctrine of original sin and instead embraced a rather optimistic view of human nature. But the overwhelming empirical evidence for the existence of evil in the twentieth century can only lead one to the conclusion that Emerson's attempt to naturalize the supernatural is deeply flawed. When Swedenborg claims to have visited Hell and found souls there completely cut off from the salvation of God, Emerson is confronted with a contradiction he cannot resolve except by dismissing it.

Swedenborg has devils. Evil, according to old philosophers, is good in the making. That pure malignity can exist, is the extreme

proposition of unbelief. It is not to be entertained by a rational agent; it is atheism; it is the last profanation... To what a painful perversion had Gothic theology arrived, that Swedenborg admitted no conversion for evil spirits!²²¹

Naess also shares this position regarding evil, stating “I, however, think that it is unfortunate to say that there is anything evil in human nature or essence.”²²² This is not a tangent or digression from a discussion of the differences between Naess and Plumwood; rather it is at the very core of the differences. Emerson’s and Naess’s attempts to dissolve opposites into each other is fundamentally flawed; therefore, their understanding of the ecological self and how it relates to nature is similarly flawed. Plumwood argues one cannot dissolve humanity into divinity or humanity into nature just like sugar and water. On the contrary, their natures might not be so readily compatible and more on the par of that of water and oil. A good person is not so quick as to be thrown into the same category as an axe murderer. Yet, according to Naess, both are members of the human race, therefore why erase any distinction between them in the name of unity, since we are all human beings? Plumwood’s case that our differences are not so easily resolved is clearly valid. Kierkegaard makes a similar objection to the Hegelian immanence of God and argues that Hegelian opposites are not so easily synthesized.

Plumwood’s objection also has implications for Thoreau, since he too likes to make word games out of blending opposites: “The water was so wet it was dry.” Similarly, many of his analogies and metaphors may be guilty of overreaching. His attempt to make Walden indistinguishable with the Garden of Eden comes into question, especially when the differences between the two are considered in depth. Since man existed in the Garden without experiencing death, the fact that immortality has not been

²²¹ Emerson, Essays and Lectures, in “Representative Men,” 685.

²²² Naess, Life’s Philosophy, 10.

restored to Thoreau is a serious flaw. Nor is Walden in a perpetual state of spring, as the Garden of Eden was. The pre-fall Garden also gave of itself freely before the fall; everything was provided for Adam and Eve. Though Thoreau lives with the greatest economy, Walden does not completely provide for him, for he still must sow his beans and hoe his fields.

The attempt to deify Walden fails, just as Emerson's attempt to deify the human being does. Although Thoreau asserts the Christlike divinity of Walden, and drapes the breaking up of the ice in the pond in Christological terms, "Walden was dead and is alive again," it is difficult to conceive of Walden as being God.²²³ Even in the Garden of Eden, the Garden was separate from God. As beautiful as Walden is, it is not an absolute, but rather lies "between the earth and the heavens."²²⁴ Walden and Heaven must remain separate from one another, just as Val Plumwood argues they should, although they still may be connected. Thoreau, like the Deep Ecologists, is guilty of overreaching and claiming too much. The implication however is clear. If the forest seer as ecological self is unable to identify or fully merge their being with that of the forest, then the forest seer cannot be understood as nature itself become conscious, or nature itself become aware of itself. The subject never fully merges with the object. Therefore the best that a forest seer can ever be is someone who speaks for nature, but not *nature itself speaking* or the voice of nature itself.

b. Is Naess's ecological self an expanded self or an ethical egoist?

Plumwood also objects to Deep Ecology's ethics as essentially egoistic. She bases this argument on a quote from Fox: "ecological resistance is simply another name

²²³ Hodder, Thoreau's Ecstatic Vision, 163.

²²⁴ Thoreau, The Portable Thoreau, in "The Pond in Winter," 525, and "'The Ponds,'" 425.

for self-defense.”²²⁵ She objects to this position, arguing that “others are recognized morally only to the extent that they are incorporated into the self, and their differences denied.”²²⁶ Plumwood is correct in asserting that one of the great problems confronting humankind is egocentrism and the selfish nature of human beings. But is Naess’s ecological self really egocentric or more correctly ecocentric? Ethical egoism is based upon the view that “each person should aim to promote his own well-being and interests.”²²⁷ Psychological egoism is simply the thesis that this is in fact how people act, merely out of self-interest.

Plumwood’s concern with the Deep Ecologist’s expanded self or an ecological self who identifies with the natural world is that their ethics are merely based on acting out of one’s self-interest. However, Plumwood’s argument runs several quotes from different Deep Ecologists together, thus confusing the issue. As noted earlier, the term ‘Deep Ecology’ is a wide net, and Fox’s views are not necessarily Naess’s. But Plumwood treats these people as of all being cut of the same cloth, when in fact what she is dealing with is a composite material. Plumwood conflates Naess’s, Fox’s, and Seed’s concept of the self together, as if they were all the same. Without discerning the differences between them, she very understandably arrives at the notion that the Deep Ecologist’s self “tends to vacillate between mystical indistinguishability and the other accounts of the self, between the holistic self and the expanded self.”²²⁸ But the reason they tend to vacillate is because she is interpreting several different Deep Ecologist’s concept of the self as if they were one concept, when in fact they are not. Naess’s

²²⁵ Plumwood, The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book, in “Nature, Self, and Gender,” 248.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

²²⁷ Peter A. Angeles, Dictionary of Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), s.v. “egoism, ethical.”

²²⁸ Plumwood, The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book, in “Nature, Self, and Gender,” 248.

concept of the self clearly belongs in the account of the indistinguishable self, not the expanded or transpersonal self. Fox's self, however, may fall into the category of the expanded self. Plumwood quotes Fox's approval of John Livingstone's statement, "When I say that the fate of the sea turtle or the tiger or the gibbon is mine, I mean it. All that is in my universe is not merely mine; it is me," to mean that Fox is an ethical egoist. But we are not discussing Fox here. We are discussing Naess.

Even if some Deep Ecologists are ethical egoists, is this a charge one should feel called upon to deny? If Fox implicates himself as an ethical egoist, or considers this approach a convenient way to solve many of our environmental problems, has he done something wrong? Is acting in one's own self-interest somehow unethical? It is stated in the Declaration of Independence that the right to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness are unalienable rights endowed by the Creator." Is not the pursuit of happiness none other than seeking one's own self-interest? Clearly the self should be concerned with its own happiness. Therefore is there something wrong in seeking one's own happiness as long as it does not conflict or injure other human beings? Does it not seem ridiculous to assert that people should not seek their own happiness? Clearly a presidential candidate could not get elected on the campaign platform that he was *not* going to act in America's self-interest. A good society is one in which yes, its citizens, as well as the nation itself, are allowed to seek their own self-interest. It seems obvious that the starting point for anyone's life must be initially themselves. If the Deep Ecologists' expanded self is guilty of acting out of self-interest, and Plumwood is arguing that this is somehow unethical, then this too seems ridiculous.

In any case, Naess's ecological self cannot be interpreted as an expanded self, even by default if the indistinguishability concept fails. Naess's ecological self is arguing against selfish behavior, not for it, by promoting a self that has concern for the human and non-human other with whom it has entered into relationship. The concept of self-realization, which is the process of the self-in-Self unfolding, may sound like an expanding of the narrow ego, but it is not. Naess's statement that "increased self-realization...implies broadening and deepening of the self" appears to suggest an expanded narrow ego, but this is not what Naess means. The process of self-realization unfolds not by expansion of the narrow ego, but by making the "self richer in its constitutive relations...not only relations we have with humans and the human community, but with the larger community of all living beings."²²⁹

Although some Deep Ecologists argue that the ecological self acts in his or her own self-interest, Naess is not among them. Naess's ecological self has moved beyond the concerns of the narrow selfish ego to a larger self that sees the importance each individual part plays in the organic whole. He states, "to identify self-realization with ego indicates a vast underestimation of the human self."²³⁰ Plumwood seems to confuse the larger ecological Self with the more narrow egocentric self. Acting out of concern for the narrow egocentric self may be considered selfish, but acting out of concern for the larger ecological Self does not. Indeed, the ecological self appears to be exactly the 'self-in-relationship' which she is arguing for. The forest seer is the sum of two parts, a person and the forest, a self and a Self. The ecological Self is the result of the two in relation, and is greater than either part considered individually. It is not the forest completely

²²⁹ Naess, Environmental Ethics and Policy Book, in "Self-Realization," 226.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

swallowing up the person, nor the seer's identity expanded to include the forest. Rather it is the subject in relation to the object with the relationship between the two resulting in something quite different than either one considered in isolation from the other.

One wonders if Plumwood would also claim the golden rule belongs in the category of ethical egoism – “treat others as you yourself would wish to be treated,” or the second commandment, since it asks one to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Both include references to one's own self in constructing an ethic. Clearly virtue involves moving beyond mere love for oneself, so that one loves others as much as one loves one's self. A person who cannot move beyond love for one's self is limited in their capacity to relate to others. But the command is not to cease loving yourself or to stop acting from self-interest; it is merely to move beyond love for one self to love for others, to incorporate love for others into love for oneself.

The selfish interests Plumwood claims to be attributing to the expanded self seem more attributable to Adam Smith's economical self, in which the individual pursues his or her own self-interest in the pursuit of pleasure and commodities, than the Deep Ecologist's self. The economic self is very much like the androcentric self that seeks to master nature, viewing it as a warehouse of goods and resources waiting to be developed. Indeed, this type of self is what prompted Naess to develop the term ‘deep’ as opposed to ‘shallow’ forms of ecology; the latter recognizes the intrinsic value of not only all living things, but the ecological processes which support them as well. Shallow ecologists on the other hand are concerned with manipulating the principles of ecology so that the earth may be used instrumentally for human good.

Naess's ecological self appears to follow Socrates' command to lead an examined life to its logical conclusion. By overcoming ignorance of the bonds which connect us all to the natural world, the self comes to know the larger biotic community as a whole and this knowledge of the other breaks the distance separating the two, maybe not completely, but enough to allow empathy for the other to form and a recognition that all lives are interconnected. Thus Naess's ethics stem not from an ethical egoism, but take their cue from Spinoza's *Ethics*. Naess states "I was inspired by Spinoza's view of human nature or essence: our nature or essence is such that we are pleased at others' pleasure and feel sad about other's sadness."²³¹

Thus Naess's ethics stem from the heart and the ability to connect with the other and treat the other's pain and happiness as though it was one's own. Naess cites the "unselfish" love a mother has for her children as an example of this. If Naess is allowed to merge his being and identity with that of the other, then yes, ethics could take on a form of egoism, since all beings are essentially one. However, Naess never argues this position, Fox does. In addition, if Plumwood's criticisms of the indistinguishability account of the self are upheld, the self cannot completely vanish in the other. Thus the other must always be viewed as other and the Deep Ecologist's complete and total identification with the other vanishes, or is now downgraded to a form of empathy. But that the ecological self must then be interpreted as an expanded self is incorrect. The ecological self as thus formulated is not an expanded egoistic self, but a self-in-relation-to-nature *whose way of relating is harmonious and respectful, not adversarial or exploitative.*

²³¹ Naess, Life's Philosophy, 9.

This understanding of the ecological self, as self-in-relation to nature, is perhaps our most accurate definition of the forest seer yet. When combined with the seven characteristics presented at the beginning of this paper, and an understanding of the people who embody them, we have arrived at a conception of the forest seer who views the world as neither radically distinct nor other, nor as merely an extension of one's own self. The forest seer thus constituted is a self in relation, a self whose attitude towards the world is one of respect and concern, and whose identity is wrapped up in this relationship but not necessarily reducible to it. Through this relationship such a person has achieved such intimate knowledge of the other that the forest seer may become in some sense a spokesman for nature and a conduit through which nature speaks.

XI. Reincarnating the lama- the need for forest seers

Emerson's forest seer is someone who embodies an ideal relationship with nature. Hopefully, what this paper has shown is the need and importance of such people and the need in general to connect with nature on a deeper level. The pronouncements of the forest seers, although wrapped up in the debate over human continuity/discontinuity with the natural world, may be the closest thing we have resembling a voice of nature. Thoreau and Muir make the experience of free and wild nature a primary focus in their life, as do the Deep Ecologists, who state their aim is to develop a "culture of wilderness."²³² A truly wild or old-growth forest is often so dense and thick with vegetation that no sunlight reaches the forest floor. The trees are covered with green mosses and lichens and liverworts to such an extent that the bark is not even visible. These wild places are so incredibly unique and biologically diverse that it would be virtually impossible to try to duplicate them through a restoration project; thus the need to

²³² Gary Snyder, Deep Ecology for the 21st Century, in "Cultured or Crabbed?" 48.

preserve and respect them if the processes of free nature are to continue. Once these forests are cut down, there is no bringing them back, however much money one spends.

Naess states:

One of today's most chilling realizations is that present "reforestation" projects do not really restore a *forest*. Artificial tree plantations lack the immense biological richness and diversity of ancient forests, together with their metaphysical intensity and richness. With so many people now reacting negatively to sham reforestation, the time is ripe for a change in policy.²³³

The Deep Ecologists believe that free nature and wilderness should be preserved because it is the result of millions of years of natural processes and the gene pool evolving together. However, it is estimated that only two to four percent of our nation's old-growth forests remain standing. If this number is an indication of anything, it appears the Hopi's prophesy that the white man will ultimately destroy himself and the land is coming true.

It is obvious that Emerson's forest seer is more than just a suggestive idea or interesting poetic idiom. The forest seer in 'Woodnotes I' was based as much upon the life of Thoreau as it was upon Emerson's conception of the ideal way to relate to nature. Thus this motif is a fundamental way of being in the world. Following Thoreau's, Muir's, and Naess's example, we should look for people who personify the wisdom of the forest, like the search for the reincarnation of a lama. Among Buddhists there is some debate as to whether it is the lama's soul or the lama's teachings that are reincarnated and passed on to the next lama. Regardless, if the forest seer's reincarnated spirit cannot be found, then we should pass on their teachings to the next generation so that new forest

²³³ Naess, Deep Ecology for the 21st Century, in "Metaphysics of the Treeline," 248.

seers will be raised. Such people are necessary if we are to avoid the despair of planting a tree, not knowing if future generations will allow it to grow.

It has been shown that the forest seer is similar to that of the Deep Ecologist's ecological self, albeit a self whose identity is not completely lost in relationship. This person's identity has expanded beyond the narrow confines of the ego to enter into a fundamental relationship with and experience of nature. A life lived in nature involves the will, i.e., a self-commitment to experience wild nature in all its concrete richness. Such a lifestyle recognizes and works towards the goal of preserving free nature for future generations. A forest seer is simply not someone who sits in a room and reads about or contemplates the environment but is actively involved in experiencing and protecting nature. Like attempting to describe the taste of coffee, the best way to understand what coffee tastes like is not to read others' accounts of it, but to experience it firsthand by going and tasting it for oneself. Norway's cabin tradition which Naess cites offers a lifestyle which affords the opportunity to experience for oneself life in the woods.

We have examined what it means to be a forest seer and have concluded that the visions and utterances of a forest seer are valid and deserve consideration. They are the result of a trained naturalist's keen eye and deep experience of nature. Such a person's identity is wrapped up in the experience of nature, so that interaction between the seer's subjectivity and forest's objectivity result in something more than the mere sum of its parts. However, not all distinctions between the human and natural world are completely dissolved. Thus the forest seer is a self-in-relation-to-nature whose relationship is harmonious, not adversarial or instrumental, as is the case when a person views the land

strictly economically or as a commodity. This personal, existential relationship with the natural world is necessary if anyone wants to assume the mantle of a forest seer.

Finally, the forest seer must be a wordsmith with the power to give a voice to nature, although this voice may at times be no more than a pointer, a reference to an experience deeper and richer than the words themselves. Since giving voice to the land entails the expansion of one's self beyond a homocentric mindset and involves the use of words, words that are formed based upon the hermeneutics of nature, then the forest seer is also involved in questions of epistemology, ontology, linguistics, metaphysics, environmental ethics and the philosophy of science and personal identity. The forest seer's vision of society and culture is one that respects free nature and wilderness and allows for evolution to continue. Emerson's concept of the forest seer, and Thoreau and Muir's personification of it, as well as Naess's updated version of it and Plumwood's subsequent critique, present a vision of a lifestyle that should be respected if humans ever wish to advance beyond the level of an invasive species.