



Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres
Département des Langues et littératures modernes

Transcendentalism and Sublime (Post)Nature in American Literature:
From Self-Discovery to Self-Destruction

Sous la direction du Professeur Michel Delville

Lecteurs : Pagnouille, Christine
Herbillon, Marie
Delville, Michel

Mémoire présenté par David Lombard en
vue de l'obtention du diplôme de Master en
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*Men say they know many things;
But lo! they have taken wings,—
The arts and sciences,
And a thousand appliances;
The wind that blows
Is all that any body knows.*

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

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0. INTRODUCTION

0.1. A DIACHRONIC AND COMPARATIVE STUDY OF A LIMITED CORPUS OF US LITERATURE

The main goal of this dissertation is to examine the evolution of the US definition of “selfhood” and its relationship with the changing (post)natural landscape as it is expressed in major (Native) American literary works from the end of the eighteenth century until the twenty-first century. Special attention will be paid to fiction and non-fiction works in which the narrator—the author, the autobiographical “I”, or the protagonist in non-fiction works—or the characters describe (sublime) experiences or “moments” that emphasise the roles of nature and/or technology in the process of self-realisation. Although many literary works will be considered, the reader should know that the chosen corpus does not constitute an exhaustive list of US nature writing but will be used to serve an ecocritical purpose, which will be explained in the next part of this introduction.

The literary works will be analysed following a diachronic order to discuss the progressive US perception of nature and selfhood. However, some texts such as Bill McKibben’s essay or Native American literary works will be included in the structure disregarding of their publication date inasmuch as they lead to a richer comprehension of the work that will be posteriorly mentioned and thus to a certain coherence between the different chapters.

As the title of the dissertation suggests and as the reader will notice, the philosophical movement of American Transcendentalism will be thoroughly examined in the second chapter. This chapter will be longer than the other parts, principally because prominent transcendentalists presented views of the natural world and of selfhood that had a significant influence on twentieth-century US nature writing. American Transcendentalism will be considered as a foundational matrix for a tradition of (non-)fiction writing with an interest in redefining the American self as related to the realm of (post)nature. In addition, the aesthetics of the sublime and its various interpretations will be frequently mentioned throughout this paper since they complexify the relationships between the self, the natural and the technological landscape. As a result, the comparative approach aims at pointing out the similarities between the transcendentalists’ ideas and subsequent literary works to demonstrate the prevalent existence of a transcendentalist legacy in US literature. Through

this approach, I will also endeavour to examine different redefinitions of the sublime that illustrate the development of the US landscape and process of self-realisation.

Finally, different terms will be used to dwell on the various interpretations of the natural world. The realm of nature has been indeed infused with religious and philosophical meaning throughout ages and has been alternatively described as separate from the human world and part of a more environmental conception that include both forms of human and nonhuman life. On the other hand, the US understanding of the 'wilderness' characterises the natural world as pristine, 'untouched' by humanity and therefore usually separate from it. Then, more recent words have been commonly used such as the 'environment', which encompasses everything that surrounds man. Besides, the 'land' had a particular Native American understanding before being adopted by, for instance, Aldo Leopold in his 'land ethic'.

0.2. AN ECOCRITICAL APPROACH TO LITERATURE

As previously mentioned, the primary interest of this dissertation is to use the corpus to draw ecocritical conclusions and 'explore the ways in which we imagine and portray the relationship between humans and the environment'.¹ Consequently, the US model, with its unique natural landscape and its rapid industrial and economic development, is an appropriate example to delve into this complex relationship and to determine the possible causes of current environmental issues.

I will start this thesis by discussing the US natural landscape in William Bartram's *Travels* to explain the origins of a conception of the American self. In the next century, the process of self-realisation began to be closely related to the natural landscape thanks to American Transcendentalism, which will be commented on in details. Then, although certain transcendentalists had already alluded to industrial and economic changes, the industrialised or technological landscape will be examined through early twentieth-century outdoor fiction. Besides, I will consider other technological changes in the landscape in the literary Environmental Movement through the lens of the 'toxic sublime'. Finally, the last part will approach postmodernism and the postnatural world to illustrate how the self's alienation from nature. Such alienation has recently urged individuals to leave civilisation to rediscover the natural world and endeavour to find the meaning of their selves in consumer society, an attitude that was also illustrated in Native American literature.

¹ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2012), p. i.

1. SUBLIME NATURE AND THE AMERICAN SELF

1.1. WELCOME TO EDEN

One may only dream of entering the New World just like Christopher Columbus did centuries ago, being the witness of undiscovered, at least by Europeans, natural landscapes and species and becoming himself the first stranger to set a foot into the great unknown. When Columbus described what he had seen in what he thought to be the Indies, he used religious terms such as ‘heavens’ or ‘Paradise’ and was convinced that he was where ‘Our Lord placed the Tree of Life’.² Indeed, Columbus initiated the belief that America was a paradise on earth, the ‘Garden of Eden restored’ after Adam and Eve’s original sin.³

Later, the eighteenth-century European settlers retrieved this Edenic idea of nature as they viewed North America as a ‘complete, eternal, and morally perfect order’ or the example of the ‘divine creation as perfectly intact as it was at the beginning of time’.⁴ As a result, these immigrants, who gradually began to consider themselves as more American than European, traded the old past they left in Europe for this unique, untouched and presumably sacred nature in order to search for a new identity, the American self.⁵ Consequently, after being already theologically characterised, this unexplored wilderness was about to be connected to the concepts of self and nationalism, one which started to be expressed in early US literature such as in William Bartram’s travelogue *Travels* (1791).

1.2. THE ROMANTIC NATURAL HISTORIAN: WILLIAM BARTRAM (1739-1823)

After settling in the new continent, the colons became interested in different means of apprehending the world and knowledge and therefore turned to natural science. Seventeenth-century sciences were separated into two ‘fields’ that were ‘natural philosophy, which included physics, chemistry, and mathematics, and natural history, comprising geology, botany, and zoology’, but the researchers were generally specialists in both branches because

² Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 3.

³ Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 9.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 10.

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

of a lack of ‘specialization’.⁶ Nevertheless, John Bartram and his son William became experts in natural sciences as they collected, classified and drew sketches of an incredible number of specimens of ‘flora, fauna and rocks’ and paved the way for further investigations.⁷ Their researches, as US historian Merle Curti stresses, were however not solely objective as they were influenced by their religious beliefs advocating especially that God was the ‘Creator’ of the cosmos and that every single element in the universe was ‘His’ own handcrafted work.⁸ It is precisely this subjective and controversial expertise that divided William Bartram’s quest into two focuses: one being public and aimed at composing a scientific report of the natural world and therefore with an emphasis on empirical experience, and the other being more private insofar as the author also writes about his own feelings and impressions in the wilderness, thus displaying literary, spiritual and possibly pre-romantic motivations of contemplation and imagination. The author’s ambivalent position towards nature is a recurrent feature of a particular genre that has since then been referred to as the ‘nature essay’, and of which *Travels* is certainly part.⁹

In his travelogue, Bartram acknowledges the importance of ‘reason’, which was at the centre of the philosophical concern with the rise of the Enlightenment in late eighteenth-century America, to justify humanity’s superiority over animals.¹⁰ This is shown by the following passage, which is built upon an opposition between reason and instinct:

I am sensible that the general opinion of philosophers has distinguished the moral system of the brute creature from that of mankind, by an epithet which implies a mere mechanical impulse, which leads and impels them to necessary actions, without any premeditated design or contrivance; this we term instinct, which faculty we suppose to be inferior to reason in man.¹¹

As a matter of fact, Bartram’s contemporaries had proven that ‘mankind’ had a ‘superior’ faculty, its ‘reason’, which allows him to premeditate his actions while the ‘brute creature’ or wild animal just follows its ‘mechanical impulse’, its ‘instinct’. Using both rational and religious arguments, since, according to Bartram, it was God who established man’s ‘dominion over all creatures’ on earth, the botanist supposedly acknowledges that animal and natural species are inferior to man but he nevertheless does not neglect their beauty and

⁶ Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 2nd edn (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), p. 91.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 94.

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 94-5.

⁹ Michael Branch, ‘Indexing American Possibilities: The Natural History Writing of Bartram, Wilson, and Audubon’, Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 284-5.

¹⁰ Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, p. 103.

¹¹ William Bartram, *Travels of William Bartram* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 21.

qualities.¹² For example, besides systematically describing birds, the writer also recognises the water-fowl's, among others, as having 'splendour of dress' or 'melody of song', thus conveying both scientific and aesthetic information.¹³ Furthermore, Bartram also mentions that 'ocular observation' is an 'advantage' and an 'opportunity' for zoologists or naturalists as it permits them to provide more accurate accounts.¹⁴ Therefore, Bartram's observations also suggest that he shares the Enlightenment's idea and, more largely, the ocularcentrism, methodologies and hierarchies of Western philosophy, which support that sight prevails over other senses to acquire empirical evidence. Notwithstanding the long factual enumerations of natural specimens, Bartram also presents a distinct perception of the wilderness as it manages to '[employ his] imagination' and to '[captivate] the senses by scenes of magnificence and grandeur'.¹⁵ In addition, the botanist even forgets his public focus at some point as he leaves more space to his 'imagination' that is 'wholly engaged in [his] contemplation of [a] magnificent landscape' to such an extent that he becomes 'almost insensible or regardless' of the 'objects within [his] reach'.¹⁶ The author's imagination reaches its climax when he claims that 'the expansive wild plains' that he and his journeymen visited 'had a pleasing effect, rousing the faculties of the mind, awakening the imagination by its sublimity, and arresting every active, inquisitive idea, by the variety of the scenery, and the solemn symphony of the steady Western breezes'.¹⁷ It is now clear that sight, hearing and other senses regarded as less noble or intellectual at the time such as touch, illustrated by the contact of the wind on human skin for example, smell, especially of flowers, or even taste, which is depicted by his eating of a fruit that 'has a cool pleasant taste', are all active as the naturalist experiences nature.¹⁸ Besides, this extract brings out interesting details through lexical uses such as 'mind', 'awakening' or 'sublimity', which may be read as almost prophetic. Indeed, Bartram anticipates the connection between the mind and the wilderness that will be expressed in nineteenth and twentieth-century nature writing, which suggests that, as Sharon Cameron insists, 'to write about nature is to write about how the mind sees nature, and sometimes about how the mind sees itself'.¹⁹ With his 'early romantic natural' historian's approach, Bartram

¹² Bartram, *Travels*, p. 103.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 234.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 274.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 155.

¹⁸ Bartram, *Travels*, p. 148.

¹⁹ Scott Slovic, 'Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology: The Interiority of Outdoor Experience', Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 351.

introduced crucial ideas for Thoreau's but also post-Thoreauvian natural experiences focused more on the 'awakening' of the self.²⁰ Moreover, he also mentions the word 'sublimity' in this passage and often uses the adjective 'sublime' throughout the book, which is evocative of a fundamental aesthetic propensity of his time to refer to nature as 'sublime', a conceptualisation of the natural world that has evolved and been interpreted differently throughout time.

1.3. THE DIVINE, THE DREADFUL AND THE DISMISSED: THE SELF IN SUBLIME NATURE

From the very first page of the introduction to his text, Bartram states that a 'traveller' should, above all, pay attention to the 'works of Nature', which he then described as created by 'the Almighty hand'.²¹ As a matter of fact, the Bartrams were Quakers and, in spite of the religious and philosophical paradigm of the time that was broadly diversified and complicated, they believed, like 'all orthodox Christians', in the doctrine of the original sin and that 'revelation' was 'the only sure path to knowledge and truth' since 'God had spoken and His Word, contained in the Bible, was holy, absolute, and final'.²² Nonetheless, Quakerism had also its peculiarities since it did not exclude, though recognising that 'personal communication with God' is beneficial for the 'processes of knowledge', 'sensory experience and natural knowledge as important instruments for understanding human nature and human relations', and advocated a more individualistic attitude towards faith as Quakers thought that any pious soul, and not only 'learned ministers' could 'interpret religious truths'.²³

As Thomas Hallock mentions, William Bartram 'uses Quaker theology' in *Travels* to 'portray the wanderings as a religious quest' since the book contains 'long meditations on the divine operations in nature'.²⁴ Indeed, the botanist often refers to God as the 'Creator', 'Almighty Creator', 'Supreme Creator' or once as the 'Author of nature'.²⁵ This latter denomination suggests God's authorship of and thus man's detachment from nature, as humans are just viewers who cross the Lord's creation and have no right of ownership over it. Moreover, the 'primitive' and untrammelled nature is defined as divine, 'infinite',

²⁰ Branch, 'Indexing American Possibilities', p. 283.

²¹ Bartram, *Travels*, p. 15.

²² Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, p. 54.

²³ Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, p. 56.

²⁴ Thomas Hallock, "'On the Borders of a New World": Ecology, Frontier Plots, and Imperial Elegy in William Bartram's "Travels"', *South Atlantic Review*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Autumn 2001), p. 111.

²⁵ Bartram, *Travels*, p. 374.

‘incomprehensible’ and ‘perfect’.²⁶ It is therefore ‘not to be imitated’ or ‘much less equalled by the united effort of human power and ingenuity’, considering that mankind was regarded as flawed or imperfect.²⁷ In fact, Bartram represents human beings in both his writing and his sketches as inferior to the natural landscape or as occupying a ‘place [which] is modest in scale and scope, not a dominating presence on the scene’.²⁸ This dichotomy between divine nature and humanity is reminiscent of the aesthetic of the ‘American Sublime’. Indeed, the sublime landscapes involve, like in Bartram’s text, an imposing nature including, for example, mountains and high forests appearing too grand to be grasped by the beholder, which can be seen as sacralised sceneries illustrating God’s ‘power and beauty’.²⁹

The almightiness may also be shown as dreadful in sublime aesthetics as, for example, Irish philosopher Edmund Burke (1729-97) defined the sublime as ‘associated with fear, gloom and majesty’.³⁰ In *Travels*, Bartram also depicts nature in frightening terms, which is obvious in the passage about a ‘dreadful battle’ between a ‘voracious trout’ and a ‘greedy alligator’ in which he narrates that:

[The alligator’s] enormous body swells. His plaited tail brandished high, floats upon the lake. The waters like cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder. When immediately from the opposite coast of the lagoon, emerges from the deep his rival champion. [...] The boiling surface of the lake marks their rapid course, and a terrific conflict commences. They now sink to the bottom folded together in horrid wreaths. [...] The shores and forests resound his dreadful roar, together with the triumphing shouts of the plaited tribes around, witnesses of the horrid combat.³¹

The writer chooses again a specific vocabulary with adjectives such as ‘terrific’, ‘horrid’ or ‘dreadful’ to stress the gloomy aspect of the events. In addition, the earthquake and the ‘clouds of smoke issue from’ the alligator’s ‘nostrils’ suggest an incident that is almost apocalyptic or perhaps even prophetic inasmuch as the ‘greedy’ animal symbolises a powerful train that releases smoke and makes the earth tremble, which would be a metaphor of the development of industrialism that also started to be harmful to the wilderness environment in nineteenth-century America. Nevertheless, Bartram was much influenced by the ‘ancient theory of correspondence’, and was therefore likely to characterise nature in both

²⁶ Bartram, *Travels*, p. 72.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁸ Thomas P. Slaughter, ‘The Nature of William Bartram’, *Pennsylvania History*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (October 1995), p. 433.

²⁹ David Melbye, ‘The Life and Death of the Contemplative Landscape’, *Spectator – The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (Fall 2001), p. 28.

³⁰ Barbara Novak, ‘American Landscape: Changing Concepts of the Sublime’, *The American Art Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1972), p. 36.

³¹ Bartram, *Travels*, p. 115.

heavenly and dreadful terms to emphasise a separation between Heaven and Hell in nature itself.³² But then, though the sublime has also been appreciated in ‘terror and dread’ that is ‘often relieved by the uproar of cataracts, earthquakes, fires, storms or thunders’, Bartram does not feel content or safe as he contemplates cataclysms or dangerous animals.³³ On the contrary, this dark side of nature exemplifies the difficulties, the jeopardy or even the secrets he may face in the wilderness. For instance, the naturalist is ‘shocked’ while dealing with the ‘thunder’ of a ‘hurricane’ and only appears to be relieved and ‘revived’ when the ‘ether[e]al fire’ of the river and the ‘animal spirits’ start to ‘exert their powers’.³⁴ The author only feels fear for his life when he faces nature’s dreadful demonstrations of terror, a sensitivity that is not really representative of the sublime itself but is rather determined by the relationship between the self and this particular form of landscape.

It is true that the implication of selfhood in the sublime landscape is arguable since it has been portrayed differently. Indeed, while, for instance, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) stresses that the sublime response depends on our ‘oscillating subjectivity’, others have a different approach like, for example, contemporary literary critic Steven Knapp, who claims that ‘over-identifying’ the sublime landscape with the self ‘would cancel the “negativity” [that is] essential to the experience of the sublime’.³⁵ Bartram’s case also envisages the sublime differently since the spectator, while contemplating a specific natural landscape described as sublime, is standing in a greater whole of which the scenery is also part, meaning nature. In other words, the author unconsciously defines nature in its entirety as sublime while he exists himself in its infinity. Consequently, Bartram’s self takes part in the aesthetic judgement of natural beauty or terror, even though it is divine and cannot be completely comprehended or equalled by mankind. On the other hand, this also emphasises Bartram’s ambiguous stance as, though all wilderness is considered as not to be touched or ‘imitated’ by man’s hands, the naturalist does not oppose the modification of certain natural places. For example, he notices that a ‘vast plain’ that he sees as ‘delightful’ might be transformed into a more ‘delightful region’ by ‘the arts of agriculture and commerce’ as it would provide people with ‘almost every desirable thing in life’ such as ‘corn’ or ‘cotton’.³⁶ As Hallock also argues, though Bartram’s text celebrates the beauty of nature as God’s creation and laments sometimes the damages caused by civilisation, it does not completely reject expansion and its consequences

³² Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, p. 94.

³³ Novak, ‘Changing Concepts of the Sublime’, p. 37.

³⁴ Bartram, *Travels*, p. 311.

³⁵ Martin Donougho, ‘Stages of the Sublime in North America’, *MLN*, Vol. 115, No. 5 (December 2000), pp. 912, 927.

³⁶ Bartram, *Travels*, p. 199.

but rather accepts them and praises the advantages that progress may offer, an attitude that is the antithesis of romantic philosophy.³⁷ Bartram's self in *Travels* and his perception of mankind and the natural world are therefore questionable as he occasionally welcomes expansion and human progress, which the romantics tended to strongly oppose, while they usually imply the modification of the natural landscape.

Despite this dubious point of view, the self is mainly presented as belonging to the greater whole of nature in *Travels*, a nature that he presumably respects as sacred. Indeed, the wilderness is depicted as a Garden of Eden in which humans can recover their 'primitive state' and be 'peaceable, contented and sociable' as 'brethren of one family, strangers to envy, malice, and rapine'.³⁸ Therefore, Bartram believes that man is capable of vices and violence, which the Quakers strongly oppose, if he leads his life apart from nature or in civilisation as 'inhumanity or savage cruelty' can also be noticed 'amongst the most civilized nations'.³⁹ However, Bartram is not against mankind since he values sociability and human company and travels with many different people too. But then, this only applies to white people or perhaps to Native Americans but certainly not to Black people.⁴⁰ As a matter of fact, Black people, as Michael Gaudio stresses, are rarely mentioned in the travelogue and, if they happen to be, they are almost instantly forgotten, which makes their self 'invisible' or dismissed from the scenery.⁴¹ The traveller only uses them, whom he refers to with racial epithets such as the "'Negro" slaves' or "'negroes'", to sail or for diverse services, therefore conveying the attitude of an eighteenth-century pro-slavery colonialist. Thomas P. Slaughter thinks that it might be because of Bartram's advocacy of a 'fatalism' supposing that 'everybody eats somebody in the natural world and that mankind has not transcended this natural state' that he does not regard slavery as an outrage, but one may also just assume that he was a man of his time.⁴²

On the other hand, the author has more appreciation for the Native Americans, who he regularly represents as virtuous and pure people, having 'truthful' relationships of 'friendship' with 'joy, contentment, love' and 'without guile of affection', and even dedicates the whole

³⁷ Hallock, "'On the Borders of a New World'", p. 129.

³⁸ Bartram, *Travels*, p. 110.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴⁰ As the reader of this dissertation will notice, the texts of the chosen corpus, except, of course, Native Americans' and Margaret Fuller's writings, do not sufficiently refer to minorities to allow a thorough analysis of their representations in the landscape. Although some precisions will be brought with respect to some authors' considerations of minorities, the focus will remain on the natural world and the sense of self as depicted in the works studied.

⁴¹ Michael Gaudio, 'Swallowing the Evidence: William Bartram and the Limits of the Enlightenment', *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2001), p. 16.

⁴² Slaughter, 'The Nature of William Bartram', p. 439.

last chapter to comment on their culture and practices.⁴³ At some point, he even adopts a double identity as the Indians give him the name of ‘Puc-Puggy’, which means ‘Flower Hunter’.⁴⁴ This new Native self is relevant as it changes the botanist’s public focus, which now involves the recollection of natural species for both the Anglo-American and the indigenous people who ‘adopt’ and permit Bartram to continue his journey on their land as they tell him: ‘Our whole country is before you, where you may range about at pleasure, gather physic plants and flowers, and every other production’.⁴⁵ In fact, the writer’s private purpose is also related to a progressive view of American Indians as he regards them as ‘Americans’ and would not allow, for example, settlers to exploit the land of which Indians are the true ‘sovereigns’ for the sake of expansion.⁴⁶

To summarise, though beginning his adventure with a strictly scientific goal, William Bartram conveys a pre-romantic perspective, although he occasionally appreciates progress and expansion, on the wilderness that is essential to apprehend the forthcoming nature literature. The author values nature as magnificent, perfect, sublime and superior to mankind, while being aware of its dark, dreadful and dangerous side that conceals many secrets, which he claims not to be able to always fully understand. On the other hand, while the naturalist admires Native Americans, he dismisses the Black self from the landscape. Consequently, the text reminds the reader that, though we learn a lot about the late eighteenth-century American conception of nature with Bartram’s literary and aesthetic accounts, the white Anglo-European settlers had still some race and gender equality issues to sort out with their fellow human beings. At the cusp of a new century, the rights they thought to have over other people but also over nature started to be questioned and reconsidered, especially by a group of philosophers and writers who called themselves the transcendentalists.

⁴³ Bartram, *Travels*, p. 183.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 218.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 201.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 199.

2. AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM: BETWEEN SELF-IMPROVEMENT AND SELF-EGOTISM

2.1. PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS CONTEXTS

Unsurprisingly, early nineteenth-century America inherited the eighteenth-century religious paradigm of which, though diverse and complex, two leading tendencies that contributed to the birth of American Transcendentalism can be distinguished: Puritanism and Unitarianism. The former's main characteristic was an insistence on the supremacy of God over everything else in the universe because His 'morality' or 'moral law' was the 'absolute authority'.⁴⁷ As a result, mankind was submitted to God and human beings were considered as 'deprived sinners' forever damned by the original sin since not even their hard work could save their soul.⁴⁸ On the other hand, the Puritans believed in the 'concept of election' suggesting that a few people were chosen by God and could escape their fate thanks to His 'mercy'. Several English Puritans already arrived in New England in the course of the seventeenth century as 'separatists' since they wanted to reorganise the 'Church of England' and establish their own church independently from 'Roman Catholicism'. This latter point emphasises the importance of Puritanism's influence in America insofar as it shows that 'religious freedom' and 'religious diversity' were conceivable, which may also suggest that it supported the 'development of democracy'.

Nevertheless, another religious tendency drastically different from Puritanism known as Unitarianism allowed even more liberties to Christian people and contributed to the birth of emergent transcendentalism. Unitarians' central idea consisted in rejecting the 'Trinitarian deity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and' praising instead a 'unitary God', Jesus Christ thus being the 'supreme model for humanity' rather than representing God Himself.⁴⁹ In addition, contrary to the Puritans, they denied the doctrine of 'predestination' advocating that it is God who designated who was to go to 'heaven or hell' but rather granted everyone the 'free will' to work hard for her or 'his salvation'.⁵⁰ Consequently, Unitarians left more space for 'spiritual, moral, and intellectual improvement' as God, depicted as both good and kind, no longer condemned the individual but was closer to if not part of herself. Since Unitarians

⁴⁷ Alireza Manzari, 'Contextual American Transcendentalism', *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 9 (September 2012), p. 1795.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 1795-6.

⁴⁹ Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2008), p. 23.

⁵⁰ Manzari, 'Contextual American Transcendentalism', p. 1796.

acknowledged that ‘human nature [was] divine’ and that ‘man [was] too good to be damned’ they were undoubtedly connected to the eighteenth-century dominant philosophical tendency known as the Enlightenment.⁵¹ Besides, they stressed the significance of ‘conscience as authority’ since they used ‘reason’ as a means of comprehending God, which certainly confirmed their philosophical affinities with the ‘Age of Reason’.⁵²

Regarding the philosophical paradigm, empiricism is considered as the leading method of acquiring knowledge in the late eighteenth century. Empiricism is perhaps best epitomised by the English philosopher and physician John Locke (1632-1704) who advocated that man was born without conscience and therefore that it is the environment that shapes ‘human nature’, which contrasted with the idea of innateness.⁵³ Locke’s empirical philosophy, also defended by ‘his disciples in the Scottish Common Sense school—Dugald Stewart, Thomas Reid, and Thomas Brown’—argues that only sensory experience permits man to acquire knowledge and to verify truth and meaning accurately.⁵⁴ In addition, as he explained in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), it is especially, if not exclusively, as some critics have claimed after interpreting Locke’s work, sight and ‘ideas of visual images’ that characterise ‘sensory perception’, which differs from the forthcoming aesthetics.⁵⁵

Indeed, another philosopher, this time German, later moved from Locke’s materialism based on ‘sensation’ to a more idealistic perception. Immanuel Kant, unlike Locke, made a distinction between ‘the world of senses and that of understanding’.⁵⁶ Kant believed that ‘God and soul’ were ‘transcendent’ as God communicates his orders and his morality transcendently to mankind. He wrote in *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) that ‘all knowledge [is] transcendental [when it] is concerned, not with objects, but with our mode of knowing objects so far as is possible a priori’, which was more similar to the nineteenth-century American concept of transcendentalism.

As a matter of fact, emergent American Transcendentalism came as a critical response to contemporary religions and to the leading materialistic empiricism of the Enlightenment. Consequently, before 1830, the transcendentalists first proposed a ‘way of perceiving the world, centred on individual consciousness rather than on external fact’, therefore more influenced by Kant’s philosophy than Locke’s since they condemned the ‘putative self-

⁵¹ Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, p. 162.

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵³ *ibid.*, p. 122.

⁵⁴ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 11.

⁵⁵ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 82-3.

⁵⁶ Manzari, ‘Contextual American Transcendentalism’, p. 1795.

interest on which it was based'.⁵⁷ Then, one of the pioneers of the movement named Orestes Brownson (1803-76) claimed in his book *New Views of Christianity, Society, and the Church* (1836) that Transcendentalism was 'Idealism as it appear[ed] in 1842'.⁵⁸ The movement was closer to idealism than to materialism, which Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) confirmed by saying that 'Idealists' stress that 'senses are not final' since 'they cannot explain themselves' and that rather than studying 'facts' or 'history', transcendentalists focus more on 'the power of Thought and on Will, on inspiration, on miracle, on individual culture'. Moreover, the transcendentalists were persuaded that 'everyone, from birth, possessed a divine element', divinity was therefore no longer distant or threatening mankind but was viewed as part of it.⁵⁹ In other words, they thought that every man, as connected to God, was able to improve through intuition, it was therefore no longer a question of 'trinity', 'unity' or supremacy of God but more about 'one's personal relation to spirit'.⁶⁰

Consequently, Transcendentalism, as a more subject-centred response to the Enlightenment rationalism, was a branch of Romanticism.⁶¹ Nevertheless, though the Transcendentalists read the English Romantic poets and shared the European movement's emphasis on individualism and close relationship with nature, they also had many other influences such as the 'German philosophical' idealism illustrated by Kant, but also the 'French eclectic philosophers' and other 'Oriental sources', which made them develop their idiosyncrasies.^{62,63} For instance, some of their peculiarities are their 'view of God' and their concept of the 'inner light' that supports the idea of man's 'inherent goodness'.⁶⁴ Unlike the Romantics, the transcendentalists believed that God manifests Himself in the form of the 'inner light' or the 'over-soul' in every individual. As a consequence, every man, as being partly divine, is intrinsically good and capable of changing or improving, which contrasts with the Romantic conception of human nature as separated from God and somehow corrupted or incomplete.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, pp. 8, 11.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 47.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 304.

⁶² *ibid.*, p. 58. Gura mentions German Idealism and French eclecticism, mainly represented by Victor Cousin, as major influences for American idealists and transcendentalists.

⁶³ Manzari, 'Contextual American Transcendentalism', p. 1795. As Manzari suggests, the 'mystical aspects of Transcendentalism' such as God's presence in every individual and in nature or 'intuition' as the 'unique source of knowledge' may have partially originated from 'Indian and Chinese religious teachings'.

⁶⁴ Manzari, 'Contextual American Transcendentalism', pp. 1796-97.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 1797.

Furthermore, American Transcendentalism was undoubtedly a broadly diversified and complex movement and its representatives did not always agree on which issue should be privileged. While nature took a whole new philosophical dimension based on the unity of its elements, especially thanks to Emerson, early nineteenth-century America did not accept universal rights and to view everyone as equal. As a result, while some of the transcendentalists kept their focus mainly spiritual, others were more concerned by social commitments.

2.2. SOCIAL CONTEXT

As the importance of concepts such as self-improvement or self-culture was increasing, many inequalities between human beings still persisted in America. Indeed, more and more white people were attending universities but Black people continued enduring the atrocities of the system of slavery and were forbidden to learn to read or write.⁶⁶ As a result, the transcendentalists condemned slavery and strongly supported abolitionism. Their advocacy for individualism and self-reliance obviously did not match the slaveholders' violence and contempt towards the enslaved who were treated merely as children or animals and deprived of their 'basic rights', along with their right to elect their own 'way of living'.⁶⁷ In addition, they stated that 'it was unacceptable that an individual could be allowed to lawfully buy or sell another individual and dominate his life thoroughly'.

Among those deeply involved in the abolitionist cause, the most prominent were Orestes Brownson, John Brown (1800-59), Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and, above all, Theodore Parker (1810-60). Parker was 'the social conscience of the Transcendentalist movement', he differed from Emerson as he believed in 'Schleiermacher's sense of man's cosmic dependence', in other words, he did not think that God was part of every individual but rather that every man should complete and justify his existence through 'selfless devotion to God's creation' and this, according to Parker, 'meant a commitment to social action'.⁶⁸ Therefore, Parker openly criticised and contested slavery as, for example, he published his antislavery *Letter to the People of the United States... Touching the Matter of Slavery* in 1848, in which he stipulates that 'American slavery is the greatest, the foulest wrong which man ever did to man; the most hideous and detested sin a nation has ever committed before

⁶⁶ Curti, *The Growth*, p. 431.

⁶⁷ Manzari, 'Contextual American Transcendentalism', p. 1793.

⁶⁸ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 218.

the just all-bounteous God—a wrong and sin wholly without excuse'.⁶⁹ Though Emerson was also an abolitionist, Parker was perhaps more direct as he did not rely on self-culture but wanted effective 'political and social change' and was ready to exert pressure to achieve his goals.⁷⁰

In the same vein as Parker, Thoreau is famous for having taken action against slavery by refusing to 'pay his poll tax' since it somehow associated him with slavery or 'the evil of the nation', and was ultimately imprisoned because of that.⁷¹ Indeed, in his essay 'Civil Disobedience', Thoreau advocates a revolution against his government that is also 'the slave's government': 'break the law', he says, 'let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine'.⁷² Motivated by Emerson's Romantic individualism, Thoreau simply could not permit that the state interferes with man's conscience and described his democratic ideal as a 'true respect for the individual'.⁷³ Thoreau and Parker were both aware that many so-called 'abolitionists' did not contribute much to fight the system and, as a consequence, they appeared, by denouncing them and taking 'concrete action', as more reactionary figures among the transcendentalists.⁷⁴

However, they were not the only thinkers who revolutionised the transcendentalists' discourse. Another great writer and activist, known as Margaret Fuller (1810-50), also supported abolitionism but was more principally a defender of women's rights. Fuller was one of Emerson's closest friends and had been very much influenced by his 'preaching'.⁷⁵ Fuller's most famous and important work was *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), in which she clearly stated her position in the women's rights movement.⁷⁶ In this book, the author, by using intertextuality, deconstructs preconceived nineteenth-century ideas that associated masculinity with genuine to grant women a more legitimate place in society. 'Let it not be said', she writes, 'wherever there is energy or creative genius, "She has a masculine mind"'.⁷⁷ Like Thoreau, Fuller took over the Emersonian transcendentalist ideas of self-reliance and 'self-culture' or 'the continual spiritual growth of the soul' to improve the 'condition of women'.⁷⁸ Indeed, her main argument was to promote freedom and equality for the

⁶⁹ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 249.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 222.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 223.

⁷² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and 'Civil Disobedience'* (New York: Signet Classics, 2012), pp. 278, 284.

⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 297.

⁷⁴ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 224.

⁷⁵ David M. Robinson, 'Margaret Fuller and the Transcendental Ethos', Larry J. Reynolds (ed.) *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton & Company, 1998), p. 247.

⁷⁶ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 227.

⁷⁷ Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Norton & Company, 1998), p. 23.

⁷⁸ Robinson, 'Margaret Fuller', p. 245.

‘Emersonian universal man’, whom could be female or male.⁷⁹ She makes it clear in the preface of her book as she states:

By Man I mean both man and woman: these are two halves of one thought. I lay no especial stress on the welfare of either. I believe that the development of the one cannot be effected without that of the other. My highest wish is that truth should be distinctly and rationally apprehended, and the conditions of life and freedom recognized as the same for the daughters and the sons of time; twin exponents of a divine thought.⁸⁰

In this extract, Fuller defines Man as being either a man or a woman without implying any emphasis on masculinity. Indeed, she claims that both ‘daughters’ and ‘sons’ as inheritors of the ‘divine thought’ are supposed to develop their self in the same conditions of ‘life and freedom’. Fuller simply did not accept the image of the ‘white man’ as the social ‘norm’ since she wanted women, just like slaves, to possess themselves, to have ‘free agency’.⁸¹ In fact, she even did not hesitate to use abolitionist rhetoric and to compare the condition of slaves with that of women in society as she stated that ‘as the friend of the “negro” assumes that one man cannot by right, hold another in bondage, so should the friend of woman assume that man cannot, by right, lay even well-meant restrictions on woman’.⁸² To summarise, her idea was that women should not by any means be limited or controlled by men in any social structure and that they should have trust in their intellect since gender does not alter its significance.

Consequently, the transcendentalists’ philosophical ideas of subjectivity and individual freedom, as specifically illustrated by Emerson, were also used to conduct more socially engaged purposes like abolitionism in Parker, Thoreau and others’ cases and feminism in Fuller’s. These battles were capital to shape and make coherent what was to be the transcendentalist concept of Nature. Indeed, first presented by Emerson in his essay *Nature* (1836), this representation of nature does not exclude any human being but rather defines them all as united, connected and equal. The ‘self’ was also soon to be included in such notions like the previously mentioned ‘self-culture’ but also in the well-known concepts of ‘self-reliance’ and ‘self-realisation’, which were granting more meaning to the American self but maybe at the expense of neglecting the importance of nature itself.

⁷⁹ Robinson, ‘Margaret Fuller’, p. 251.

⁸⁰ Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 5.

⁸¹ Kimberly Drake, ‘Rewriting the American Self: Race, Gender, and Identity in the Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs’, *Melus*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Winter 1997), p. 94.

⁸² Robinson, ‘Margaret Fuller’, p. 251.

2.3. NATURE IN AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM: THE EMERSONIAN SUBLIME

First and foremost, it is worth mentioning one European thinker who initiated the transcendentalists' conception of nature: Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). Among the philosophers briefly mentioned in the context of this chapter, the Swedish Swedenborg was perhaps Emerson's major influence, especially regarding his view of nature. Indeed, Swedenborg depicted nature as 'the very emanation of God' and developed his theory of correspondence 'between the material world and that of spiritual realities' and thus anticipated the idea that 'the worlds of matters and spirits' are united, which became the fundamental doctrine of emergent Transcendentalism.⁸³ In addition, he thought that man was capable of spiritually improving since 'the growth of the mind' was related to 'a proper perception and interpretation of the natural world'.⁸⁴

As a synthesis of Swedenborg's and many others' theories, Ralph Waldo Emerson defined his own representation of the natural world in his small book entitled *Nature*, that has often been referred to as the 'manifesto of [American] Transcendentalism'.⁸⁵ Although some critics have deplored the work's 'lack of structure and coherence', clear features of Emerson's theory can be identified.⁸⁶ To begin, the author determines the composition of Nature and differentiates what is the 'Me' from what is the 'Not-Me' as he writes: 'Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the Not Me, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, Nature.'⁸⁷ Originally from Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773-1843), Emerson uses these terms to portray the individual as part of nature since his self, the 'Me', is united to 'the Whole', meaning Nature. In addition, man may only acquire 'purity and knowledge' by experiencing the natural world itself as it is where he can be transcended by God.⁸⁸ This is illustrated by the following passage:

[...] I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into

⁸³ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, pp. 60-4.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 61-2.

⁸⁵ Leo, Marx, 'The Idea of Nature in America', *Daedalus*, Vol. 137, No. 2 (Spring 2008), p. 12.

⁸⁶ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 93.

⁸⁷ Ralph W. Emerson, *Nature and Other Essays* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2009), p. 2.

⁸⁸ Alireza Manzari, 'Nature in American Transcendentalism', *English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (August 2012), p. 61.

infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become transparent eye-ball; I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.⁸⁹

Therefore, Emerson advocates a close relationship with nature, in which man can be unified with the divine spirit. In nature, man ‘see[s] all’, he becomes universal, omniscient as a ‘particle of God’, and almost invincible as there is ‘no disgrace’ or ‘calamity’ that ‘nature cannot repair’. In other words, as Nicolas Brinded writes, ‘Emerson charts an experience in which the process of looking becomes as important as that which is “seen”’.⁹⁰ Within eight conceptual chapters analysing notions such as ‘commodity’, ‘beauty’ or ‘language’, Emerson theorises nature and how we should approach it. Subsequently, he describes ‘commodity’ as ‘all those advantages that our senses owe to nature’ and ‘beauty’ as the ‘delight’ we feel by looking at ‘primary forms’, which are the natural elements such as ‘the mountain’ or ‘the tree’.⁹¹ Then, he analyses ‘language’ almost mathematically with a demonstration to show that words are both ‘natural facts’ and ‘symbols of particular spiritual facts’, which allow us to discuss personal thoughts as well as to depict the world surrounding the individual.⁹² To summarise, the Emersonian nature provides us with everything we need but it is also ‘beauty, satisfying us with its loveliness, harmony, and unity’ and ‘offers discipline, teaching what is true, beautiful, and good, for the physical laws of the universe are analogous to the great moral laws’.⁹³ Then, there is another concept known as ‘the Soul’ or the ‘Over-soul’ that the transcendentalist explains with even more abstract terms.

In an essay published in 1841 called ‘The Over-soul’, Emerson depicts the ‘Over-soul’ as the ‘Unity’ within which ‘every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other’, it is the ‘whole’ of which natural elements are ‘the shining parts’, ‘the eternal ONE’ in which ‘every part and particle is equally related’.⁹⁴ As previously mentioned, it is also separated from nature since the universe does not include the Soul in the entity of Nature. In addition, Emerson claims that language, though it permits man to express his thoughts and describe the world, cannot grasp the Over-soul as it is ‘too subt[le]’ and we can only ‘know that it pervades and contains us’.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Emerson, *Nature*, p. 3.

⁹⁰ Nicolas Brinded, ‘The myth making of nation building: *Walden* and the technological sublime’, *Myth and Nation*, Vol. 23 (Spring 2015), p. 4.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁹² *ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

⁹³ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, pp. 94-5.

⁹⁴ Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 52.

⁹⁵ Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, p. 53.

Furthermore, the author develops in this same essay his conception of the sublime inasmuch as he claims that ‘announcements of the soul’ are accompanied by ‘the emotion of the sublime’ through the process of ‘revelation’ characterised by the ‘communication’ of the ‘Divine mind into our mind’.⁹⁶ This comment is essential as it clearly contrasts with earlier representations of the sublime like, for instance, William Bartram’s. Indeed, the sublime, according to Emerson, no longer refers to God, though He is still viewed as the creator of all things in the universe, as a separate or dreaded entity but as part of man, existing within ‘our mind’. Unlike Bartram, Emerson considers pious people not as inferior or submitted but as united, therefore almost equal, to God. The philosopher’s idea is that ‘the union of man and God in every act of the soul’ is ‘ineffable’ and that ‘the simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God’.⁹⁷ We can also say that, from the eighteenth-century religiously devoted man’s point of view, the belief that anyone could be equal to God is bold and highly presumptuous. Emerson demonstrates that, as he experiences the sublime in nature, man is connected to the divine and thus manages to improve spiritually. This obviously contrasts with puritanism but also with empiricism since knowledge and self-improvement are no longer resulting from sensory experience. On the contrary, Emerson developed a more romantic view of the self that was perhaps best exemplified by Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle who claimed that the mind is not a ‘reflex of what is’ in the world, as Locke would say, but appeals to our imagination, to the ‘inner resources of the psyche’, and is more ‘spontaneous’.⁹⁸ In other words, Emerson was primarily influenced by Kant’s transcendental idealism, as opposed to the empiricist ‘understanding’ best represented by Locke, advocating a more ‘intuitional perception’ encouraging man to describe and comprehend the world with ‘symbols’, with his own imagination.⁹⁹ He even goes further by showing that sublime nature makes man feel the ‘over-soul’, as it grants him with divine power and invigorates his ‘inner light’. Consequently, one may think that the Emersonian Sublime emphasises the importance of man’s connection with nature but it is also exclusively self-centred, perhaps even anthropocentric, as aimed at demonstrating man’s boundless potentiality in the natural world.

In his famous essay entitled ‘Self-Reliance’ published the same year as ‘The Over-soul’, Emerson explains more clearly his conception of the sublime by relating it to self-reliance. The author opens with a Latin quotation translated as ‘[do] not seek for things

⁹⁶ Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, p. 57.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 62.

⁹⁸ Marx, *The Machine*, pp. 173-5.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 233.

outside of yourself', which already suggests the tone of his work.¹⁰⁰ Throughout his text, he conveys that the individual is rendered capable of genius thanks to the divine spirit that transcends him. For example, he writes that '[we] but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that divine idea which each of us represents'.¹⁰¹ In other words, Emerson rejects any preconceived idea introduced by religions to promote individual genius as he claims that '[whenever] a mind is simple, and receives a divine wisdom, old things, —means, teachers, texts, temples fall'.¹⁰² He believed that man should not be influenced by society, as it is an obstacle to his self-realisation, which is shown by the following passage:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.¹⁰³

What the transcendentalist advocates here is almost a pre-social state for mankind as he describes society as a 'conspiracy', a 'company' that almost empisons individuality with its 'names and customs'. In addition, he even considers, like Carlyle, 'Spontaneity' or 'Instinct' as 'the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life', which clearly contrasts with the Enlightenment's rationalism previously mentioned.¹⁰⁴ Emerson condemns society as it 'acquires new arts' but 'loses old instincts', he claims that every man should, like the 'naked New Zealander' who does not possess much but has not lost his 'aboriginal strength', live in union with nature and according to his instinct, and develop his own imagination disregarding of pre-established doctrines.

However close to nature it may appear, Emerson's self-empowering spirituality could also be understood as rather aggressive and thus easily criticisable. Emerson's essay 'Self-Reliance' encouraged the 'nonconformist' man to '[stand] alone' in nature and apart from society and to value his own mind, 'to believe that what is true for [him] in [his] private heart is true for all men'.¹⁰⁵ Other transcendentalists, like Elizabeth Peabody (1804-94), denounced his reflexion as 'egotheism' since it only rejects man's conceptions of God to put the individual on a pedestal.¹⁰⁶ In another essay called 'Experience', Emerson writes that '[d]ivinity is behind our failures and follies' and that '[n]ever mind the ridicule' or 'the

¹⁰⁰ Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, p. 19.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁵ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, pp. 213-14.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, p. 216.

defeat', there is 'victory' and 'justice' for all.¹⁰⁷ As a result, it may be dangerous to deem any mistake or any man as representative of the divine. Indeed, as opposed to Bartram's, the Emersonian Sublime provides man with all the confidence he needs to face divine nature and to ultimately transcend it. Consequently, readers may as well, as Paul Crumbley suggests, view his texts as strictly 'self-oriented' and simply advocating 'aggressive optimism'.¹⁰⁸ If we do not disapprove any 'folly' or 'failure' but rather regard them as the genesis of great actions, one may indeed be drawn with extreme optimism. Emerson's 'universal man' is a legitimate concept insofar as it illustrates all human beings, disregarding of race or gender as Fuller highlighted later, as equal. Nonetheless, if the primary focus of American Transcendentalism is man's connection to nature, Emerson's later texts somehow render it vague and overwhelmed by an intense emphasis on individualism, which makes them rather precarious with respect to the future of nature that was already facing increasing industrialism.¹⁰⁹

Fortunately, one of Emerson's best disciples known as Henry David Thoreau did more than writing about nature, he experienced it as he went to live alone in the woods near Walden Pond. In what has been regarded as a classic of US literature, Thoreau, influenced by his master's theories, reminded the American people of what is mankind's place in nature and society, and developed a particular wilderness aesthetics that prepared the ground for forthcoming conservationists.

¹⁰⁷ Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, pp. 89, 101.

¹⁰⁸ Paul Crumbley, 'Contesting the sublime: new versions of an alternative American tradition', *SPELL: Swiss papers in English language and literature*, (2002), pp. 29, 41.

¹⁰⁹ Gray, *A History of American Literature*, p. 89. Gray stresses that from the beginning of the nineteenth-century, the 'economic base of the country was [already] shifting from agriculture to industry, and its population was moving from the country to the town' travelling mainly by 'wagons' or 'steamboats'. Then, 'by 1860', the modern 'age of railroad had definitely arrived' with more than thirty thousands miles of track across the country. In addition, market economy was also developing, which led to the 'growth of a whole new range of industries, among them lumbering, mining, and the production of machine tools. Industrialism and the 'systems of production and consumption' contributed to the modification of the US landscape and, consequently, influenced the literature dealing with the American self and nature.

2.4. WELCOME TO WALDEN: THE THOREAUVIAN SUBLIME

To begin, Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) has often been referred to as Emerson's disciple but distanced himself from his master's theories before ultimately thinking he was 'Emerson's equal and less his disciple'.¹¹⁰

Motivated by Emerson's ideas of self-reliance, Thoreau believed that 'humanity spent too much time getting a living rather than living life itself' and that we should 'first succeed alone' before 'we may enjoy our success together'.¹¹¹ The two transcendentalists can be distinguished by saying that Emerson 'observes thoughts' while Thoreau 'examines experiences', which he proved by deciding to put into practice what his master had previously advocated and leaving the city of Concord to live in Walden Pond in 1845.¹¹² As a result, Thoreau published his book *Walden* in 1854, in which he recounts his experience in nature, displaying reflexions on society, economy, natural facts and life itself. The author's main purpose was to only live with the 'necessary of life', which he defines as the basics of human existence.¹¹³ Indeed, he believed that nineteenth-century economy and lifestyle was overwhelmed by 'materialism and commercialism' and that they were the causes of artificial needs and luxuries that spiritually impoverished human beings.¹¹⁴ The young transcendentalist, like Emerson who compared civilised men with indigenous people, claimed that most of civilised people were 'all poor in respect to a thousand savage comforts, though surrounded by luxuries'.¹¹⁵ In fact, he condemned comfort as, instead of improving man's life, it imprisoned him in 'modern house[s]' in which he became exclusively interested in collecting 'gross necessities'.¹¹⁶ Already presented in the first chapter entitled 'Economy', these concerns were announcing his hard self-appointed task to illustrate the contemporary American landscape, meaning both society and nature, which was in the middle of an identity struggle between the early nineteenth-century focus on nature aesthetics and the emerging capitalism and industrialism that were drastically changing the country and affecting people's mind.

¹¹⁰ Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 207.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, pp. 203-4.

¹¹² Manzari, 'Nature in American Transcendentalism', p. 64.

¹¹³ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 10.

¹¹⁴ Alireza Manzari, 'Henry David Thoreau: Literary Transcendentalism', *English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (August 2012), p. 1.

¹¹⁵ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 27.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 28.

Although there is no dearth of writings on Thoreau's philosophy of nature, still, very little attention has so far been paid to his relationship to the senses as vehicles of understanding. For example, almost like Bartram, all his senses are active as he experiences nature in such a way that he somehow fuses with it. For example, Thoreau appreciates the taste of 'sand cherr[ies]', of which he, in a style reminiscent of a botanist like Bartram, also gives the Latin name '*Cerasus pumila*', as he 'tasted them out of a compliment to Nature' and concludes that 'they were scarcely palatable'.¹¹⁷ In addition, besides the cherries, but also the beans, huckleberries, and other fruits or vegetables he recounts having tasted, it is worth stressing the importance of the description of the wilderness on the first page of the 'Baker Farm' chapter in which he claims that 'wild holly berries make the beholder forget his home with their beauty, and he is dazzled and tempted by nameless other wild forbidden fruits, too fair for mortal taste'.¹¹⁸ This depiction is unique insofar as it suggests many characteristics of what can be called a Thoreauvian idea of the sublime. As a matter of fact, in *Walden*, the sublime lies in the simplicity of natural elements such as berries that are also partly divine. Thoreau's 'forbidden fruits' can also be compared to the fruits of the Garden of Eden, too divine or 'holy' to be tried by 'mortal taste'.

Then, the author also dedicates a whole chapter to the 'Sounds' of nature or, more largely, to its symbols. For instance, he demonstrates acute hearing as he is enthralled by 'the distant lowing of some cow in the horizon beyond the woods' that 'sounded sweet and melodious' to such an extent that he almost thought they were 'the voices of certain minstrels' though it was 'one articulation of Nature'.¹¹⁹ The references to the wind are also prevalent in Thoreau's book because he is often touched by its breezes or hears its 'terrestrial music' and even uses it to refer to the daily process of divine 'creation' that he described as 'uninterrupted', and therefore to the whole of Nature.¹²⁰ However, Thoreau describes the 'lake' as the 'landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature' but, most interestingly, as 'the earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature'.¹²¹ This comparison suggests the dominance of sight over the other senses insofar as it reminds the connection between the human mind and the landscape that is beheld discussed in the previous chapter. As a consequence, the Thoreauvian sublime presents some similarities with the Kantian Sublime since both considers 'natural objects' as experienced first by our 'senses'

¹¹⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 93.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 164.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 101.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 69.

¹²¹ *ibid.*, p. 152.

and then processed by our ‘imagination’, which make them related to the human mind and thus to subjectivity.¹²² In addition, man is not perceived as inferior and nature as dreadful, as it would be in the Burkean Sublime, but is instead represented as capable of ‘measur[ing] [himself] relative to nature’ and no longer feels ‘insignificant’ but manages to ‘experience freedom’ and pleasure while contemplating nature, which again reminds the reader of Kant’s definition of the sublime.¹²³ Therefore, unlike Bartram, Thoreau dismisses the idea of the sublime and divine landscapes as fearful and dominant but rather explores what Bartram had introduced, meaning that natural ‘sublimity’ aims at ‘awakening’ the mind, at improving spiritually our self, which is reminiscent of the Emersonian concepts of self-reliance and self-improvement.

Besides his multi-sensorial approach to nature, Thoreau also writes with an idiosyncratic language that reminds man of the fact that, though natural facts may appear as wild or simple, they are symbols of the divine and their beauty that may ‘make the beholder forget his home’ is not to ignore but to contemplate and fully appreciate. Although the author fosters simplicity, his writing is not ‘simple’ and displays an economy of language that is reminiscent of what the Russian Formalists, or more precisely Viktor Shklovsky (1893-1984), referred to as the process of poetic ‘defamiliarisation’ of the real. Indeed, Shklovsky claimed that ‘only the creation of new forms of art can restore to man sensation of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism’ and thus promoted ‘poetic language’ as opposed to ‘practical language’.¹²⁴ Therefore, Thoreau uses his ‘art’, his symbolical and poetic language, to ‘defamiliarise’ the common view of things in order to ‘restore perception of the world’ as the ‘center of aesthetic experience’.¹²⁵ In other words, Thoreau supports an optimistic form of symbolism, or ‘symbolicalness’ as he prefers to call it, of natural elements, which is to be grasped through ‘imagination’, independently from any pre-established belief, doctrine or science, and that is aimed at ‘resurrecting’ natural elements or, in other words, reevaluating their meaning and usefulness to the realisation of the human self.¹²⁶

As previously mentioned, since the sublime lies everywhere in nature, although Thoreau’s optimistic symbolism is slightly innocent and the author randomly looks at nature’s beauty or occasionally hears its sounds, he is very much aware of and attentive to what is

¹²² Emily Brady, ‘Reassessing Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature in the Kantian Sublime’, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 101.

¹²³ *ibid.*, pp. 93-95.

¹²⁴ Lawrence Crawford, ‘Viktor Shklovskij: *Différance* in Defamiliarization’, *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 1984), pp. 209-210.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 210, 212.

¹²⁶ Dana Phillips, ‘Thoreau’s Aesthetics and “The Domain of the Superlative”’, *Environmental Values*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (August 2006), p. 296.

happening since he is not just content with the sight of a natural scenery but also ‘listen to every zephyr for some reproof, for it is surely there, and he is unfortunate who does not hear it’.¹²⁷ Consequently, Thoreau suggests that the sublime can be found in nature everywhere one may pause to perceive and comprehend it, in every fruit, sunset, ‘zephyr’ as each natural element is worth examining. Indeed, the author’s attempt is to remind the reader to focus on what is around him and not further away as he writes that:

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us.¹²⁸

In this extract, Thoreau portrays his contemporaries who were too interested in history and in the progress of sciences to such an extent that they were missing the ‘real truth’ that the transcendentalists valued so much. The author does not deny that ‘there is indeed something true and sublime’ in mankind’s history or in scientific progress that seeks ‘truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star’ but he nevertheless explains that ‘truth’, the divine and sublime nature, ‘culminates in the present moment’ and is to be found constantly in ‘the reality that surrounds us’. Therefore, since Thoreau reevaluates sublime nature, as opposed to technology or science, and self-realisation in the natural world, his aesthetics responds to what Daniel Peck defined as ‘the need for a new foundation mythology, one that would link human activity to an actual place, if US civilization were to survive the dehumanization and despiritualization—the barbarism—of the Age of Empire’.¹²⁹ Indeed, the young transcendentalist was perhaps the first one to advocate an ‘ecological’ conception of the self and the natural world that influenced many of the upcoming conservationists. In addition, he was also concerned in preserving mankind and human rights since he wanted to grant a legitimate place to every man in the sublime landscape.

As a matter of fact, as previously stated, the young transcendentalist also respects the idea of the Emersonian universal man since he took action against his government and refused to pay his taxes as he did not want to contribute to a system supporting slavery. Nevertheless, he also, like Bartram, praises the Native Americans’ expertise and to value their lifestyle that has remained untouched by the market economy, although he frequently uses the epithet ‘savage’ as opposed to ‘civilised’ people to refer to them. Indeed, Thoreau illustrates the

¹²⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 178.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 79.

¹²⁹ Paul Crumbley, ‘Contesting the sublime’, p. 36.

indigenous man as closer to nature and enjoying a ‘simpler’ but yet spiritually richer and ‘truthful’ way of living. For example, the author writes that ‘in the savage state every family owns a shelter as good as best’ and then remarks that ‘though the birds of the air have their nests, and the foxes their holes, and the savages their wigwams, in modern civilized society, not more than one half the families own a shelter’.¹³⁰ Thoreau claimed that since ‘civilised’ Americans pay annual taxes to live in their houses, they did not entirely possess them. In other words, Indians, like any ‘inhabitant’ of nature who lives apart from society rules, value more what truly matters. Consequently, with respect to Thoreau’s abolitionist activism, he undoubtedly includes the Black self in the American landscape but he also regards the Indian self as perhaps spiritually superior to the ‘civilised’ white self. Indeed, Thoreau believed that the ‘white self’ had been corrupted by the new market economy and by the expanding industrialisation to which it was closely related, which he tried without success to avoid in Walden Pond.

In 1964, Leo Marx published a work of literary criticism entitled *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* in which he analyses mostly American literary classics to represent how technology drastically changed the American pastoral ideal that was originally based in a strictly natural setting. In his book, Marx defines the concept of ‘the machine in the garden’ as the ‘tension’ or the ‘noise’ often caused by the ‘train whistle’ symbolising industrialism in the natural landscape or ‘a reality alien to the pastoral dream’ that ‘arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety’ and ‘clash[es] through harmony’.¹³¹ The critic also applied his theory to *Walden* as he noticed that the symbolism of industrialism and technology is prevalent in Thoreau’s work. As Marx mentions, while Thoreau is describing the natural scenery he sees through his window during one sunny afternoon, he suddenly hears the sound of ‘the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country’.¹³² This train will then become a preoccupation for the author, as he will subsequently refer to it and its sound. One of his representations of the machine is particularly reminiscent of Bartram’s apocalyptic description of the alligator as he writes:

[...] when I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils (what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon they will put into the new Mythology I [do not] know), it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it. If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends!¹³³

¹³⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 25.

¹³¹ Marx, *The Machine*, pp. 15-17.

¹³² Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 94.

¹³³ *ibid.*, p. 95.

The 'iron horse' is indeed similar to Bartram's 'monster' since they both breathe smoke and make the earth tremble and are symbols of US increasing industrialism. Nevertheless, Thoreau specifies that the 'iron horse' is man-made, which may suggest that mankind is not threatened by a dangerous animal like in Bartram's text but rather participates in the modification of the landscape. The machines and trains manufactured as 'servants for [man's] noble ends' are part of the landscape, described as 'worthy to inhabit [the earth]', which means that Thoreau was aware of its significance and utility. As Brinded writes, this latter extract shows that Thoreau does not exactly reject modernity since 'he is attempting to place' the train 'within the philosophical framework of the sublime, where the train is able to stand side by side with nature because they share the same ineffable qualities'.¹³⁴ Although Thoreau first depicts the train as a disturbing element, he gradually accepts it as belonging to the landscape, as if he was prophetically recognising that 'the natural sublime was making way for the technological sublime'.¹³⁵ Therefore, the transcendentalist disciple, like Emerson and unlike Bartram, stopped regarding technology as horrid because 'there is nothing inherently ugly about factories and railroads' since 'what is ugly is the dislocation and detachment from "the Whole"'.¹³⁶ In fact, the problem is not that Thoreau considers technology as 'anti-poetic' but rather that he was fearing that it might eventually alienate mankind from 'the Whole', from Nature and what had defined the American self.

According to Thoreau, the railroads, trains or factories were not really disturbing the sublime landscape, it was 'the commerce' that they symbolise that 'Thoreau finds distasteful'.¹³⁷ As previously mentioned, the American people became gradually obsessed by accumulating money and material possessions in order to have a 'comfortable' life so that they forgot what was truly necessary. Thoreau was concerned by this change of lifestyle and 'did not separate himself from social strings just to be free but instead to carry out in-depth analysis of them'.¹³⁸ As a consequence, the author was searching for what he refers to as 'truth' in nature, which can be understood as the 'true' meaning of life that was being obscured in civilisation by this new market economy or, more largely, by money and abstractness like fame since he writes towards the end of *Walden*: 'rather than love, than

¹³⁴ Brinded, 'The myth making of nation building', p. 9.

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 1.

¹³⁶ Marx, *The Machine*, p. 241.

¹³⁷ Brinded, 'The myth making of nation building', p. 12.

¹³⁸ Manzari, 'Henry David Thoreau', p. 2.

money, than fame, give me truth'.¹³⁹ He was convinced that 'superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only' and proposed man to 'sell [his] clothes and keep [his] thoughts' because 'money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul'.¹⁴⁰ Perhaps less aggressively than Emerson, Thoreau's optimism urged American people not to let their self be damaged by consumerism by showing that a life in harmony with nature, which represents 'truth' and 'authenticity', offers the possibility of self-improvement.¹⁴¹ In other words, as an advocate of 'romantic' primitivism, Thoreau believed that man could find the 'necessary of the soul' in nature, which he truly needs to realise his self.

In conclusion, as Paul Crumbley suggests, Thoreau somehow contests Emerson's 'aggressive optimism' in his conception of the sublime.¹⁴² As a matter of fact, the author's multi-sensorial approach to nature is an attempt to reconcile the empiricist and transcendental poles. As Leo Marx emphasises, *Walden* 'has a strong contrapuntal theme' since Thoreau, 'assuming that natural facts properly perceived and accurately transcribed must yield truth, [...] adopts the tone of a hard-headed empiricist'.¹⁴³ Thoreau, through his poetic and metaphorical language, intended to improve man's perception of nature, to prove that knowledge or 'truth' can be achieved through both empiricist experience and imagination. Thoreau's text thus allows the universal man to reach the 'truth' that lies everywhere in sublime nature, and to encourage him to refocus his self and his mind on the basic necessities of life. This is shown, for instance, by his short poem also used as an epigraph for this dissertation, as he claims that 'men say they know many things' thanks to 'the arts and sciences' but, in fact, 'the wind that blows', again referring to the wind as a symbol of Nature, 'is all that any body knows'.¹⁴⁴ The young transcendentalist indeed left his town to better understand his society and to meditate on what he thought was alienating mankind from 'truth'. Almost prophetically, Thoreau urged nineteenth-century American people who were 'tak[ing] wings' not to cause their self-destruction by privileging fame, money, progress or, in short, an artificial way of living, over the truly rich natural world. Although Thoreau was perhaps not blaming industrialism or technology for upcoming ecological damages—he was

¹³⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 268.

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 267.

¹⁴¹ The reader should know that the concepts of 'truth' and 'authenticity', which may often appear as problematic in the academic discourse, will frequently be mentioned throughout this dissertation. In this particular paper, they should be mainly understood as related to Thoreau's representation of nature as depicted in *Walden*, meaning as a space uncorrupted by capitalist economy, consumerism, or also later, as it will be discussed in details in the last three chapters, by media culture, modern technologies or simulations.

¹⁴² Paul Crumbley, 'Contesting the sublime', p. 41.

¹⁴³ Marx, *The Machine*, p. 243.

¹⁴⁴ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 34.

even maybe leaving space for the technological sublime—, he unconsciously supported the ‘first Law of Ecology’, which is that ‘everything is connected to everything else’ on earth, since he claimed that one should not detach from the ‘whole’ of Nature, from its ‘truth’.¹⁴⁵ Thoreau’s idea of the sublime was therefore not really ‘aggressive’ or dangerous as not specifically focused on self-accomplishment and certainly not on the achievement of success, fame, or wealth but rather to encourage self-realisation in nature, where ‘authenticity’ and ‘truth’ prevail over the accumulation of meaningless artificialities.

2.5. POETIC TRANSCENDENTALISM: WALT WHITMAN (1819-1892) AND EMILY DICKINSON (1830-1886)

As Emerson wrote in his essay entitled ‘The Poet’, ‘the poet is the sayer, the namer’ who converts the beauty of things into words and gives them ‘a second wonderful value’ like, for example, we can find in Thoreau’s *Walden*.¹⁴⁶ Although one may easily recognise the transcendentalists’ essential ideas in Emerson’s or Thoreau’s writings, other US poets’ like Walt Whitman’s and Emily Dickinson’s affinities with the movement have often been commented on, which allows us to read their work as poetic Transcendentalism.^{147 148} Nonetheless, these two poets also managed, through their poetic speakers, to develop a particular perception of the changing American landscape and therefore to distinguish their aesthetics from Emerson’s or Thoreau’s philosophies and to somehow redefine the ‘transcendental’ self, harmonising it with the human community and with urban settings in Whitman’s case and demystifying it, making it erratic in Dickinson’s.

First of all, Whitman’s representation of nature is perhaps best epitomised in his most famous epic poem called ‘Song of Myself’. As the title already suggests, the poem deals with Whitman’s speaker’s, often quoted as ‘I’, relationship with nature and mankind but also with everything else that surrounds him such as unnatural objects. With regard to nature, the speaker adopts the transcendentalists’ idea of the ‘Whole’ as he states: ‘I take part, I see and hear the whole’.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, the idea of unity in nature or, more largely, in the universe, is significant to the American poet. For example, he uses the natural images of the grass in the

¹⁴⁵ William Rueckert, ‘Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism’, Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 108.

¹⁴⁶ Ralph W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*, pp. 67-69.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas W. Ford, ‘Thoreau’s Cosmic Mosquito and Dickinson’s Terrestrial Fly’, *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (December 1975), p. 487.

¹⁴⁸ Manzari, ‘Contextual American Transcendentalism’, p. 1798.

¹⁴⁹ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Signet Classics, 2013), p. 58.

sixth section to stress this Emersonian theory of oneness as the grass is ‘a uniform hieroglyphic’ meaning ‘sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones’ and ‘growing among black folks as among white’.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, fervent opponent to slavery, Whitman presents his speaker in the tenth section as ‘alone far in the wilds and mountains’ and helping a ‘runaway slave [who] came to [his] house’, to whom he ‘gave [...] a room’ and ‘had him sit next [to him] at [the] table’.¹⁵¹ In addition, the speaker also states that he is ‘the poet of the woman the same as the man’ and ‘say[s] [that] it is as great to be a woman as to be a man’, therefore advocating equality among human beings, which is related to the notion of the universal man that Emerson and Fuller endorsed among other transcendentalists.¹⁵² Then, the speaker also illustrates God, or the divine, as appearing in everything that surrounds man, which is reminiscent of the Thoreauvian Sublime. For instance, in the last stanza of the fifth section he states:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowl-
edge that pass all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that all men ever born are also my brothers, and
the women my sisters and lovers,
And that a keelson of the creation is love,
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap[ed] stones, elder,
Mullein and poke weed.¹⁵³

In this extract, the speaker claims that God is in everything, and he, again presenting himself as equal to other human beings, women and men, contemplates God everyday in nature. The divine would thus reside in every element as ‘spread around’ man and permits him to reach ‘peace and knowledge’. In addition, he also describes the process of creation as being ‘limitless’ and portraying positive feelings such as ‘love’. Contrary to the Burkean Sublime, Whitman uses the ‘leaves’ of grass in the fields to symbolise a welcoming natural world in which predominates the equal union between mankind and natural elements.

However, it is difficult to determine the speaker’s exact method of experiencing nature. Indeed, for example, Alireza Manzari claims that Whitman was primarily influenced by Emerson and therefore considered the ‘eyesight’ as the most ‘powerful’ of the senses.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 27.

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁵² *ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁵³ *ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

¹⁵⁴ Manzari, ‘Contextual American Transcendentalism’, p. 1799.

On the other hand, Larry J. Reynolds and Tibbie E. Lynch maintain that ‘touch’ is ‘the most acute of [Whitman’s speaker’s] senses’.¹⁵⁵ I would argue that, though Reynolds and Lynch also stress that many ‘critics have pointed out [that] sound was the primary medium of [Thoreau’s] correspondence with nature’, Whitman’s speaker’s approach is comparable to Thoreau’s as he uses all his senses when he experiences nature. For example, from the beginning of the poem, the speaker already acknowledges that he is not indifferent to ‘[t]he sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore / and dark-color[ed] sea rocks, and of hay / in the barn’.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, he also mentions the ‘delicate sniffs of sea-breeze, smells of sedgy grass and fields by the shore’ and, in the forty-ninth section, associates the ‘smell’ of a woman’s body with the smell of ‘white roses sweet-scented and growing’, which again emphasises the importance of the sense of smell to the poet’s speaker.¹⁵⁷ Then, the speaker also says that ‘the air tastes good to [his] palate’, which is an appreciation of the ‘taste’ of the air that has not been observed in the literary works previously analysed in this dissertation.¹⁵⁸ As Manzari stresses, sight is indeed also significant in Whitman’s poem since the speaker frequently uses the construction ‘I see’ like, for instance, in his contemplation of God’s everyday work: ‘I see something of God each hour of the twenty-four, and each moment then’.¹⁵⁹ In addition, the speaker’s sight is also related to a particular ‘theory of nature’, aimed at reconnecting materialism with transcendentalism and thus explains the poet’s affinities and differences with the American philosophical movement.

As Diane Kepner mentions, Whitman’s ‘theory of nature’ can first be defined as influenced by materialism since his speaker states: ‘I accept Reality and dare not question it, / Materialism first and last imbuing. / Hurrah for positive science! long live exact demonstration!’.¹⁶⁰ Whitman, through his speaker, presents ‘himself as a materialist’ because his ‘emphasis on particular objects’ and his speaker’s ‘obvious respect for scientific inquiry’, which is clearly shown by the ‘[h]urrah for positive science’, ‘are consistent with a materialist outlook’.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, the speaker displays certain ambivalence since, though he recognises the separation between the body and the soul, he does not think that one is more important than the other as he says that ‘[c]lear and sweet is [his] soul, and clear and sweet is

¹⁵⁵ Larry J. Reynolds and Tibbie E. Lynch, ‘Sense and Transcendence in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman’, *The South Central Bulletin*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter 1979), p. 150.

¹⁵⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 23.

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 61, 76.

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁶⁰ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 43.

¹⁶¹ Diane Kepner, ‘From Spears to Leaves: Walt Whitman’s Theory of Nature in “Song of Myself”’, *American Literature*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (May 1979), p. 180.

all that / is not [his] soul' and that the individual who 'lack[s] one' thus 'lacks both', and also specifies later that '[he is] the poet of the Body and [...] the poet of the Soul'.¹⁶² Like Thoreau who reconciles the empiricist with the transcendentalist methods, Kepner notices that Whitman illustrates a 'common ground between materialism and idealism' or between 'scientific truth and mystical truth' in his epic poem.¹⁶³ As a matter of fact, the speaker agrees with Emerson's idea of unity in nature but modifies its perception by demonstrating that the unity, the 'universal', does not only exist in 'the grand productions of man and nature', like Emerson would claim, or in every simple natural elements as Thoreau represented in *Walden*, but in 'every aspects of our everyday life'.¹⁶⁴

Indeed, Whitman's speaker 'help[s] [him]self to material and immaterial' and reaches the 'mystical truth', or the 'unseen', through scientific observation of matter.¹⁶⁵ In other words, the poet's speaker's vision, his 'direct observation of the visible world' leads him to characterise the universe with the abstract 'unseen' and the actual 'seen', the latter proving the existence of the former as he acknowledges in the third section.¹⁶⁶ However, the best example of the relation between the two tendencies is perhaps Whitman's reference to the 'atoms'. As a matter of fact, in the first section, the speaker mentions that 'for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you' and that '[his] tongue, every atom of [his] blood, [was] form[ed] from this soil / this air'.¹⁶⁷ According to Kepner, the 'unseen atoms' symbolise the divine 'energy' that 'merge' with other 'atoms' in order to generate what is 'seen' in the universe, meaning every object that the human eye is capable of seeing.¹⁶⁸ The speaker's multi-sensorial consideration of the universe thus allows man to acquire 'evidence' of all this universal 'energy' that the poet actually defines with 'the word "God"'. Whitman's speaker's therefore uses this atomic or materialistic conception of the universe to link it to a more idealistic and mystical purpose aimed at 'universalising' things and people since, to him, 'the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow'.¹⁶⁹ Like the scientist, the poet recognises the differences between 'objects' but, contrary to his approach, he stresses the importance of 'unity' among these objects, thus offering a more complete and 'comprehensive' view of the universe.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶² Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 25, 41.

¹⁶³ Kepner, 'From Spears to Leaves', p. 182.

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁶⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 55.

¹⁶⁶ Kepner, 'From Spears to Leaves', p. 183.

¹⁶⁷ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁶⁸ Kepner, 'From Spears to Leaves', p. 191.

¹⁶⁹ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 40.

¹⁷⁰ Kepner, 'From Spears to Leaves', p. 197.

Nonetheless, this idea of ‘interrelatedness of the universe’ is also primarily self-oriented and to exemplify Emerson’s concept of self-reliance insofar as Whitman encourages the reader not to adopt his perception but to develop her ‘own connections with the objects and experiences that fill h[er] own life’, which he also stresses in the twentieth section by stating: ‘All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own’.¹⁷¹ This passage certainly illustrates the speaker’s identification with his reader, which leads us to characterise Whitman’s poetry as perhaps closer to mankind, something Reynolds and Lynch also commented on.¹⁷²

Considering that the poet’s speaker repeatedly refers to his ‘self’, admiring, celebrating or singing himself, one may criticise the egotism that Whitman’s poetry portrays, just like Elizabeth Peabody criticised the egotism displayed in Emerson’s essays on self-reliance. On the other hand, Whitman has also been called a ‘poet of democracy’ because of his advocacy of freedom but also because of his speaker’s close relationship with people since he sympathises with workmen from many walks of life, which is shown in, for example, the forty-seventh section, as well as with women and slaves.¹⁷³ As Lawrence Buell notices, Whitman’s idea of union in the universe came at a time when ‘people [were] treat[ing] others as “non-persons”’ and therefore ‘Song of Myself’ could be interpreted as restoring a ‘sense of plenitude, of contact with others and with landscape’.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, the poet’s representation of the universe supports an equal and respectful relationship between human beings. However, his self-centred language might also be perceived as perhaps obscuring the idea of oneness as it would only be aimed at satisfying the poet’s ego. In fact, the reader may think that Whitman views nature as a mere means of self-realisation. The basic idea of American transcendental philosophy, the idea of oneness in nature, is indeed represented in Whitman’s poem but is overwhelmed by the speaker’s self, which leads us to believe that nature was perhaps not really significant to the poet. As Elisabeth Panttaja Brink mentions in the introduction to *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman believed that ‘strong possessed souls can make a society great’ and his text ‘serve[d] as [the American people’s] catechism, showing [them] the kind of people [they] must become if the American experiment is to succeed’.¹⁷⁵ The message of Whitman’s poetry was to communicate what would have made a ‘great society’ but he could not imagine

¹⁷¹ Kepner, ‘From Spears to Leaves’, p. 201.

¹⁷² Reynolds and Lynch, ‘Sense and Transcendence’, p. 150.

¹⁷³ Nina Baym and Robert S. Levine (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 8th edn (New York: Norton, [1979] 2012), p. 1311.

¹⁷⁴ Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: literature, culture, and environment in the U.S. and beyond* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 99.

¹⁷⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, pp. xxii-xxiii.

that ‘strong possessed souls’ could also only consider the self-oriented dimension of the poem disregarding of its democratic symbolism, as they may also do when reading Emerson’s essays on self-reliance.

Finally, similarly to Thoreau, Whitman’s speaker is also aware of the changing landscape and incorporates the city in the ‘Whole’ without really devaluating these ‘modern’ landscapes in comparison to the natural world, which also, as a consequence, alienates man from nature. For instance, in a section comparable to Thoreau’s chapter ‘Sounds’, Whitman’s speaker describes the natural but also the unnatural sounds he hears:

I hear bravuras of birds, bustle of growing wheat, gossip of
flames, clack of sticks cooking my meals,
I hear the sound I love, the sound of the human voice,
I hear all sounds running together, combined, fused or
following,
Sounds of the city and sounds out of the city, sounds of the day and night,
[...]
The ring of alarm-bells, the cry of fire, the whirr of swift-
streaking engines and hose-carts with pre-
monitory tinkles and color[ed] lights,
The steam whistle, the solid roll of the train of approaching cars.¹⁷⁶

While the speaker enjoys the sounds of ‘birds’, he then quickly switches to the sounds of the ‘human voice’ he loves, and then of the ‘city’. This extract conveys the idea that social interaction and urbanism do not disturb the speaker’s experience of nature. The ‘ring’ and the ‘steam whistle’, obviously symbolise the city life and industrialism, which again reminds us of Leo Marx’s theory of the intervention of the machine in the natural landscape. Indeed, Marx discusses in his book the representation of the machine in some of Whitman’s poems such as ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ and ‘Passage to India’ but not especially in ‘Song of Myself’.¹⁷⁷ Whitman, though ‘attached to the countryside’, did not condemn urban landscapes but rather ‘wanted an urbanism that would retain a measure of rural healthfulness’, which is shown in his epic poem.¹⁷⁸ His speaker does not reject modern landscapes since he feels close to working people and is interested in market economy as he states towards the end of the poem:

This is the city and I am one of the citizens,
Whatever interests the rest interests me, politics, wars, mar-
kets, newspapers, schools,
The mayor and councils, banks, tariffs, steamships, factories,

¹⁷⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 47.

¹⁷⁷ Marx, *The Machine*, pp. 222-223.

¹⁷⁸ Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 101.

stocks, stores, real estate and personal
estate.¹⁷⁹

Considering these lines, the speaker includes the 'city' in the 'Whole' as he is 'one of the citizens' and, therefore, becomes interested in 'whatever interests the rest'. In fact, he is not disturbed by the sounds of 'engines' or, unlike Thoreau, by what the 'banks', 'steamships' or 'factories' symbolise. On the contrary, he is involved in the changing landscape and might eventually visit 'stores' and buy meaningless luxuries to be part of modern society. In Whitman's poem, the new market economy and industrialism appear as inevitable and the speaker would rather embrace this new American landscape and way of living rather than trying to avoid it. Moreover, the speaker also mentions that he knows about 'personal estate' and continues later in the same section saying: 'In the houses the dishes and fare and furniture—but the host / and hostess, and the look out of their eyes?'. The speaker does not condemn the possession of 'houses' with 'furniture' but urges man not to lose contact with other people, with the 'hostess', and with his self. The democratic poet was indeed perhaps admitting that the pastoral ideal of isolation in nature was not achievable anymore and was thus trying, as Panttaja Brink wrote, to show his best idea of the American society and self. Consequently, as Whitman's poetry portrays, the American process of self-realisation was gradually separating itself from the natural world to be connected to self-accomplishment and human scientific progress. As a contrast with this tendency, famous woman poet Emily Dickinson's representation of the transcendental self was less self-centred, which could be interpreted as an attempt to revive the mystical or 'Edenic' original conception of the American wilderness.

For example, her poem 'A Bird, came down the Walk -', Dickinson's speaker's attempts to 'civilise' or to appropriate nature are unsuccessful. Indeed, as Ryan S. Bayless notices, the poem begins with the speaker's effort to associate 'features of civility and social propriety' with the bird using 'phrases such as "came down the Walk", "drank a Dew / From a convenient Grass," and "hopped sidewise to the Wall / To let a Beetle pass"'.¹⁸⁰ Nonetheless, she rapidly becomes aware of nature's 'wildness' since she then describes the bird as consuming 'raw' an 'Angle Worm', which prevents her from 'civilising' the animal.¹⁸¹ In the third stanza, there is a change of attitude since the speaker is hesitant about how the

¹⁷⁹ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, p. 67.

¹⁸⁰ Ryan S. Bayless, 'The Breakdown of the Pathetic Fallacy in Dickinson's "A Bird, came down the Walk"', *The Explicator*, Vol. 69, No. 2, pp. 68-69.

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 69.

bird really looks like as she only ‘thought’ his eyes ‘looked like frightened Beads’, again using human objects in her description.¹⁸² Then, her uncertainty becomes fear as she speaks of ‘danger’ and of being ‘cautious’, which leads to more beautiful and impressive images of the bird in the last stanza, flying with his ‘Oars divid[ing] the Ocean’, and of other ‘Butterflies’ that ‘Leap, [splash]less as they swim’. This symbolic language can be read as similar to Thoreau’s, which is a process of poetic ‘defamiliarisation’ of language aimed at expressing a ‘truer form of perception’ of nature. The strangeness of nature is indeed what compels the speaker to use these ‘man-made object descriptions’ as she believes that ‘anthropomorphising’ nature will help her to better apprehend its ‘essence’.¹⁸³ This ineffective attempt symbolises the speaker’s ‘own anxiety and disconnection from the natural world’ which prevents her from apprehending its ‘mysterious essence’.¹⁸⁴ Consequently, Dickinson’s poem illustrates a less self-focused perception of nature, perhaps in order to restore the ‘Edenic’ essence of the American wilderness that was discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. In other words, in this particular poem, the speaker learns to appreciate and not to appropriate nature as if she was trying to express, more generally, that man’s appropriation of or dominance over the natural world ruins its meaning and beauty. Therefore, Dickinson’s poetry may appear as less assertive than Whitman’s and perhaps more tentative as it portrays a less emphatically self-oriented language that occasionally aims at stressing the importance of nature’s independence from mankind.

Another example of the ‘Edenic’ nature could be Dickinson’s poem ‘Wild nights – Wild nights!’. Indeed, in this poem the almost Thoreauvian speaker claims that: ‘Wild nights should be / Our luxury’.¹⁸⁵ She then continues saying that the wind is now ‘futile’ for the ‘Heart’ who desires to navigate on the sea since it possesses the ‘[c]ompass’ and the ‘[c]hart’. Then she expressed her intention to lose herself far on the wild sea as she states: ‘Rowing in Eden - / Ah - the Sea! / Might I but moor - tonight - / in thee!’. The two objects, the compass and the chart, represent Thoreau’s idea that scientific progress and material possessions, though they make the practice of sailing easier, alienate the self from the ‘truth’ of nature. In this poem, the sea allows the speaker to isolate herself in ‘Eden’, in a place that has remained untouched by progress and man-made tools and has kept the ‘authenticity’, the wildness of nature. In addition, the wind is ‘futile’ to anyone choosing science as referring to man’s

¹⁸² Baym and Levine (eds.), *The Norton Anthology*, p. 1676.

¹⁸³ Bayless, ‘The Breakdown of the Pathetic Fallacy’, p. 69.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

¹⁸⁵ Baym and Levine (eds.), *The Norton Anthology*, p. 1670.

incapacity of using his sensorial faculties in the sea or in nature since his perception is obstructed by artificialities such as the ‘compass’.

Dickinson’s detachment from the self-reliant self is also evident in other poems, less focused on natural elements, such as, for instance, in ‘I’m Nobody! Who are you?’, in which the poet questions self-reliance and identity and its significance in society. ‘I’m Nobody!’, she begins, and then distinguishes the ‘nobody’ with the ‘Somebody’ by explaining that it is ‘dreary’ and ‘public’ to be ‘Somebody’.¹⁸⁶ As opposed to Whitman’s representation of the self, Dickinson eliminates selfhood to present her speaker as a selfless ‘nobody’. Through what could be perceived as an ironic tone, she expresses that one’s ‘name’, probably referring to his identity or his ‘public’ self, is not relevant in society. Indeed, in an essay entitled ‘Reperiodization: the Example of Emily Dickinson’, Margaret Dickie demonstrates how the poet represents the self as ‘discontinuous, always in a process of changing’, which betrays the poet’s intention to “de-divinize the world and the self”, to demystify the Emersonian ‘Transcendental hero’ and his ‘transparent’ and ‘static eyeball’.¹⁸⁷ To illustrate her point, the critic refers to a series of poems like ‘I could not prove the Years had feet’ in which she notices that the speaker ‘[finds her] feet’ to ‘have further Goals’ and ‘identifies with the feet rather than the static eyeball’. Moreover, Dickie shows that she does not really ‘expand and grow in a narrative self-development such as Thoreau could generate’ but rather presents her ‘self’ as ‘awkwardly fitting’ in the world and thus depending ‘on contingency, on what is around [her], rather than on an ideal pattern she might impose’. The speaker therefore is dependent on the environment, on chance, to define her self, which is therefore also related to her sensorial experience of nature.

In Dickinson’s ‘This is my letter to the World’, Dickie stresses the importance of the sense of touch as prevalent in the short poem.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, the speaker claims that Nature’s ‘Message is committed / To Hands [she] cannot see’, which conveys the idea that sight is useless as she needs to use her ‘Hands’ to apprehend nature’s ‘Majesty’.¹⁸⁹ On the other hand, the sense of sight is also significant to the poet in other poems such as in ‘I’ve seen a Dying Eye’, in which the speaker has ‘seen a Dying Eye / Run round and round a Room / In search of Something – as it seemed’ but then obscurity preventing her from seeing, as the room becomes ‘Cloudier’ and obscured ‘with Fog’, she concludes that it is ‘blessed to have

¹⁸⁶ Baym and Levine (eds.), *The Norton Anthology*, p. 1669.

¹⁸⁷ Margaret Dickie, ‘Reperiodization: The Example of Emily Dickinson’, *College English*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (April 1990), p. 399.

¹⁸⁸ Dickie, ‘Reperiodization’, p. 402.

¹⁸⁹ Baym and Levine (eds.), *The Norton Anthology*, p. 1684.

seen'.¹⁹⁰ Thomas W. Ford believes that Dickinson, contrary to Dickie's analysis focused on the sense of touch, 'wants to steadily observe realities only and allow her vision to penetrate the surface of things'.¹⁹¹ Indeed, like Thoreau, Dickinson's speaker does not reject empiricism or, like Whitman, scientific approaches. For instance, in "'Faith" is a fine invention', scientific observation, suggested by the use of 'Microscopes', appears as 'prudent / In an Emergency!' but those who have faith are 'Gentlemen' who really 'see'.¹⁹² As a matter of fact, Dickinson's speaker acknowledges the existence of a Thoreauvian 'higher truth' achievable to who, after conducting a plain observation of the world surrounding her, sees something divine, greater than natural facts. The poet's possible affinities with the young transcendentalist's philosophy becomes clearer in her poem 'I taste a liquor never brewed-', in which the speaker adopts a multi-sensorial appreciation of nature as she tastes a 'liquor' made from 'Frankfort Berries' and then becomes 'Inebriate of air' and 'Debauchee of Dew'.¹⁹³ This idea of 'drunkenness' of natural elements could indeed be interpreted as symbolising a transcendental state of 'oneness' in nature. And yet, the poet takes up another view of nature in 'I dreaded that first Robin, so,', in which the speaker is more fearful and cautious regarding nature as she states: 'I could not bear the Bees should come, / I wished they'd stay away / In those dim countries where they go, / What word had they, for me?'.¹⁹⁴ Hostile towards the 'Bees', the speaker of this poem reminds the reader that Dickinson's nature poems are, indeed, less focused on the human self and illustrate a versatile view of the natural world as her speakers feel closely connected to nature whereas, on the other hand, they might also feel uncomfortable when dealing with its strangeness.

In conclusion, Dickinson's poetic self is contingent because of her speakers' different perceptions of the natural landscapes. However, her speakers always appreciate nature's beauty or wildness. Consequently, Dickinson's nature poetry generally represents the natural world as 'desanthropomorphised' or free from human appropriation, which characterises its strangeness and beauty. If one really desires to really 'see', to comprehend nature, he must be an attentive observer of, and not a predominant actor in, the natural landscape. Although the poet was influenced by American Transcendentalism, she avoided the concepts of self-reliance to better apprehend the natural world. In fact, though her speakers manage sometimes to merge with nature, they are also aware that untouched nature is invaluable because it is not

¹⁹⁰ Baym and Levine (eds.), *The Norton Anthology*, p. 1688.

¹⁹¹ Ford, 'Thoreau's Cosmic Mosquito', p. 497.

¹⁹² Baym and Levine (eds.), *The Norton Anthology*, p. 1666.

¹⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 1667.

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 1674.

possessed, man-made or modified, in other words, because it exists independently from mankind. Perhaps Dickinson anticipated the fact that the American self-dominant perspective on the wilderness needed to change if it was to be preserved. Fortunately, one of the last transcendentalists developed environmental ethics that contributed much to save the remaining wilderness and to launch what was called the conservation movement.

2.6. JOHN MUIR (1838-1914) OR THE CONSERVATIONIST SUCCESSOR: GODFUL NATURE AND SELF-RECOVERY

John Burroughs, famous American naturalist and long-time friend of John Muir's, said that '[Muir] [was] a poet and almost a Seer' since 'he could not sit down in the corner of the landscape, as Thoreau did' but had to 'have a continent for his playground', he was 'probably the truest lover of Nature'.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, certainly one of the most notable and influential conservationists, Muir had also a specific view of nature that was expressed in his writings, which communicated his faith in God and his love of the natural world.

Muir had a perfect knowledge of the Bible and believed that God was 'the Creator of nature'.¹⁹⁶ As a matter of fact, he was convinced that the 'natural world' is an expression of God's 'beauty and love', which should be contemplated as his everyday creation. Consequently, the author defined 'Creation' not as an event that occurred a long time ago but rather as 'a phenomenon that recurs every season' and 'every day in the present'.¹⁹⁷ In other words, God is still conceiving the universe and we are honoured to participate in this daily celebration of beauty. In his first published book entitled *The Mountains of California* (1894), Muir already writes about the manifestation of God's love in nature while he is observing some 'water-ouzel[s]':

[...] not fearing to follow them through their darkest gorges and coldest snow-tunnels; acquainted with every waterfall, echoing their divine music; and throughout the whole of their beautiful lives interpreting all that we in our unbelief call terrible in the utterances of torrents and storms, as only varied expressions of God's eternal love.¹⁹⁸

In this passage, the author uses adjectives such as 'divine' or 'beautiful' to describe the animals and the sound they produce, and also characterises what he experiences as

¹⁹⁵ Paul Brooks, *Speaking for Nature: The Literary Naturalists, from Transcendentalism to the Birth of the American Environmental Movement* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2014), p. 16.

¹⁹⁶ Barnett, 'John Muir', p. 272.

¹⁹⁷ Barnett, 'John Muir', p. 274.

¹⁹⁸ John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008), p. 207.

‘expressions of God’s eternal love’. Moreover, he also includes ‘torrents and storms’ in God’s creation and he is willing to risk his safety, as he is ‘not fearing to follow [the water-ouzels] through their darkest gorges’, to behold their beauty. Consequently, this passage also shows that ‘even death and desolation are marks of’ God’s love or as Paul Brooks noted, ‘nature’s violence appealed to Muir as much as its calm’.¹⁹⁹²⁰⁰ Muir’s idea of sublime nature is therefore reminiscent of the Burkean Sublime since natural facts were perceived as dreadful, though also as ‘Godful’, by Burke. Nevertheless, Muir’s case is different since he does not see fearful nature as superior, gloomy or to be avoided but, to the contrary, to be embraced and admired as ‘expressions of God’s eternal love’. The naturalist stresses here that what ‘we in our unbelief call terrible’, such as the ‘torrents and storms’, is actually God’s beautiful creation, which reminds us of Dickinson’s poem about faith permitting the believers to really ‘see’. Indeed, Muir argues that faithful beholders of nature will see beauty everywhere in the wilderness and that those who are afraid of certain natural facts are simply ‘non-believers’. In another passage, the author mentions that ‘beauty is universal and immortal, above beneath, on land and sea, mountains and plain, in heat and cold, light and darkness’.²⁰¹ Muir’s methods aim at, as Buell has called it, ‘neutrali[sing] the landscape of fear’, as represented in the Burkean Sublime, ‘by dwelling on [other] surrounding’ natural elements that are less dreadful or bleak, which is also a way of emphasising the universal beauty of the natural world.

Furthermore, the book does not only contain descriptions of nature as ‘Godful’. As a matter of fact, Muir also provides the reader with a lot of scientific information about ‘plants, animals, rocks, water’, natural elements that he notices during his trip in the mountains, without referring to God. This could be compared to William Bartram’s writing style, more precisely to his natural historian’s purpose. Indeed, often quoted with their specific Latin denominations and accompanied by sketches, the species are described with the same accuracy as the eighteenth-century American botanist. However, their idea of sublime nature is not exactly similar since Bartram also represents certain natural landscapes with Burkean terms. The contexts of publication of these two works are indeed drastically different since while Bartram wanted to classify natural species and give an account of the untrammelled wilderness, Muir’s main ambition was to convey his love of the remaining and already discovered American natural world and to promote its preservation, which proves their distinct perception.

¹⁹⁹ Barnett, ‘John Muir’, p. 275.

²⁰⁰ Brooks, *Speaking for Nature*, p. 25.

²⁰¹ John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, p. 233.

Besides demonstrating that dreadful nature can also be enjoyable, Muir supports his conservationist purpose by attempting to ‘domesticize, to reconstitute literal or symbolic wilderness as home’.²⁰² For instance, this is illustrated in the chapter ‘In the Sierra Foot-Hills’ in which, after depicting the ‘outer chambers of mountain caves’, Muir concludes that they are ‘remarkable because notwithstanding the darkness and oozing water there is nothing uncomfortably cellar-like or sepulchral about them’.²⁰³ The author is, indeed, trying to deconstruct man’s pre-conceived idea of the wilderness as inhospitable or dangerous in order to compare it to a comfortable ‘home’. This particular wilderness aesthetics may also betray an attempt to restore the ‘pastoral ideal’ of isolation in the wilderness, which is also expressed through Muir’s multi-sensorial approach to nature.

For instance, the author describes his sensations of smelling the ‘sweet-scented hay-fields’, tasting the ‘delicious’ ‘sugar pine’, hearing species of trees that ‘give[] forth the finest music to the wind’ or of seeing ‘fresh beauty [that] opens one’s eyes wherever it is really seen’, which encourage his readers to experience the wilderness.²⁰⁴ Consequently, Muir’s multi-sensorial experience contributes to an attempt to show the reader that he can feel ‘at home’ in the wilderness, relate to the ‘majestic’ natural landscape and, therefore, be willing to preserve it. In addition, even the machine does not disturb nature’s expression of beauty and Muir’s appreciation of it. For example, he explains that he heard the singing of the ouzels ‘on the lower reaches of the rivers where mills are built’ even ‘through the machinery, and all the noisy confusion of dogs, cattle, and work-men’ since there is not ‘any kind of unwonted disturbance [that] put[s] him in bad humor, or frighten[s] him out of calm self-possession’.²⁰⁵ In Muir’s book, the noisy machine does not interrupt the stillness of nature since Muir can still hear perfectly the sound of the bird, which conveys the idea that nature might be more powerful than man’s attempts to transform it. Indeed, although man is regarded by Muir as ‘the most dangerous enemy of all’, he argues that ‘even from him our brave mountain-dweller has little to fear in the remote solitudes of the High Sierra’, which displays the possibility of isolation in the high and wild mountains, of an experience of self-recovery in the wilderness.

Muir also considered nature as a place for self-recovery. Like Thoreau who criticised the urban or modern lifestyle, Muir thought that ‘city-bound humans were “asleep”, overwhelmed with care and anxiety, chained to schedules and stifling duties’ and alienated

²⁰² Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, p. 17.

²⁰³ John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, p. 233.

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 6, 111, 118, 229.

²⁰⁵ John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, p. 203.

from nature.²⁰⁶ He believed that man could recover from the pressure engendered by his daily life in cities simply by enjoying the outdoors. In other words, he claimed that the ‘environment of Nature’ possesses healing virtues capable of curing the ‘anxiety’ caused by modernity.²⁰⁷ However, this ‘mechanism of healing’ is not exactly related to the transcendental idea of self-improvement or “‘spiritual” transformation of the soul’ as there is also a ‘physical effect of the Godful wilderness upon the body of the pilgrim’ to take into consideration.²⁰⁸ Muir was convinced that there was a physical change, God’s ‘immortal gift’ to man, that is permanent even after man’s return to the city. In fact, he believed that human beings could be metamorphosed ‘simply by their presence in the natural world’, which is a therapeutic effect on man’s physical well-being rather than a deeply spiritual development.²⁰⁹

While promoting outdoor retreats, the conservationist was also preoccupied by the economic growth, as he knew it could be a potential danger to the preservation of the wilderness. For example, he discusses his environmental concern in *The Mountains of California* as he explains that: ‘The time will undoubtedly come when the entire area of this noble valley will be tilled like a garden, when the fertilizing waters of the mountains, [...], will be distributed to every acre, giving rise to prosperous towns, wealth, arts, etc.’²¹⁰ The expanding civilisation was about to pollute and destroy nature, which would ultimately convey a ‘sad sight to see’ for the ‘botanists’. The naturalist was aware that man’s obsession for wealth could overcome his respect for nature, which led him to focus his ‘conservation efforts’ on protecting the wilderness from ‘human activity’.²¹¹ Muir was not hostile towards humanity but he could not tolerate the deterioration of natural landscapes just for man’s own profit and therefore became famous as a conservationist as he contributed much to preserve the wilderness in National Parks. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that Muir changed his lifestyle in 1881 when he got married.²¹² Indeed, he reinvented himself ‘as an agricultural businessman’, more interested in ‘property’ and ‘economic production’. His passion and devotion for nature were therefore obscured as he became what can be called a ‘victim of comfort’, riding ‘cars and steamships’, staying at ‘elegant hotels’ and ‘private residences’ and only occasionally enjoying nature for its therapeutic advantages. In addition, the people who supported ‘environmental destruction’ to construct rails and factories were eventually

²⁰⁶ Barnett, ‘John Muir’, pp. 275-6.

²⁰⁷ *ibid.*, p. 277.

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 278.

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 279.

²¹⁰ Muir, *The Mountains of California*, p. 242.

²¹¹ Barnett, ‘John Muir’, pp. 280.

²¹² Donald Worster, ‘John Muir and the Modern Passion for Nature’, *Environmental History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January 2005), p. 14.

included in his circle of friends. Muir's essential interest could have been to save the 'spectacular national treasures' in parks while, on the other hand, the rest of the wilderness could be 'sacrificed' for the sake of massive industrial production.²¹³

In spite of this latter point about Muir's change of lifestyle that might differ from the transcendentalists' ideals, Muir read and was influenced by Emerson's and Thoreau's writings, which also led many critics to define him as a transcendentalist.²¹⁴ Nevertheless, though he shares many philosophical ideas with the movement such as the contemplation of sublime nature as a manifestation of the divine, he also expresses peculiarities. As previously noted, his main emphasis was not on spiritual self-realisation but on an understanding of nature as 'Godful', universally powerful and beautiful, and as having therapeutic effects. The human self was not of capital importance to the naturalist as he was more concerned by the conservation of the wilderness rather than by notions of self-reliance, equality or freedom. For instance, he was less involved in social causes and may have expressed some contempt towards Black people or Native Americans. As Edward Hoagland mentions in the introduction of *The Mountains of California*, Muir had for a long time described the 'Indians of California' as 'ignoramuses and children, dirty and cultureless wretches' till his middle age when he eventually showed 'tolerance into his view of Indians' during his journeys in Alaska.²¹⁵ With regard to African-American people, Hoagland claims that, in the course of an excursion in Georgia after the Civil War, Muir said that 'the "Negroes" [had] been well-trained and [were] extremely polite' as they 'walk[ed] bare-headed until [the white man] [was] out of sight'. In spite of his later change of attitude, Muir's wilderness aesthetics was less self-centred and was focused on the reasons why the wilderness had to be preserved. Although it is obvious that Muir prepared the ground for upcoming conservationists, his view of nature as a place for self-recovery also influenced early twentieth-century writers who displayed in fiction works the contemporary national enthusiasm for the outdoors through a representation of nature that could be regarded as part of the transcendentalists' legacy.

²¹³ Worster, 'John Muir', p. 16.

²¹⁴ Brooks, *Speaking for Nature*, p. 18. To be more precise, it was one of his professors at the University of Wisconsin, James Davie Butler, who 'had recognis[ed] young Muir's literary gift' and 'introduced him to the writings of Emerson and Thoreau'.

²¹⁵ Muir, *The Mountains*, p. viii.

3. EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY OUTDOOR LITERATURE: SELF-RECOVERY AND CONSERVATION

3.1. SOCIOCULTURAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXTS

On the cusp of the post-Civil War period, some fundamental events occurred that were about to transform the American landscape and consideration of the natural world. First of all, it is worth stressing that the Civil War was ‘the bloodiest war in American history’ because of the terrible number of victims, who were ‘Union soldiers’, ‘Confederates’ but also ‘casualties’.²¹⁶ In addition, after the war, ‘slavery was finally’ abolished and the Union of the States was ‘restored’, which undoubtedly also ‘left an indelible stain on the American consciousness’. While the South was depicted as ‘a dead civilization’ with a ‘broken-down system’ and the North was celebrating their ‘triumph’ as well as the ‘restoration of the nation and the abolition of slavery’, the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln left another sentiment of sadness among the American people.²¹⁷ In other words, as ‘historian Lewis Mumford’ said, ‘[t]he nation not merely worked differently after the Civil War; the country looked different—darker, sadder, soberer’.²¹⁸ As the victory of the North only insured ‘the political but not the intellectual and emotional unity of the nation’, the American people thought that the idea of a united nation could be restored through the reconstruction of the country, which thus started expeditiously.²¹⁹

As a matter of fact, the country’s economic development became rapidly flourishing, which led to a considerable increase of immigration too. As Richard Gray explains, ‘what arose with an unparalleled speed’ was ‘a great urban and industrial society dedicated to production, progress, and profit’ since, for example, it had ‘become one of the giants of the international steel industry’ and ‘the number of factories’ in the country ‘had more than doubled’.²²⁰ In addition, ‘half the railway mileage in the world was in the United States’, illustrating the fact that America ‘was being transformed from a country of farms and villages into a country of towns and cities’. In other words, ‘intensive urbanization in the [nineteenth]

²¹⁶ Gray, *A History of American Literature*, p. 219. Gray mentions that there were ‘about 360,000 Union soldiers and 260,000 Confederates’ who ‘had died on the battlefield or in military hospitals’, without counting the ‘casualties’.

²¹⁷ Gray, *A History of American Literature*, pp. 219-220.

²¹⁸ Robert E. Bieder, ‘From Thoreau to Muir: Changes in Nineteenth-Century American Conceptions of the Environment’, *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Fall 2011).

²¹⁹ Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, p. 483.

²²⁰ Gray, *A History of American Literature*, p. 220.

century' came as a 'by-product of industrial expansion'.²²¹ As a result, many immigrants from different places all around the world arrived in the United States to benefit from its prosperous economic situation, which eventually made the country 'even more ethnically mixed' and 'culturally plural'.²²² But the economic growth had also negative consequences on the urban environment like, for instance, pollution and diseases.

Indeed, where 'slums festered in polluted air', 'tenements were overrun with vermin and prone to fire and disease' and where 'odors, bad water and crowding' were proliferating, some people thought that a 'return to nature', like John Muir advocated, could be the 'solution[] to [these] urban problems'.²²³ Besides the increasing construction of 'suburbs', which somehow symbolised the 'promise of health, happiness, safety and oneness with nature' for the citizens, prescriptions for 'outdoor activities' as 'cures' to the anxiety caused by urban life were made by doctors. In addition, psychologists like 'G. Stanley Hall' condemned the 'unnaturalness of urban life' and promoted the discovery and knowledge of nature and country as a capital phase for human development. However, it is be worth mentioning that this enthusiasm for the outdoors mainly reached 'elite' or 'urban tourists' and 'wealthy sportsmen' who did not view the natural landscape as a 'site for productive labor' or 'a permanent home' but rather as 'a place of recreation' or for 'leisure time', and therefore 'created wilderness in their own image'.²²⁴ For example, President Theodore Roosevelt, as a hunting enthusiast, could be regarded as one of these rich sportsmen but he nevertheless also supported conservation and contributed to spread this interest in nature.

As a camping friend of John Muir, Roosevelt, besides his political career, was also a devoted naturalist who encouraged people to 'get out into nature and exercise'. However, the American president was also aware of the fast consumption of 'natural resources' and of their limitation and, as a result, developed a new 'conservation policy' and a wiser approach to 'public land', which had to be considered as a 'resource to be managed rather than exploited'.²²⁵ Consequently, Roosevelt reorganised the American landscape by creating 'several more national parks', 'forest preserves' and 'bird sanctuaries'.²²⁶ Preservation became one of his priorities since he believed that 'natural resources' were closely related to

²²¹ Maurice Boyd and Donald Worcester, *American Civilization: An Introduction to the Social Sciences (Second Edition)* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1968), p. 296.

²²² *ibid.*, p. 221.

²²³ Bieder, 'From Thoreau to Muir'.

²²⁴ William Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', *Environmental History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 1996), p. 15.

²²⁵ Jessica Sheffield, 'Theodore Roosevelt, "Conservation as a National Duty" (13 May 1908)', *Voices of Democracy*, Vol. 5 (January 2010), p. 89.

²²⁶ Bieder, 'From Thoreau to Muir'.

the ‘National welfare’ and that people needed to experience the wilderness and to spend time outdoor.²²⁷ With regard to literature, Roosevelt, besides being himself a writer, thought that the country needed naturalist authors who ‘could take the facts of science and transmute them into literature’ as it could help American people to ‘recognize the natural world as part of their culture’.²²⁸ Roosevelt’s words were capital since, as Paul Brooks notes, ‘the personal interest of a President of the United States would give new weight and dignity, new public recognition, to nature study and nature writing’.²²⁹ In other words, the President did not only support conservation, he also reevaluated the importance of nature writing, which was about to be abundant in the first decade of the twentieth century.

John Muir was already one of Roosevelt’s most recommended authors as he managed to relate scientific accounts of natural species to a simple and elegant language that did not forsake the beauty of the wilderness. Nevertheless, other literary works of fiction, Muir’s literature consisting mainly in non-fiction books, published during the early twentieth century portrayed this ‘new interest in the outdoors and nature’ as well as the nostalgia of unspoiled nature. In order to illustrate this early twentieth-century tendency, I will now analyse two novels that represent different environments but yet convey the same purpose: to reconnect US culture with the American natural landscape and to indirectly support preservation.

3.2. WRITING ABOUT THE WILD WEST: OWEN WISTER’S *THE VIRGINIAN: A HORSEMAN OF THE PLAINS* (1902)

There may not be a more suitable novel to begin than Philadelphian author Wister’s classic novel *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*. Indeed, Owen Wister (1860-1938) met Theodore Roosevelt in Harvard University while he was studying music, became then his ‘lifelong friend’ and eventually dedicated his novel to him, the ‘benefactor’ whose ‘voice, instead of being almost solitary, ha[d] inspired many followers’.²³⁰ The two men shared conservationist ideals as Wister recognises in his note ‘To the Reader’ preceding his main text that the American landscape has been transformed and indirectly calls for a more responsible way of managing it:

²²⁷ Sheffield, ‘Theodore Roosevelt’, p. 97.

²²⁸ Brooks, *Speaking for Nature*, p. 4.

²²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 105.

²³⁰ Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2006), pp. iii, v.

A transition has followed the horseman of the plains; a shapeless state, a condition of men and manners as unlovely as is that moment in the year when winter is gone and spring not come, and the face of Nature is ugly. I shall not dwell upon it here. Those who have seen it know well what I mean. Such transition was inevitable. Let us give thanks that it is but a transition, and not a finality.²³¹

The ‘inevitable transition’ described in this passage is indeed characterised by a perturbation of the natural environment as the seasons have changed and ‘the face of Nature is ugly’. Nonetheless, Wister also draws the reader’s attention to another negative effect of this ‘transition’ since he suggests that ‘the condition of men and manners’ are ‘unlovely’, which would mean that there is a connection between landscape and people and that the deterioration of nature is harmful to man’s welfare and behaviour. As William Cronon acknowledges, Wister and Roosevelt were among those who ‘benefited from urban-industrial capitalism’ and ‘believed they must escape its debilitating effects’.²³² As a consequence, Wister used his ‘horseman’, or more largely his novel, to illustrate his ‘nostalgia for a passing frontier way of life’ and his ‘hostility toward modernity and all that it represented’.²³³ In other words, as Thoreau predicted, the modern American economic system had a significant impact on people’s lifestyle and behaviour, their ‘manners’ became despicable as their comfortable and artificial civilised life had alienated them from ‘truth’ and honesty, from the fundamental values Nature symbolises. Through representations of a ‘lost’ untouched nature and of a form of Emersonian individualism, Wister expresses his fear of this ‘transition’ to modern society and landscape, which he did not want to be a ‘finality’.

Although critics have commented on the virtues that the horseman epitomises, it is more relevant to this study to consider the narrator’s view of nature and modernity. Indeed, the narrator’s descriptions present characteristics of what could be perceived as sublime nature and some passages may reveal a multi-sensorial connection with the natural landscape that is somehow similar to certain of the transcendentalist philosophers’ or poets’ approaches. For instance, one extract is particularly reminiscent of Dickinson’s speaker who was ‘Inebriate of air’ in her poem ‘I taste a liquor never brewed-’, since Wister’s narrator recalled he was ‘swallowed in a vast solitude’ in the ‘quiet, open, splendid wilderness’ and that ‘every breath that [he] breathed was pure as water and strong as wine’.²³⁴ The narrator frequently describes the quietness or stillness of the wilderness, an observation that is often associated

²³¹ Wister, *The Virginian*, p. viii.

²³² Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness’, p. 14.

²³³ Nevertheless, the reader should bear in mind that Wister’s novel, though it discusses issues of gender equality through the characters of the horseman and Molly that have been much commented on by critics, does not include passages that would allow an analysis of the consideration of other minorities such as Native Americans or African Americans during the American Frontier era.

²³⁴ Wister, *The Virginian*, p. 31.

with the ‘mountains’, which is his most appreciated natural landscape. His admiration for the mountains is also shown further as he describes the ‘Bow Leg Mountains’ with many colours claiming that ‘at evening the sun lay against the plain, the rift of the cañon [is] filled with a violet light’ and the mountains ‘bec[o]me transfigured with hues of floating and unimaginable color’ or that ‘the chill wind with wet in it c[o]me[s] blowing the invisible draws, and br[ings] the feel of the distant mountains’. In addition, the ‘Bow Leg Mountains’ are also depicted as surrounded by flourishing nature that appeals to the narrator’s sense of hearing as the ‘pines were stirring with a gentle song; and flowers bloomed across the wide plains at their feet’.²³⁵ Consequently, the narrator’s discourse suggests a transcendental approach to nature insofar as he merges with the natural elements and, more interestingly, to express a certain feeling of ‘comfort’ when he leaves the urban environment, which means that Wister, through his narrator, restores the pastoral ideal of isolation in the wilderness.²³⁶ However, the tension of the machine, as theorised by Leo Marx, often reminds him, or occasionally the protagonist, of the intrusive influence of modern civilisation on the natural landscape.

The first traces of modern civilisation in the wilderness may be seen in the form of man-made objects such as the ‘portable ready-made food’ in ‘picnic pots and cans’ like, for instance, the ‘empty sardine box’ that is still lying ‘rusting over the face of the Western earth’ after the cowboy was long gone, that are, as explains the narrator, the ‘first trophies that Civilization dropped upon Wyoming’s virgin soil’.²³⁷ The narrator describes these ‘tins’ as the marks of every horseman’s passage, which eventually compelled him to ‘gr[ow] familiar’ with its ‘trade-mark’. This intrusion of man-made objects in the ‘virgin’ landscape illustrates that the untouched wilderness is a ‘lost’ landscape, a dream, since the narrator, even though he feels immersed in nature, always finds traces that ‘Civilization’ has left upon the ‘Western earth’. Furthermore, the narrator refers to modernity in another longer passage in which the ‘newspaper’ reminds him of the impossible realisation of the pastoral dream:

At noon, when for a while I had thrown off my long oilskin coat, merely the sight of the newspaper half crowded into my pocket had been a displeasing reminder of the railway, and cities, and affairs. But for its possible help to build fires, it would have come no farther with me. The great levels around me lay cooled and freed of dust by the wet weather, and full of sweet airs. Far in front the foot-hills rose through the rain, indefinite and mystic. I wanted no speech with any one, nor to be near human beings at all. I was steeped in a revery as of the primal earth; even thoughts themselves had almost ceased motion. To lie down with wild animals, with elk and deer, would have made my waking dream complete; and since such dream could not be, the cattle around the deserted buildings, mere dots as yet across separating space, were my proper companions for this evening.²³⁸

²³⁵ Wister, *The Virginian*, p. 81.

²³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 236.

²³⁷ Wister, *The Virginian*, p. 26.

²³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 219.

This man-made object, the 'newspaper', is again a 'displeasing reminder' of modern civilisation that is symbolised by 'railways', 'cities' and of the stressful life that the 'affairs' may cause. Although the narrator claims that the 'newspaper' will only serve him to 'build fires', its symbolism haunts him further and to lead him to admit that the pastoral ideal is a dream that 'could not be' because of the expanding modern civilisation. As he is beholding the mountains that he depicts as 'indefinite and mystic', saying that he does not want to speak 'with any one, nor to be near human beings at all', he realises that the state of oneness with nature, consisting in being isolated, '[l]ying] down with wild animals, with elk and deer', is a 'revery' or a 'dream' and he comes back to reality in a landscape where 'deserted buildings' predominate. Though the narrator, like Dickinson's speaker in 'A Bird, came down the Walk -', appreciates nature's wondrous strangeness or mysticism and, like many transcendentalists, experiences its 'sweet airs', the tension of modernity compels him to think that his ideal of an untouched or untrammelled nature is an illusion, which he may only express in the form of nostalgic reflexions.²³⁹

However, there is a certain resolution towards the end of the story as the narrator describes how the Virginian and his bride, Molly, manage to 'pass[] through the gates of the foot-hills', where 'the outstretching fences and the widely trodden dust [are] no more', to escape the urban landscape and be finally 'glad to see the road less worn with travel, and the traces of men passing from sight'.²⁴⁰ The Virginian refers to this place as an 'island', which symbolises, as Stephen L. Tanner suggested, an 'Edenic island' where the 'communion with the divine' is possible since 'authenticity' or 'truth' are predominant with 'the true mountain air' and the 'true breath of the mountains'.²⁴¹ In addition, another extract displays the narrator's idea of the mountain not as an island but as 'another world' where the colourful landscape is the work of 'no hand but nature's' with 'many-colored harvests' and 'yellow flowers'.²⁴² Consequently, the narrator has a comparable view since he states that 'somewhere in a passage of red rocks the last sign of wagon wheel was lost, and after the trail became a wild mountain trail'. Indeed, the narrator emphasises the importance of the mountain for the two lovers as, for example, he recalls that Molly noticed that the water of the stream there

²³⁹ François Gavillon, 'Le Wilderness américain, des Transcendantalistes à Rick Bass : conceptions et représentations', *Les Cahiers du CEIMA*, Vol. 4 (2008), p. 168. Gavillon also suggests that Wister represents nature as a 'lost' myth and stresses the author's nostalgia for this 'vanished world'.

²⁴⁰ Wister, *The Virginian*, pp. 282-283.

²⁴¹ Stephen L. Tanner, 'Spiritual Values in the Popular Western Novel', *Literature and Belief*, Vol. 21, No. 1&2 (2001), p. 127.

²⁴² Wister, *The Virginian*, p. 283.

‘had become at last wholly clear’, that ‘the soil had changed to mountain soil’ and that ‘full solitude was around them now’.²⁴³ If the mountain does not symbolise the pastoral ideal, it serves as a place of retreat for the two characters, which is reminiscent of the contemporary enthusiasm for outdoor activities and view of nature as a place for self-recovery.

As a matter of fact, nature appears as rich on the ‘island’ for the two characters since ‘the sun was throwing upon the pine boughs a light of deepening red gold’ and ‘the pasture spread like emerald’. In addition, Molly mentions that the natural landscape is remarkably ‘beautiful’ as it is ‘better than [her] dreams’. Although the author deplores the loss of the myth of nature as untrammelled, he maintains at the end of his novel that some isolated places have remained untouched by man’s hands. Wister therefore idealises the Virginian’s island to present a ‘salutary contrast’ to the prevalent ‘dehumanizing materialism and urbanization’ of his time as he restores, through his fictive characters, the pastoral ideal in the form of a retreat in untouched nature that permits to recover from the modern stressful lifestyle and from self-alienation.²⁴⁴ Wister’s narrator’s as well as the protagonist’s and Molly’s shared view of nature is an attempt on behalf of the author to reconcile mankind with the natural world by reevaluating its richness, its magnificent and fascinating mysticism that may still be preserved. Writing about the romantic landscape of the Wild West could be Wister’s means of expressing the loss of the original ‘American self’ as modern civilisation tended to forget how closely related to sublime nature American culture but, most importantly, self-realisation used to be. Wister’s representation of nature, which could almost be defined as transcendental, demonstrates that comfort may also be found in the natural world and that one might, as he experiences it, recover from the anxiety caused by modern city life but, more importantly, discover—or rediscover—his self.

Nonetheless, as previously stated, many authors represented nature as the ideal environment for self-recovery in the early twentieth century. With a different approach that followed Roosevelt’s encouragements of relating nature studies to literature, a famous woman writer published several novels that can also be interpreted as attempts to reconcile mankind with nature and to support conservation.

²⁴³ Wister, *The Virginian*, p. 284.

²⁴⁴ Tanner, ‘Spiritual Values’, p. 125.

3.3. LINKING LITERATURE TO NATURE STUDIES: GENE STRATTON-PORTER'S *A GIRL OF THE LIMBERLOST* (1909)

In her classic of Indiana literature entitled *A Girl of the Limberlost*, Gene Stratton-Porter (1863-1924) displays an enthusiasm for nature studies through her protagonist, Elnora, who may also be defined as a transcendentalist character. Indeed, Elnora is a young self-reliant girl who decides to compose a book that would give a detailed account of all species of butterflies and moths present in her cherished Limberlost Swamp, in which she had a particular transcendental experience.

First of all, the protagonist's scientific purpose can be compared to Bartram's public focus. However, her study is principally destined to teach 'city people' about nature as it is shown by the following extract in which the 'Bird Woman' advises Elnora to share the natural beauty of the swamps with a book: 'We Limberlost people must not be selfish with the wonders God has given to us. We must share with those poor cooped-up city people the best we can. To send them a beautiful book, that is the way'.²⁴⁵ Contrary to the 'cooped-up city people', Elnora and the Bird Woman spend most of their time in the outdoors and, consequently, appear to be their 'teachers' who would show them the 'wonders God has given to [them]'. In addition, the idea that natural elements are considered as 'God's wonders' conveys that Stratton-Porter's characters share Muir's view of nature as 'Godful' or as God's beautiful gift to mankind.

For example, in an inspired monologue, Elnora's mother, Mrs. Comstock explains how she 'felt in the Presence', 'as if the Almighty w[as] so real and so near, that she could reach out and touch Him' and then praised him to 'help [her] to learn, [...], the lessons of [His] wonderful creations'.²⁴⁶ This 'revelation' happens after contemplating the 'spreading' of a moth's wings inasmuch as she claims that some 'sight may be good for you' but 'it takes the wisdom of the Almighty God to devise the wing of a moth'.²⁴⁷ Mrs. Comstock is stunned by the wondrous beauty of the moth's mutation as her 'wings droop[] and spread wider', to such an extent that she thinks there is nothing comparable, that God reveals his secrets of creation through the grace of the new-born flying insect. Furthermore, other expressions of nature's beauty are represented in Stratton-Porter's novel, which may be related to Elnora's music. Indeed, as the narrator notices, Elnora 'had become so skilful' at playing the violin 'that it

²⁴⁵ Gene Stratton-Porter, *A Girl of the Limberlost* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2007), p. 34.

²⁴⁶ Stratton-Porter, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, p. 207.

²⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 206.

was a delight to hear her play the music of any composer' but something else happened 'when she played her own' since she conveyed 'joy inexpressible, for the wind blew, the water rippled, the Limberlost sang her songs of sunshine, shadow, black storm and white night'.²⁴⁸ Elnora's music displays Muir's idea of universal beauty in nature since the feeling of 'joy inexpressible' is associated with elements such as the 'wind' or the 'water' but also with natural facts that may be less cheerful such as the 'shadow' or the 'black storm'. In addition, her music revives nature's greatness and draws human attention on its powerful and wondrous beauty. This is perhaps clearer in this passage describing Elnora's recital during which the stage is transformed into an extraordinary demonstration of God's natural creation:

Just as she turned to go a sound so faint that every one leaned forward and listened, drifted down the auditorium. [...] after one instant half the audience looked toward the windows, for it seemed only a breath of wind rustling freshly opened leaves, just a hint of stirring air. Then the curtains were swept aside swiftly. The stage had been transformed into a lovely corner of creation, where trees and flowers grew and moss carpeted the earth. A soft wind blew and it was the gray of dawn. [...] The light grew stronger, the dewdrops trembled, flower perfume began to creep out to the audience; the air moved the branches [...].²⁴⁹

The audience's attention is drawn when the protagonist starts playing as, after the opening of the curtains, the audience beholds the stage as a scenery in which nature's outburst is predominant and appeals to the spectator's senses with its 'flower perfume' but, more essentially, with the 'bird's voices', the air's 'heavenly notes' and the wind's 'louder song' that ravishes their ears. The narrator then concludes by telling that 'all nature had grown still, the violin sobbed, sang, danced, and quavered on alone, no voice in particular, just the soul of the melody of all nature combined in one great outpouring', which is reminiscent of the transcendentalist philosophy. Indeed, Elnora's music instrument allows her to reach a state of oneness in the Limberlost Swamp since all manifestation of its nature, 'the soul of the melody of all nature', is united in 'one great outpouring'. Consequently, the author's emphasis on the sounds of the Limberlost, on its music, demonstrates an influence of the philosophical movement that may be aimed at reconciling the reader with the transcendentalists' idea of the natural 'Whole'. In other words, in Stratton-Porter's book, music symbolises the divine or the spiritual 'truth' that characterises every part of the Whole, by which its listeners may be transcended. Moreover, Elnora is also represented as self-reliant throughout the novel, which emphasises the Emersonian idea of self-development in nature.

²⁴⁸ Stratton-Porter, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, p. 129.

²⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 140.

At the age of nineteen, Elnora is described as a strong woman, a ‘compound of self-reliance, hard knocks, heart-hunger, unceasing work, and generosity’ who has a ‘breadth and depth of character altogether unusual’.²⁵⁰ In addition, Elnora, as a Thoreauvian character, claims that city people ‘motor, sail, and golf, all so secure and fine[,] [b]ut what [she] like[s] is the excitement of choosing a path carefully, in the fear that the quagmire may reach out and suck [her] down’, she likes ‘sufficient danger to put an edge on things’.²⁵¹ Elnora is not interested in leading a luxury and secured life since she is an adventurous woman who only finds happiness and spiritual fulfilment in the wilderness. If Thoreau or Muir assumed that ‘in wildness is the preservation of the world’, the character of Elnora portrays a Thoreauvian sense of self that is preserved thanks to wildness.²⁵² In addition, another character, Freckles, shares the protagonist’s perception of nature as he tells her that it is only ‘into real forest’ that children ‘can learn self-reliance and develop backbone’. Indeed, before starting to teach nature studies, Elnora had been a ‘student of nature’. For instance, the author almost paraphrases the concept of transcendence as Elnora explains that oaks speak to her and tell her to ‘be true, live a clean life, send your soul up here and let the winds of the world teach it what honour achieves’ and claims that she was ‘driven to the forest to learn what God has to say there’.²⁵³ The ‘talking trees’ symbolise here the knowledge, the spiritual self-development that is achievable through communion with the divine that exists everywhere in nature. As the protagonist claims, God is speaking to her through the trees and the winds, teaching her ‘soul’ what she has to accomplish with her life and ‘what honour achieves’. Elnora, after experiencing ‘Godful’ nature, became this self-reliant character who would play the ‘Song of the Limberlost’ to all the city people who still doubt that life in harmony with nature is worth preserving. As a ‘Lecturer on Natural History’ at the ‘Onabasha School’ who is ‘exhibiting and explaining specimens of the most prominent objects in nature’, who also composed a book recounting many natural species and who performed a song that reconciles people with nature, Stratton-Porter’s protagonist’s purpose is perhaps more significant than simply sharing scientific information, it is aimed at bringing an awareness that the preservation of the wonders of the swamps is threatened because of economic growth and industrial expansion.

As a matter of fact, during her self-appointed task of investigation in the Limberlost, Elnora notices that ‘changing natural conditions affect such work’.²⁵⁴ The devastation of the

²⁵⁰ Stratton-Porter, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, p. 130.

²⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 322.

²⁵² Brooks, *Speaking for Nature*, p. 19.

²⁵³ Stratton-Porter, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, p. 219.

²⁵⁴ Stratton-Porter, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, p. 130.

swamps is then made obvious as the narrator tells that ‘men all around were clearing available land’ and that ‘the trees fell wherever corn would grow’. ‘[T]he swamp was broken’, she says, ‘by several gravel roads, dotted in places around the edge with little frame houses, and the machinery oil wells’. In this novel, the ‘machine in the garden’ is not only obstructing the protagonist’s appreciation of the Limberlost but is also preventing her from doing her work, from finding moths and butterflies. The insects’ habitat is disturbed if not destroyed by urbanisation with ‘roads’ and ‘houses’ and by industrialisation with ‘the machine of oil wells’, hence the narrator’s emphasis on the fact that the ‘dragon-flies would not hover over dry places, and [that] butterflies became scarce in proportion to the flowers’. If nature is indeed part of US culture and contributes to the definition of the American self, Stratton-Porter stresses in her novel that the study of nature may soon be impossible because of the expansion of massive production of crops or oil and, as a consequence, that this cultural necessity may soon become part of Wister’s ‘vanished world’. Stratton-Porter’s protagonist, inspired by the transcendentalists, serves undoubtedly as a connection between nature studies and literature but maybe, most importantly, as a conservationist argument to reconcile city people with the natural world and to show them the urgency of preservation.

Nevertheless, although these two works of fiction display a noble intention of reevaluating human connection with nature and of urging people to conserve the American wilderness, the situation was critical and the American people needed proofs and facts to be warned that they were condemning themselves by allowing the destruction of the natural world. This chapter on outdoor literature conveys that if a sublime idea of nature could be considered in Bartram’s time, it was now becoming a mere fiction, a landscape that could only be contemplated in works of literature or art but that disappeared in reality. Even though the wilderness had not yet completely ‘vanished’, it was preserved almost as a commodity or transformed into national parks, therefore into objects of leisure or occasional aesthetic appreciation, which somehow confused the philosophical meaning that the transcendentalists gave to nature. The wilderness, because of its rarity, was becoming a luxury, and both the sublime and the pastoral ideal became illusions, only visible or achievable through some writers’ imagination. As a result, two of the major figures of what was to become the Environmental Movement directed their forces to support the ecological cause and to reshape the vanishing original American wilderness aesthetics for a more sustainable and promising future.

4. THE LITERARY ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT: FIGHTING TECHNOLOGY AND TOXICITY

4.1. FROM 'NATURE' TO 'ENVIRONMENT'

The term 'nature' has so far been used to refer to the natural world and discuss the American self's relation to it. On the other hand, the 'wilderness' has frequently been the denomination of natural landscapes that had remained unmodified by man's hands. Nevertheless, humanity's impact on the natural world had become so significant in the post-Second World War era that it needed to be reconsidered and redefined. In Bartram's time, the untrammelled wilderness could be contemplated as dreadful and dangerous, superior and therefore as separated from mankind. Bartram did not define the American self as connected with the natural world as, though he travelled through it himself, his perception is distant and incomplete since he viewed God's creation as either too sublime to be grasped or too dreadful to be approached. As a consequence, the transcendentalists realised the first philosophical attempt to fully include the self in the 'Whole' of Nature and to be in 'contact' with God's divine creation. But some of the transcendentalists, like Thoreau, knew that the American rapid economic growth was changing the landscape and therefore their concept of self-realisation. Indeed, man was shaping the natural landscape to promote massive production, agriculture and urbanisation to such an extent that the idea of nature's strangeness or mysticism, as represented in some of Dickinson's poems, became obsolete. In the early twentieth century, writers, similarly to Whitman, tried to reconcile urban civilisation with the natural world but this attitude was also translating their awareness that modern civilisation had left its marks everywhere. Consequently, modern nature aesthetics had to encompass humanity and man-made objects and therefore needed to consider the problems caused by technology, mechanisation, and pollution.

As environmental historian Donald Worster notes, 'ecosystems, [...], have been commonly described in the text-books as self-contained assemblages of plants and animals, evolving over time but in the absence of any people' but the 'human presence' is not to be neglected as 'ecosystems have long been the home of people too'.²⁵⁵ In addition, he stresses that the 'human impact on the rest of nature' had 'been increasingly explosive in the modern

²⁵⁵ Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 25.

era, for deep material and cultural reasons' and became too significant to be ignored by the scientists. In order to avoid the philosophical and ideological implications of the word 'nature' and to include both mankind and the natural world in the landscape, the term 'environment' began to be used more frequently. Leo Marx defines the 'environment' as a more general and ideologically neutral term as he explains that:

[The environment] refers to the entire biophysical surround—or environ—we inhabit; it implies no distinction between human and other forms of life; it encompasses all that is built and (so to speak) unbuilt, the artificial and the natural, within the terrain we inhabit. Besides, as the related verb, *to environ*, indicates, most environments palpably are products of human effort. It is not difficult to understand, then, why this matter-of-fact word proved to be more acceptable than *nature* to people coping with the practical problems created by the degradation of 'nature'.²⁵⁶

The environment is thus a generalising term that 'encompasses' everything that is surrounding the 'terrain we inhabit', meaning both 'human' and non-human beings, both 'the artificial and the natural'. As a matter of fact, the new American landscape was gradually becoming 'artificial', man-'built', and man's perception of the natural world changed along with his identity, his sense of self, which was so closely related to the wilderness in the nineteenth-century. As a result, modern man-made technology was criticised by several conservationists who claimed it had a negative impact on the American environment and self and on human perception in general.

Among those who were concerned by the 'practical problems created by the degradation of nature', two authors in particular analysed the negative effects of modernity on the environment. However, considering that critics have minutely discussed these writers' environmental ethics, I will focus on their environmental aesthetics and their representation of the natural world, on how their texts may help to comprehend man's influence upon sublime nature and how human progress, which was primarily aimed at improving economic growth and comfort, was gradually leading man to his self-destruction.

4.2. REFOCUSING PERCEPTION: ALDO LEOPOLD'S *A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC* (1949)

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) was a devoted conservationist, he had been the 'Associate Director of the U.S. Forest Service's main research institute; held the chair of wildlife management at the University of Wisconsin; and co-founded the Wilderness Society' in 1935

²⁵⁶ Marx, 'The Idea of Nature in America', p. 17.

but, more interestingly, he wrote his most famous work *A Sand County Almanac*, which was published posthumously, that displayed his specific environmental aesthetics.

From the beginning of his book, Leopold suggests that the idea of the natural world's separateness from mankind is disappearing. In his short description of the 'Draba', a wild flower found in 'abundance' for 'who searches for spring with his knees in the mud', the author illustrates its independence, devoid of any human contact or consideration:

Draba plucks no heartstrings. Its perfume, if there is any, is lost in the gusty winds. Its color is plain white. Its leaves wear a sensible woolly coat. Nothing eats it; it is too small. No poets sing of it. Some botanist once gave it a Latin name, and then forgot it. Altogether it is of no importance—just a small creature that does a small job quickly and well.²⁵⁷

In this passage, Leopold describes the plant as odourless, plainly 'white', and neutral in the natural landscape. More importantly, he distinguishes two figures that will be significant for the rest of this analysis, which are the poet and the scientist. Indeed, the existence of the flower is acknowledged despite the fact that 'the poet' does not try to grasp its essence through his poetic language or that the 'botanist', or scientist, 'forgot' its 'Latin name'. In addition, he does not mention its beauty since he only says that the 'small creature' has 'leaves [that] wear a sensible woolly coat' and claims that 'altogether, it is of no importance'. And yet, the reader may be tempted to think otherwise since the small flower has something man does not possess. Indeed, thanks to its humble and non-invasive existence, the flower fits perfectly well in its environment, and it has remained unspoiled by self-appropriation, it exists on its own 'do[ing] a small job quickly and well'.

Nevertheless, some passages can be read as presenting similarities with Dickinson's speaker's process of 'anthropomorphisation' of nature in her poem 'A Bird, came down the Walk -', but with a distinct purpose. For instance, Leopold's description of the 'sky dance' of the 'woodcocks' is compared to a human dancing performance as the author uses words such as the 'show' or 'curtains' to refer to the beginning of the dance, specifying that 'the stage must be an open amphitheatre in woods or bush'.²⁵⁸ The author refers to the dance as 'entertainment', as worthy of man's attention as if it was a professional dancing performance. After 'learning of the sky dance', the conservationist, though also a hunting enthusiast, recognises that the 'woodcock is a living refutation of the theory that the utility of a game bird is to serve as a target, or to pose gracefully on a slice of toast'.²⁵⁹ While Dickinson's speaker

²⁵⁷ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), p. 28.

²⁵⁸ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 33.

²⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 36.

associates man-made objects characteristics with the bird in order to apprehend the strangeness of nature, Leopold's bird serves a conservationist purpose since his dance allows us not to consider him as a mere 'target' or a piece of food but to identify with him. For example, the author uses the same method during his 'meditation' on the similarities between men and trout. 'I sit in happy meditation on my rock, pondering', he writes, 'upon the ways of trout and men' and 'how like fish we are: ready, nay eager, to seize upon whatever new thing some wind of circumstance shakes down upon the river of time'.²⁶⁰ The author cannot help thinking of man and identify him with the fish whose 'eagerness' urges him to take advantage of any opportunity. Nevertheless, Leopold's attempts to anthropomorphise nature also disguise his desire to include both mankind and nature within the same harmonious community. In other words, Leopold tends to represent humans as resembling animals to reconcile them with the natural world but also to show what man may learn from it.

As a matter of fact, in his reflexion on hunting, Leopold acknowledges that he is his dog's student, and not the reverse, since the dog's sense of smell is more acute than the naturalist's:

My dog, [...], thinks I have much to learn about partridges, and, being a professional naturalist, I agree. He persists in tutoring me, with calm patience of a professor of logic, in the art of drawing deductions from an educated nose. I delight seeing him deduce a conclusion, in the form of a point, from data that are obvious to him, but speculative to my unaided eye. Perhaps he hopes his dull pupil will one day learn to smell.²⁶¹

Contrary to Bartram's assertion of man's superiority over other beings since his reason surpasses their mechanical impulse or instinct, Leopold values the dog's faculties of perception and empirical knowledge and considers himself as his 'pupil'. Indeed, the dog is described as 'a professor of logic' who is able to 'draw[] deductions' with his 'educated nose'. Through the examination of empirical 'data', the dog manages to 'deduce a conclusion', his skills at 'smelling' allow him to understand, to see things the hunter's 'unaided eye' cannot see. Although Leopold is a scientist, he admits that those who best comprehend the natural world are those who were born in and remained connected with it. In other words, the hunter is an outsider in the natural environment that the dog masters. In addition, in the part called 'Song of the Gavilan', Leopold emphasises that though some sounds may be 'audible to every ear' in nature, 'there is other music in these hills, by no means audible to all' because, 'to hear even a few notes of it', 'you must live here for a long

²⁶⁰ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 43.

²⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 67.

time, and you must know the speech of hills and rivers'.²⁶² Therefore, the author conveys the idea that the modern man may not be able to apprehend the natural world or fully appreciate its beauty because he has been separated from it for too long. In other words, in his subtle critique of progress and comfort, Leopold demonstrates that man's modern lifestyle has had a detrimental effect on his sensorial perception, which could only be cured through the re-imagination of his self within the harmonious community of the natural world.

As Daniel Berthold suggests, Leopold's writing style could be defined as 'poetic science' as his yearning for 'discovery', of apprehending natural species is closely related to his 'poetic temperament' that tends to define the mysticism of nature, 'what is not seen directly and explicitly', by 'reaching past its own subjectivity to the ineluctably enigmatic subjectivity of the other'.²⁶³ I would argue that the author indeed oscillates from a scientific approach to a more poetic language but he nevertheless prefers the latter to foster his conservationist purpose. For example, in the part 'Song of the Gavilan', Leopold explains his distinction between science and poetry as he says that 'the construction is the domain of science, while the detection of harmony is the domain of poets'.²⁶⁴ 'Professors serve science and science serves progress', he continues, 'it serves progress so well that many of the more intricate instruments are stepped upon and broken in the rush to spread progress to all backward lands'. Then, science alters the Song of the Gavilan since its parts are 'stricken from the songs of songs' and 'if the professor is able to classify each instrument before it is broken, he is well content'. In fact, Leopold does not reject science, he even stresses its 'great moral contribution', which 'is objectivity', but regrets that its main focus is people's 'need' for 'more inventions' to such an extent that it does not consider aesthetical questions such as whether the 'good life on any river may likewise depend on the perception of its music, and the preservation of some music to perceive'. This comment is reminiscent of Thoreau's view of science insofar as Leopold suggests that scientific progress does not guarantee happiness or the 'good life' on earth. If, as Thoreau wrote, 'the wind that blows', or the Gavilan's music if we understand it as a reference to the nature's 'truth', 'is all any body knows', it might also, according to Leopold, be all that any body needs to 'perceive' to have a meaningful existence. However, men tend to focus on acquiring a comfortable life and thus to prefer scientific progress to 'authentic' perception, which is what Leopold principally criticises.

²⁶² Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 158.

²⁶³ Daniel Berthold, 'Aldo Leopold: In Search of a Poetic Science', *Human Ecology Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (December 2004), pp. 212-213.

²⁶⁴ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, pp. 162-163.

In *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold stresses that ‘the modern dogma is comfort at any cost’ as it is man’s obsession to secure himself a comfortable life.²⁶⁵ ‘We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness’, he writes, ‘deer strives with his supple legs’ but ‘the most of us with machines, votes and dollars’.²⁶⁶ In fact, the author confirms that what Thoreau feared when he published *Walden*, that the new market economy and modern lifestyle would alienate man from ‘truth’, from an ‘authentic’ way of living, actually happened. Indeed, Leopold acknowledges that ‘modern’ American people define their selves with their money, their ‘prosperity’, ‘dollars’, and ‘comfort’. He even quotes Thoreau as he says that ‘too much safety seems to yield only danger in the long run’ and that it may be ‘behind Thoreau’s dictum: In wildness is the salvation of the world’. According to Leopold, ‘wildness’ is the priceless value of natural elements, which the ‘high priests of progress’ could never grasp.²⁶⁷ In other words, wildness could be compared to Whitman’s atomic perspective on nature as Leopold claims that wildness is ‘the fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals’ that is indispensable to man’s existence. Consequently, Leopold demonstrates that modern American self-realisation is based on the pursuit of wealth and comfort and is disregarding of ‘wildness’, of the world’s ‘energy’. This argument is also illustrated in Leopold’s references to the ‘machine in the garden’ such as, for instance, the ‘jeep and the airplane, creatures of the ever mounting pressure from humanity’ that ‘eliminate the opportunity for isolation in nature’.²⁶⁸ Progress, symbolised by the ‘jeep and the airplane’, ‘eliminate[s]’ the pastoral ideal and deteriorates man’s perception of the ‘wildness’, which is also seen in the mechanisation of outdoor activities.

For example, in his analysis of the ‘Wildlife in American Culture’, Leopold discusses how progress and mechanisation have affected the spirit of hunting and sportsmanship:

I have the impression that the American sportsman is puzzled; he doe[s] [not] understand what is happening to him. Bigger and better gadgets are good for industry, so why not for outdoor recreation? It has not dawned on him that outdoor recreations are essentially primitive, atavistic; that their value is a contrast-value; that excessive mechanization destroys contrasts by moving the factory to the woods or to the marsh.²⁶⁹

In this passage, the conservationist suggests that the ‘mechanisation’ of ‘outdoor recreation’ simply ‘destroys’ the symbolic separation between industrialised and ‘primitive’ natural landscape. In addition, these ‘recreations’ become meaningless since their ‘wildness’, their

²⁶⁵ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 76.

²⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 141.

²⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 107.

²⁶⁸ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 289.

²⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 216.

‘primitiveness’ or ‘authenticity’, is what makes them worthwhile. The modern ‘American sportsman’, Leopold claims, is over-equipped with ‘gadgets’, he is ‘supercivilized’ and has lost the ‘hunting instinct’ so that he became a mere ‘trophy-hunter who never grows up, in whom the capacity for isolation, perception, and husbandry is undeveloped, or perhaps lost’.²⁷⁰ This ‘modern picture’ of the ‘trophy-hunter’ came along with the evolution of culture, progress and technology, which fragmented the human self and perception. Therefore, Leopold’s argument may be that if sublime nature still exists, man may not be able to contemplate its beauty because his perception has been altered, it has become too vague, incomplete and useless. In other words, man has become this ‘trophy-hunter’ who wants to see all without really seeing, ‘he is the motorized ant who swarms the continents before learning to see his own back yard’, who wants to possess or ‘invade’ everything without taking the time to perceive the ‘authentic’ value of natural facts.

In conclusion, according to Leopold, the ‘true conservationist’ could be defined as the poet who has ‘a refined taste in natural objects’.²⁷¹ In other words, he is like Thoreau or Muir, like those naturalists who manage to have an ‘ethical relation to land’ or nature because of their ‘love, respect, and admiration’ for it, their ‘high regard for its value’.²⁷² With regard to perception, he is the one who contemplates wildness with a ‘philosophical eye’ and is able to cherish it ‘because it gives definition and meaning to his life’.²⁷³ These ‘poets’ could comprehend sublime nature because they truly loved it and were not blinded by man-made technology or by a yearning to appropriate everything for themselves. But, more importantly, they just understood the fundamental law of ecology: harmony. ‘Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land’, Leopold writes, and ‘by land is meant all of the things on, over, or in the earth’.²⁷⁴ Although Leopold did not adopt the term ‘environment’, he uses the word ‘land’ to emphasise that now that civilisation has imposed its marks everywhere, that the sound of the machine is heard wherever you stand in the ‘wilderness’, the respect of harmony between all life forms should be the priority of conservation effort. In order to live in harmony with the rest of the world, modern men should not promote scientific progress but scientific ‘regress’ so that they would restore their original or ‘primitive’ perception of nature that allowed them to grasp its ‘true’ meaning and value as equal and not inferior to themselves.

²⁷⁰ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, pp. 227, 294.

²⁷¹ *ibid.*, p. 194.

²⁷² Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 261.

²⁷³ *ibid.*, p. 265.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 189.

Nevertheless, Leopold's path was not really followed by American modern generations who began to poison the land with toxins that contaminated every inch of the remaining sublime nature. As Rachel Carson exposed, the invisible damage of nature was too significant and the American people had intoxicated their environment, and therefore themselves.

4.3. TOXIC SUBLIME AND SELF-DESTRUCTION: RACHEL CARSON'S *SILENT SPRING* (1962)

Although Aldo Leopold anticipated its birth, it is the publication of scientist and author Rachel Carson's 'environmental science book' *Silent Spring* that played a 'key role in launching the environmental movement'.²⁷⁵ More specifically, Garrard stresses that 'it is generally agreed that modern environmentalism begins with 'A Fable for Tomorrow', Carson's book's first chapter.²⁷⁶ Indeed, being also her most famous book, *Silent Spring* fuelled the debate on whether or not pesticides were dangerous for human health. Though Carson's thorough analysis of the chemical components of pesticides and their effects on human beings or, more largely, on the environment was questioned in her time, it could be read as an 'understatement' now.²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, her huge contribution to the ecological cause may not be reduced to her scientific work as the author also portrays the modern landscape that the American people had created and how, because of their cultural idea of the American self, they had condemned its and their own existence.

First and foremost, Rachel Carson (1907-64) represents the essence of the natural world and its beauty as corrupted by mankind. In her first chapter entitled 'A Fable for Tomorrow', she recalls 'places of beauty' with 'abundance' and 'variety' of life and 'wildflowers [that] delighted the traveller's eye through much of the year'.²⁷⁸ This is reminiscent of Bartram's 'delighting' illustration of the American wilderness insofar as Carson's words are comparable to the botanist's aesthetical vocabulary but she then uses a more 'apocalyptic' discourse describing the 'strange blight', the 'evil spell', that began to 'change' everything in the natural landscape into a 'shadow of death'.²⁷⁹ As a matter of fact, Carson explains that by trying to eradicate insects with insecticides, man started a 'war

²⁷⁵ Brooks, *Speaking for Nature*, p. 276.

²⁷⁶ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 1.

²⁷⁷ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), p. 17. Lord Shackleton mentions in his introduction to *Silent Spring* that 'a distinguished British ecologist' believed that '*Silent Spring* overstated some things now but in ten years' time or less these could be understatements'.

²⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁷⁹ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 103.

against life' that he was bound to lose and that would cause his self-destruction. From Carson's point of view, sublime nature could be defined as the 'earth's green mantle of plants' that 'make up the world that supports the animal life' without which man simply 'could not exist'.²⁸⁰ However, this 'green mantle' has been 'spoiled' by man's 'newest addition' to the machine in the garden as, after using a 'large assortment of machines for cutting and ploughing and seeding', he decided to use 'chemical sprays' to improve the quality of agricultural production. Although it may not be visible, the poison that lies in nature is harmful to the environment and, consequently, to human health. For instance, Carson uses the symbolism of 'Greek mythology' as she describes the 'robe' of the 'sorceress Medea' that causes a 'violent death' to the wearer in order to illustrate the effects of the 'systemic insecticides' that 'convert' or rather corrupt 'plants and animals' by 'making them poisonous' so that the 'insects that may come in contact with them' would be instantly eliminated.²⁸¹ This representation of nature as covered by what Carson calls an invisible 'lethal film', could be characterised, to some extent, as a form of toxic sublime since the intoxicated nature implies a certain human control—or, rather, lack of human control—over the environment, and thus revisits the original conception of the self and its implications in the sublime landscape.

In her article 'Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes', Jennifer A. Peeples defines the toxic sublime as 'the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe'.²⁸² In *Silent Spring*, Carson stresses man's yearning of dominance over nature as she says that 'the chemical weed killers' give him 'a giddy sense of power over nature', in other words, they constitute his weapon to fight 'undesirable' nature.²⁸³ This attitude may result from the misguided American notion of individualism or self-reliance, which suggests that nothing could stop the American man to achieve his goals, as Carson writes that 'under the philosophy that now seems to guide our destinies, nothing must get in the way of the man with the spray gun', which is related to Peeples's definition of the toxic sublime.²⁸⁴ Indeed, Peeples also mentions that the toxic sublime is related to the technological sublime, 'the sublime response' to the contemplation of 'industrial leaps such as the advent of the railroad or space travel', since both forms of the sublime are 'signs' of the 'potential

²⁸⁰ Carson, *Silent Spring*, p. 69.

²⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 45-6.

²⁸² Jennifer A. Peeples, 'Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes', *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 2011), p. 375.

²⁸³ Carson, *Silent Spring*, p. 73.

²⁸⁴ *ibid.*, p. 87.

omnipotence of humanity' as they convey sentiments of 'pride and wonder in humans' ability to master their environment'.²⁸⁵ In addition, she claims that the toxic sublime differs from the concepts of sublime nature previously analysed that are aimed at 'improv[ing] moral character' since it portrays a 'sense of self [that] is diminished' to such an extent that 'the individual feels a separation from, or lack of control of, the [human-made] environment'. As Carson explains, man's obsession of dominance over the environment led him to lose 'control' of it and to bring a 'shadow of death' that poisoned all natural life and 'silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world'.²⁸⁶ In other words, it is the cultural view of mankind as separate from nature that urged man to dominate the natural world and to empoison it, which 'diminished his sense of self' and ultimately caused his self-destruction. Consequently, Carson's idea of the toxic sublime is not aimed at illustrating the mysticism that still lies in intoxicated nature as Peeples first suggested, but rather to convey the cultural 'tensions' that invisible toxicity symbolises in the landscape. Therefore, Carson has an ecological purpose that is aimed at awakening in man the awareness that the 'smallness' of his self in the environment is not a burden but a way of preserving environmental balance and durability.

As a matter of fact, the concept of human 'smallness' supported by Carson can be related to the transcendental conception of nature as a 'whole' in which everything is connected. Indeed, Carson explains how life on earth functions like a circle in which all the elements are interconnected and play a significant part to conserve the balance of the whole. For instance, she emphasises the importance of the soil as the element that 'controls our own existence and that of every other animal of the land' since 'without soil, land plants as we know them could not grow, and without plants no animals could survive'.²⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the soil may only bring plants to life thanks to the help of 'earthworms' that 'aerate the soil, keep it well drained, and aid the penetration of plant roots'.²⁸⁸ Carson thus shows that the 'earthworms' could be regarded as the 'good' insects that are the 'casualties' of man's war against the 'bad' insects. As a result, man has created a 'chain of devastation' since the poison that is sprayed on leaves and plants eventually affects the worms, then the soil and consequently every natural form of life. Carson stresses that if the denomination 'environment' includes everything that surrounds humans, it also implies that no life can exist on its own but in harmony with the rest. She does not claim that man-made objects or technologies are intrinsically bad but that they should not disturb the necessary harmony of

²⁸⁵ Peeples, 'Toxic Sublime', p. 380.

²⁸⁶ Carson, *Silent Spring*, p. 22.

²⁸⁷ Carson, *Silent Spring*, p. 61.

²⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 63.

life in the environment. Consequently, man has to recognise his 'smallness' in the environment and needs to avoid trying to eliminate or dominate even the tiniest insect in the natural world since any life could somehow contribute indirectly to his health and safety. If we reconsider Worster's argument that human presence is incontestable in the ecosystems of modern civilisation, the 'cultural impact' is that humans do not comprehend the balance, the fundamental relationship of equality between the elements in the ecosystems. As David Kinkela mentions, Carson's concept of 'smallness' destroys the frontier between nature and city or between humans and non-humans to emphasise the importance of regarding the environment as composed of 'interconnected communities' since 'individual ecosystems operate independently, but are intrinsically connected to the whole as well'.²⁸⁹ Nonetheless, the concept of 'smallness' was perhaps not sufficient to draw people's attention on environmental issues, which led her to focus on the impact of pesticides on human health and safety.

Carson's idea of the 'circle of death' does not spare humans since her main argument to reconnect mankind with its environment is based on emphasising the link between chemical use and the development of human diseases such as cancer. 'The problem', she writes, 'is whether any of the chemicals we are using in our attempts to control nature play a direct or indirect role as causes of cancer', which she demonstrates with 'evidence gained from animal experiments' concluding that 'five or possibly six of the pesticides must definitely be rated as carcinogens'.²⁹⁰ Carson expresses implicitly in her analysis that while man was intoxicating the environment to improve his production, comfort or lifestyle, he was also gradually causing his self-destruction. As Kinkela suggests, '*Silent Spring* connected health and safety issues to the modernist transformation of built and natural environments', but these 'health and safety issues' may also serve as an encouragement for man to improve his relationship with his environment.²⁹¹ Mankind produced the toxic sublime, a landscape in which the 'relationship between toxins and illness—toxins and cancer—is terrifyingly real for most viewers', which somehow exclude the self from the landscape.²⁹² Humans' tendency to adapt the environment to his way of living, and not the reverse, has ultimately made it reactive and harmful to his self. As Carson writes in the chapter 'Nature Fights Back', insects became more resistant to toxicity and some bacteria and diseases developed in parallel, which

²⁸⁹ David Kinkela, 'The Ecological Landscapes of Jane Jacobs and Rachel Carson', *American Quarterly*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (December 2009), pp. 917, 920.

²⁹⁰ Carson, *Silent Spring*, p. 196.

²⁹¹ Kinkela, 'The Ecological Landscapes', p. 913.

²⁹² Peebles, 'Toxic Sublime', p. 386.

suggests that nature responded to mankind's 'attacks'.²⁹³ In other words, by persisting in imagining his self as separate from the natural world and trying to destroy what he views as inconvenient, man has created a landscape in which he is not safe anymore, in which his own self is now endangered.

In conclusion, Carson's text portrays the modern process of self-realisation based on promoting production, or the accumulation of wealth, and improving human comfort as closely related to self-destruction. Indeed, though the author provided humans with options to correct their mistakes and embrace a healthier, or what one may refer to as an 'ecologically responsible', way of life, some damages were done and were hardly repairable. In fact, the toxic sublime was only the premise of the idea of the 'postnatural world' that postmodernity created and in which the bright future of mankind may only be seen as uncertain or even condemned.

5. POSTMODERNISM AND THE POSTNATURAL WORLD

5.1. IMAGINING A POSTNATURAL WORLD: BILL MCKIBBEN'S *THE END OF NATURE* (1989)

Although actual environmental damages were proved after the publication of Rachel Carson's book but also after the use of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II, Leo Marx stresses that environmentalism gained national interest and 'displayed its political power' in 1970, which was 'the year of the first Earth Day'.²⁹⁴ Indeed, in the 1970s, a plethora of 'scientists and engineers' started to record environmental damages by studying issues such as the 'accelerating rate of air', 'water pollution, climate change, and species extinction'. Consequently, now that man had almost entirely altered the natural world, the original American representation of the natural world was obsolete and needed to be reimagined. Towards the end of the twentieth century, American environmentalist and author Bill McKibben (1960 -) considered the idea of a postnatural world, a world in which nature has ended 'both as a discrete biophysical entity and as a meaningful concept', which may be comprehended as a consequence of postmodernity.²⁹⁵

²⁹³ Carson, *Silent Spring*, p. 214.

²⁹⁴ Marx, 'The Idea of Nature in America', p. 16.

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 18.

As a matter of fact, McKibben's main argument, as displayed in his essay entitled *The End of Nature*, could be related to his approach to nature not as a 'place' but rather as an idea. For example, the author mentions Bartram's representation of the untrammelled nature, which is separated from human society, as its culturally accepted definition. However, he stresses that 'the wonder of nature does not' and should not 'depend on its freshness' because everything in the postnatural world has been 'touched' by man's hands, which makes man's idea of an 'unaltered' wilderness unrealistic. For example, he refers to Marx's theory of the machine in the garden but insists on its predominance since the sound of the 'chain saw will always be in the woods', even when you think you may be isolated in a natural landscape like the 'Adirondack lake', McKibben states: '[...] the motorboat gets in your mind. You're forced to think, not feel—to think of human society and of people'.²⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the 'idea of wildness', as untouched by mankind, McKibben explains, 'can survive most of the "normal" destruction of nature' since, even though nature is 'often fragile in reality', it is 'durable in our imagination', it can be 'picture[d] it fresh and untainted' when it is actually 'degraded'.²⁹⁷ The author suggests that the end of nature means the end of 'the thing that has, at least in modern times, defined nature for us—its separateness from human society'—, which is not to be understood as man's physical presence out of nature but as its independence, which is characterised by the absence of human influence. In other words, the postnatural world in which we are living could be described as a man-made world that includes what McKibben calls a 'new artificial nature'.²⁹⁸ According to McKibben, nature's independence as illustrated by Leopold in his representation of the 'Dabra' had become an illusion that only persisted in human imagination.

Furthermore, McKibben also acknowledges, like Carson, that the modern way of life was harmful to the stability and health of the planet since he claims that 'over the last century[,] a human life ha[d] become a machine for burning petroleum'.²⁹⁹ Indeed, the environmentalist provides the reader with a solution to environmental change as he writes that 'global pollution' caused by the 'burning [of] oil [that] releases carbon dioxide' is not exactly the issue since it is 'our habits', our lifestyle, that we could change to preserve what may remain of the 'independent force' of nature. As the author explains, humans' tendency to adapt the environment to his self and needs, and not the reverse, was what caused a circle of changes first in the atmosphere and then in the entire natural world, which ended the idea of

²⁹⁶ Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), pp. 40-42.

²⁹⁷ McKibben, *The End of Nature*, p. 49.

²⁹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 115.

²⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 123.

independent nature. Carson had already emphasised man's propensity to consider himself as superior to other beings but McKibben relates this idea, which is 'that we [belong] at the top in every way', to the American 'consumptive' and destructive lifestyle.³⁰⁰ If there was a God, some 'larger forces' that were dreaded during Bartram's time, men had now become 'those larger forces', he had created the 'hurricanes and thunderstorms and tornadoes' that were once perceived as 'acts of God', he had 'dominated' the previous ideas of sublime nature and became the source of every creation and destruction.³⁰¹

To summarise, McKibben's postnatural world could be defined as 'the imposition of our artificial world in place of the broken one'.³⁰² In fact, the original American sense of self, which was so closely related to the strangeness or mysticism of the country's wilderness, had been replaced by a self-realisation based on the accumulation of possessions, on the consumption of man-made objects. Even though man could be willing to preserve the wilderness, McKibben argues that it would primarily be for his own sake, to keep it as a commodity to recover from the stressful city life. Nevertheless, the author suggests that it is not 'natural beauty that is ended' but 'the meaning that beauty carries'.³⁰³ Indeed, he says that nature's 'authenticity' has disappeared because it was altered by pollution, by the use of petrol and pesticides, and man's search for his noxious comfort. In short, the postnatural world is a world where 'anthropomorphism' has supplanted 'biocentrism', where artificiality has replaced 'authenticity' and where nature and the American self have acquired a whole new meaning. However, McKibben does not specifically mention that the postnatural world was caused by *postmodernism*, which had gradually transformed our perception of the world as well as the American sense of self, an idea that was also expressed in the fiction of the 1980s.

5.2. POSTMODERN SUBLIME AND CONSUMERIST TRANSCENDENTALISM: DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE* (1985)

In his famous essay entitled 'Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' published in 1984, Frederic Jameson related the American capitalist economic system to the concepts of progress, Postmodernism and postmodern sublime and claimed that 'Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is

³⁰⁰ McKibben, *The End of Nature*, p. 146.

³⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. xviii.

³⁰² *ibid.*, p. 175.

³⁰³ McKibben, *The End of Nature*, p. 53.

gone for good', replaced by a 'more fully human world than the older one' in which "culture" has become a veritable "second nature".³⁰⁴ Jameson anticipated McKibben's idea of a postnatural world with his definition of Postmodernism since the idea of a modernised or artificial nature can be found in both works. In order to demonstrate the influence of the postmodern sublime and postmodern self-realisation on the conception of a postnatural world, I will now examine a famous novel written by Donald Richard "Don" DeLillo (1939 -), *White Noise*.

First of all, postmodernist theories conveyed a new perception of reality. One notable literary example of this different perception may be DeLillo's famous passage dealing with 'the most photographed barn in America' in which the simulation, or *simulacre*, is more important than the landscape's 'authenticity'. Indeed, as the protagonist and narrator of the novel, Jack Gladney, arrives at the location of the barn that is situated in a natural setting with 'meadows and apple orchards', his colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, tells him that 'once you [have] seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn' as you are 'part of a collective perception' and 'only see what the others see'.³⁰⁵ 'Every photograph reinforces the aura', he says, 'an accumulation of nameless energies' of which Jack and himself are part, and he 'seemed immensely pleased by this'.³⁰⁶ While standing in front of the barn, the two characters do not actually contemplate the barn but its photographic representation. As James Collins mentions, the image of the barn could be perceived as a 'simulation' that is 'created through photographic reproduction', which causes 'an aura in which 'authenticity' is no longer of any interest to the tourist'.³⁰⁷ This 'aura' could be identified as a sublime experience that excludes 'reality', the 'true' or 'authentic' landscape, as it is the 'reproduction' that arouses Murray's pleasing reaction. Indeed, as Dana Phillips suggests, in Postmodernism, 'representation has supplanted presence' and, as a result, it could be said that 'the postmodern' has altered 'our relationship to the landscapes we inhabit'.³⁰⁸ In fact, there is a collective, cultural appreciation of landscape that is not 'natural' but artificial, factice, as the barn is beheld through 'cultural mediation', through the means of cameras.³⁰⁹ Consequently, Jameson's acknowledgement that, in Postmodernism, "culture" has become a "second

³⁰⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. vii.

³⁰⁵ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 2011), pp. 13-14.

³⁰⁶ DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 14-15.

³⁰⁷ James Collins, 'Reconfigurations of the American Sublime in the Fiction of Joan Didion, Don DeLillo and Paul Auster', (McMaster University, Ph.D, 2012), p. 132.

³⁰⁸ Dana Phillips, 'Is Nature Necessary?', Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 206-207.

³⁰⁹ Collins, 'Reconfigurations of the American Sublime', p. 133.

nature”, conveys that the landscape that is contemplated has lost its initial meaning, its essence, because of its cultural recognition. In other words, things are no longer discovered or appreciated as they truly ‘are’ but rather acquire their historical meaning through cultural representations. Far from evoking the Thoreauvian sensorial method, this approach is nevertheless related to a transcendental experience with the postmodern landscape, which eventually introduces a new definition of selfhood.

As the title *White Noise* suggests, sounds are significant in DeLillo’s novel and linked to the process of self-realisation in postmodern society. As Karen Weekes argues, ‘this title emphasise[s] our culture’s saturation in sound, but encompasses other definitions as well, some of which focus on the physical properties of sounds waves or the random nature of noise’ such as what Timothy Aubry calls ‘any background noise that [we] wish [we did not] notice’ or ‘anything—sounds, store displays, gossip—that people can[not] avoid encountering but always try to ignore’.³¹⁰ Therefore, the denomination “white noise” does not distinguish noises that have a displeasing effect when heard by humans such as, for example, the noise of the machine in Leo Marx’s book, from the sounds that, on the contrary, are perceived as more pleasing, as it is illustrated in Thoreau’s chapter ‘Sounds’ in *Walden*. Indeed, DeLillo’s characters often refer to these ‘sounds’ and ‘noises’ as conveying a comforting feeling to the listener, which is shown in the following extract, in which Jack associates the sounds he hears in the mall with a sensation of happiness:

A band played live Muzak. Voices rose ten stories from the gardens and promenades, a roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery, mixing with noises from the tiers, with shuffling feet and chiming bells, the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating, the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction.³¹¹

Thoreau’s simple individual experience in nature has been replaced by an impressive communal experience in a postmodern place, the mall, which barely includes ‘gardens and promenades’, and in which the protagonist does not relate to the ‘sounds’ of the natural elements but to the ‘roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery’, ‘the noises from the tiers’ or ‘the sound of people eating’. Consequently, these sounds eventually lead the protagonist to identify himself as part of this human community of consumers, contributing to the ‘human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction’. Moreover, when Jack’s daughter Steffie ‘murmur[s]’ the brand of ‘Toyota Celica’ in her sleep, he explains that when he

³¹⁰ Karren Weekes, ‘Consuming and Dying: Meaning and the Marketplace in Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*’, *Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (November 2007), p. 287.

³¹¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 100.

‘realized this was the name of an automobile’, ‘the truth only amazed [him] more’ and describes the ‘utterance’ as ‘beautiful and mysterious’, the product of a ‘child’s brain noise’ that ‘struck [him] with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence’.³¹² While the transcendentalists could experience a state of oneness in sublime nature, Jack’s ‘moment of splendid transcendence’ occurs in a context where manufactured products are constantly bought and consumed, worshipped as divine and eventually become part of the consumer’s self. Therefore, the postmodern idea of the sublime does not include the natural world since the self is realised within a ‘community’ of consumers in an artificial postmodern landscape where economic transaction and consumption are possible.

However, considering the fact that the self is realised through the act of consumption of manufactured products that are being sold, self-realisation is therefore dependent on economic and not spiritual wealth, which exclude a significant part of the population from the landscape. Indeed, as Laura Barrett mentions, in this particular novel, ‘DeLillo has taken the nexus of economics and spiritual salvation to form an elect in which quasi-spiritual fulfilment is irrevocably linked to wealth’.³¹³ As opposed to the transcendentalists’ idea that spiritual self-improvement is accessible through a state of unity with sublime nature, the novel displays that the accumulation of wealth is the only way to achieve ‘spiritual salvation’. For instance, the narrator describes ‘parents’ who are ‘stand[ing] sun-dazed near their automobiles’ and ‘feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition’, which leads him to conclude that ‘this assembly of station wagons, as much as anything they might do in the course of the year, more than formal liturgies or laws, tells the parents they are a collection of the like-minded, and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation’.³¹⁴ Jack’s last words are significant since they refer to the community of ‘parents’ who own an ‘automobile’ or ‘station wagon’ as representing the spiritually self-realised American ‘people’ or ‘nation’. As a result, Emerson’s concept of the universal American man as obsolete in the postmodern society since one is accepted in the community only if he has sufficient money, if he is able to satisfy secondary needs such as owning a beautiful car. However, if the postmodern process of self-realisation is achievable through ‘consumer capitalism’, it therefore also implies the consideration of people’s waste.

In another passage, Cynthia Deitering notices that the protagonist relates his relatives’ identity to their waste:

³¹² DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 180-181.

³¹³ Laura Barrett, “‘How the dead speak to the living’”: Intertextuality and the Postmodern Sublime in *White Noise*, *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2001), p. 99.

³¹⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 4.

But why did I feel like a household spy? Is garbage so private? Does it glow at the core with a personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearning, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioral ruts? [...] I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness?³¹⁵

Jack describes the garbage as 'private' since they possess an intrinsic value that is his relatives' 'deepest nature', their selves. Indeed, Deitering claims that the protagonist, after examining his family's 'trash', characterises his relatives' 'true selves as idiosyncratic producers of waste' so that 'the familiar notion of finding one's identity in commodity products is transformed into the notion of finding one's identity not in the commodities themselves but in their configuration as waste products'.³¹⁶ Consequently, while the transcendentalists advocated a state of unity, of oneness, with the 'Whole' of nature in order to achieve self-reliance or self-accomplishment, postmodern society compels people to consume and to ultimately waste their selves. DeLillo's novel can thus be understood as conveying a literary form of postmodern or, rather, consumerist transcendentalism since the characters experience a state of union with the manufactured or material objects that they buy, consume and waste, which allows them to realise their selves in the postmodern sublime landscape.

Furthermore, the postmodern landscape is unnatural, man-made, since it mainly includes places to which French anthropologist Marc Augé would refer as 'non-places' such as, for instance, the mall or supermarkets which 'cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity' and in which people transit, buy and leave and thus where social interactions are 'temporary' or 'ephemeral'.³¹⁷ Considering that these 'non-places' are not 'defined as relational' or 'historical', not 'concerned with identity', postmodern self-realisation is also an illusion, a simulation itself in the postmodern sublime since consumption is a means of replacing the absence of identity. In other words, in the postmodern or postnatural world, the self merges with the artificial landscape and becomes itself artificial, devoid of individual perception and of identity. For instance, this is illustrated in the last chapter, in which the narrator portrays a scene in the supermarket where humans 'walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go' as 'clusters of well-dressed figures frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the pattern' but 'in the end, it does[] [not] matter what they see or think they see' since '[t]he terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary

³¹⁵ DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 297-98.

³¹⁶ Cynthia Deitering, 'The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s', Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 198.

³¹⁷ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 77-78.

secret of every item, infallibly'.³¹⁸ As this passage suggests, contemplation and perception have been forsaken since what the customers see and the environment through which they pass are insignificant. In other words, human perception, which was valued by the transcendentalists and by Leopold, have been replaced by technology, by the 'holographic scanners' that 'decode the binary secret of every item' and allow man to achieve knowledge and to conclude his process of self-realisation through a final economic transaction. Moreover, as Jameson stresses in his essay, 'the alienation of the [postmodern] subject is displaced by [his] fragmentation', which suggests that what Thoreau criticised, the alienation of the subject from 'truth', finally caused his fragmentation or disintegration.³¹⁹ Indeed, what Jack describes as a 'fragmented trance' which refers to the 'fragmentation' of the subject as if it was nothing but a means of concluding an economic transaction, a 'frozen figure' waiting on being wasted. Consequently, the 'happy transaction' that seemed to bind individuals together in postmodern society may also be perceived as a misconception, an illusion, that would only reassure the characters of their actual existence. In fact, the 'relational' that characterises social communities and usually relates people together is replaced by a feeling of anxiety, of fear, which is linked to environmental pollution and changes.

Considering Deitering's idea of a 'toxic consciousness' that led the American people in the 1980s or, more specifically, 'during the Bush-Reagan decade', to consider themselves in a relationship with 'pollution and waste', toxicity somehow connects the individual to the community. Indeed, the omnipresent toxicity causes an anxiety that is shared among human beings since everyone may express fear for his own health or safety. As Buell suggests, Rachel Carson contributed to this 'toxic consciousness' as she, with *Silent Spring*, 'awakened [human] perception', which compelled people to view themselves as being in constant 'contact with dangerous chemicals', a form of anxiety that the critic refers to as 'toxic anxiety'.³²⁰ In *White Noise*, this anxiety is represented through the characters' fear of death, which was awakened by the 'Airborne Toxic Event'. For example, in a conversation with his wife Babette, Jack mentions that these kinds of dangerous and tragic events only 'happen to poor people who live in exposed areas' because '[s]ociety is set up in such a way that it [is] the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters'.³²¹ What should be understood in Jack's acknowledgement is that it is not the direct threat of toxicity that only affect 'the poor and the uneducated' because everybody is subject

³¹⁸ DeLillo, *White Noise*, pp. 374-375.

³¹⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 13.

³²⁰ Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, pp. 35, 51.

³²¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 133.

to death, but it is the fear of dying that only concerns them since they may not distract their attention from toxic anxiety. In other words, being a university professor, Jack, but also other members of the community of consumers, manage to forget their vulnerability, their mortality, through the accumulation of wealth and then through economic transactions and consumption. Consequently, the absence of death is another simulation created by postmodern society, which Barrett summarises as ‘our illusion that we can control everything, including death’, while, in reality, even the rich cannot control death.³²²

In conclusion, the postmodern sublime and self as represented in DeLillo’s novel confirm McKibben’s idea of a postnatural world in which everything is artificial. In *White Noise*, Postmodernism is a form of consumerist transcendentalism since the self is connected with the postmodern landscape through consumer capitalism. In this postmodern form of the American philosophy, the concepts of individuality, individual perception or self-reliance have disappeared since everything in postmodern society is perceived as an illusion or a simulation. Indeed, as Barrett writes, ‘*White Noise* presents a world in which individuality is replaced by media role models and God is replaced by an ATM’.³²³ The transcendentalists’ idea of an individual relationship with the divine through the contemplation of sublime nature is displaced to a postmodern society in which money and possessions offer the possibility of a ‘fake’ self-realisation. If not yet exactly destroyed as Carson predicted, the American self is wasted in the consumption of man-made products and detached from the actual but also ideological natural landscape, which is viewed as either artificial or as the product of a cultural simulation. Consequently, people lost their connection with nature and with their selves to such an extent that they became only concerned by the potential dangers environmental changes may represent to their health but not by the environment itself. Therefore, in the 1990s, individual cases like Christopher McCandless had troubles coping with this type of society and decided to reconnect with the original transcendental method of experiencing nature in order to find the meaning of their selves.

³²² Barrett, “How the dead speak to the living”, p. 112.

³²³ *ibid.*, p. 101.

6. THE REVIVAL OF NATURE FOR SELF-(RE)DISCOVERY OR SELF-RECOVERY

6.1. THE NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL TRADITIONS AND RENAISSANCE

Before examining the case of Christopher McCandless, I would like to consider the Native American view of nature as depicted in oral traditions and in literary works from what Kenneth Lincoln has called the 'Native American Renaissance', a term that encompasses 'the poetry and fiction written in English by (North) American Indian authors' that began to be abundant in the 1960s and that 'dr[e]w upon tribal traditions to express personal continuity with an Indian past'.³²⁴ Considering that these texts were aimed at rediscovering the Indians' past traditions, they display the original indigenous view of the natural world that was already expressed in pre-colonisation Native American oral literature.

Indeed, if Lincoln speaks of a 'Renaissance', it is precisely because new texts dealing with Native American traditions were published but these traditions existed, of course, long before the 1960s. As Richard Gray stresses, there are some recurrent topics in Native American translated texts from the pre-colonisation and early colonial periods such as, for example, the 'world creation', 'human and cultural emergence' or the adventures of 'culture heroes' or 'tricksters'.³²⁵³²⁶ Gray also mentions the importance of the 'myths of origin', which tell the story of 'the evolution of the world out of water and primal mud' but also of the 'myths of ending', which most frequently coincide with the arrival of the white settlers. As a matter of fact, many stories of 'beginnings and endings' illustrate the world as a place where human beings and animals live in harmony and understand each other, they praise the 'vitality and unity of creation' that prevailed prior to Columbus's coming to the continent.

Besides these oral stories that already depicted a harmonious view of the natural world, the Native Americans' relationship with nature consists generally in 'respect[ing] and rever[ing] the land, the environment, and the human interrelatedness to that environment' as a

³²⁴ Victor Golla, 'Linguistics: *Native American Renaissance*. Kenneth Lincoln', *American Anthropologist (New Series)*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (September 1984), p. 754.

³²⁵ Gray, *A History of American Literature*, p. 4.

³²⁶ Joni Adamson, *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2001), p. 120. Adamson also mentions that 'American Indian oral traditions do include ancient creation and emergence stories, stories of trickster's outrageous behavior, tales of the interactions between gods and humans, ceremonies, songs, and legends' but, above all, stresses that 'the oral tradition is a continuously growing body of stories that also speak crucially about the last five hundred years in the Americas, stories about social protocol, jokes, and even everyday stories about events that occur in the community'.

‘reciprocal appropriation’ because Native Americans do not only ‘invest themselves in the landscapes’ but also ‘incorporate [it] into [their] own most fundamental experience’.³²⁷ Moreover, since they consider mankind as part of and not separate from the natural world, they also reject the Western understanding of the term ‘wilderness’ as a space existing in contrast with civilisation. For instance, twentieth-century Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko (1948 -) exemplified this harmonious relationship with nature or what Native Americans most commonly refer to as ‘the land’ by discussing her people’s ancestral spirituality and traditions in an essay entitled ‘Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination’. Silko explains that the Laguna Pueblo’s spirituality involves ‘interrelationships’ between mankind and the ‘landscape’, which suggests that every man needs to live in harmony with the landscape and that his process of self-realisation is also closely related to it.³²⁸ In addition, if harmony is significant, the sense of community is also primordial for the Laguna Pueblo since they value ‘communal storytelling’ as a way of preserving the Pueblo’s ‘knowledge and belief’ and of sharing a ‘communal truth’.³²⁹ In brief, the Laguna Pueblo view life as a ‘journey’ during which the individual becomes aware that, though she may be ‘somehow different’ from the ‘other’ or the natural elements, she emerged from the same place, which is ‘the Mother Creator’, their denomination for ‘the earth’, and can survive because she lives in a state of ‘interdependence’ and perfect harmony with them.

As another example representative of Laguna Pueblo traditions and view of nature, Silko published in 1977 her most famous novel entitled *Ceremony*, which portrays the self-recovery of the Native American protagonist, Tayo, who suffers from psychological damages as he fought in the Second World War. In this novel, Tayo occupies a complicated position between Native and white cultures since he fought the war in order to somehow fit in the ‘white society’ as well as in his own family, which eventually led him to alienate his self from his Native traditions and endanger his mental health.³³⁰ Silko describes this harmful attitude that seeks ‘white’ or ‘Euro-American model’ as the ‘lie’, which is shown by the following passage: ‘The lie. [...] The liars had fooled everyone, white people and Indians alike; as long as people believed the lies, they would never be able to see what had been done to them or

³²⁷ Lee Schwenger, ‘Writing Nature: Silko and Native Americans as Nature Writers’, *MELUS*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 1993), p. 47-8.

³²⁸ Leslie Marmon Silko, ‘Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination’, Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 267.

³²⁹ Silko, ‘Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination’, p. 269.

³³⁰ Murielle Cayouette, ‘MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS FOR A HOME: A Study of the Cultural and Social Repercussions of the Return to Nature in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*, (Université Laval, 2013), p. 74.

what they were doing to each other'.³³¹ Since the 'lie' prevents Tayo from comprehending his own culture, from finding the meaning of his 'self', and thus from healing, he needs to trade his 'personal past for a communal, shared experience of remembering' or for a 'communal truth', to use Silko's words.

Consequently, the medicine of 'Ku'oosh' being unsatisfactory, Tayo has to endure a 'complex ceremony' in which he will be 'in direct contact with nature and with himself' to reconnect with his Native past.³³² During this spiritual experience, the author uses many natural images and a specific aesthetics of landscape principally characterised by the protagonists' smelling and hearing of natural elements, which is comparable to Thoreau's multi-sensorial approach to nature. For example, Tayo often pays attention to the sound of the wind or the rain as the narrator tells, for instance, that 'he could hear the rain rattling the roof and the sound of the old cottonwood tree straining in the wind'.³³³ Later, he even begins to feel 'alive' just by breathing different smells of 'snow', 'ponderosa pine' or 'horses', his senses therefore being closely linked to his healing process.³³⁴ Among the natural images, Silko relates the 'sun' or the 'sunlight', as Murielle Cayouette notices, to the protagonist's 'experience as a war prisoner' and to his 'feeling of guilt about the death of his cousin Rocky' or, to sum up, to his 'haunting' past.³³⁵ However, this particular imagery depicts the progress of his self-recovery, of the 'ceremony', since the sunlight starts to symbolise more positive sensations such as 'warmth', 'happiness' or comfort as Tayo is feeling better.³³⁶ In addition, this latter word, 'comfort', is significant in the novel since it has a particular Native American interpretation that is revealed at some point when, for example, the old medicine man Betonie describes where his people have lived and says that '[he and his people] know these hills and [they] are comfortable here'.³³⁷ Then, the narrator explains in details the Native idea of comfort, which is defined by the self's relationship with the land:

There was something about the way the old man said the word "comfortable". It has a different meaning—not the comfort of big houses or rich food or even clean streets, but the comfort of belonging with the land, and the peace of being with these hills. But the special meaning the old man had given to the English word was burned away by the glare of the mirrors and chrome of the wrecked cars in the dump below.

³³¹ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006), p. 177.

³³² Cayouette, 'MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS', p. 46.

³³³ Silko, *Ceremony*, p. 91.

³³⁴ *ibid.*, 168.

³³⁵ Cayouette, 'MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS', p. 45.

³³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 47.

³³⁷ Silko, *Ceremony*, p. 108.

As opposed to the Western or maybe any capitalistic or postmodern understanding of 'comfort' symbolised by the accumulation of meaningless luxuries, the possession of 'big houses' and the consumption of 'rich food', Native people have a radically different approach to the concept. Indeed, while Western civilisation tends to separate mankind from the land, which is frequently viewed as unworthy of man's love and respect and just likely to be transformed into a 'dump', Native Americans value simplicity and may feel 'at home' in nature since it possesses everything they need. In other words, while indigenous people find 'comfort' or 'peace' in belonging to nature, many Euro-Americans would try to define their 'comfort', and their selves as previously shown in DeLillo's novel, with their expensive belongings.

Finally, through a ceremony guided by natural elements, Tayo acknowledges the interconnection between himself, all natural and living things, and his Native past, which is shown by the following passage: 'He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time'.³³⁸ In addition, since there are 'no boundaries' but 'transitions through all distances', the protagonist also recognises death as part of life, not to be obsessively feared like DeLillo's characters suggest, which is clearer when the narrator tells that: 'Josiah was driving the wagon, old Grandma was holding him, and Rocky whispered "my brother." They were taking him home. [...] They had always been loved. He thought of her then; she had always loved him, she had never left him; she had always been there. He crossed the river at sunrise.'³³⁹ The 'sunrise' ultimately symbolises here the comforting feeling that his departed relatives have not left the earth, they have 'always been there' with him and are now 'taking him home', to nature, where he can be free of the guilt of their deaths. Consequently, Silko's fictional characters assume a strong interconnection between all beings, living or dead, and all natural elements on earth and thus epitomise the Laguna Pueblo and, more largely, the Native American spirituality, which may be summarised with the following acknowledgment: 'we came out of this land and we are hers'.³⁴⁰ Indeed, they remind the reader that 'the earth was here first' and that, though it offered humans the natural world that they may rightfully consider as a 'home' and not as a 'dump', humans should always remember that they are first and foremost its guests.³⁴¹

A similar attitude aimed at revaluating the Native oral traditions and view of nature could also be found in Muscogee Creek author Joy Harjo's poetry. As Joni Adamson states,

³³⁸ Silko, *Ceremony*, p. 229.

³³⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 236-37.

³⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 236.

³⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. xxiii.

Joy Harjo (1951 -) devoted herself to write with a 'transformed' English language, impregnated of the 'moral force of tribal perspectives and traditions' originating from her 'Creek heritage' as a means of 'promot[ing] beneficial changes in the attitudes of individuals toward their responsibilities as members of larger human and ecological communities'.³⁴² In addition, she also rejects the Euro-American conception of the wilderness as 'something to be afraid of' or 'to be conquered because of fear', as it was illustrated in the Burkean Sublime, which was expressed in the English language and consequently deteriorated 'perceptions of human relation to the natural world' by altering the 'sense of a land' that was 'alive'.³⁴³

A notable example of Harjo's point of view on languages is her poem 'For Alva Benson, and For Those Who Have Learned to Speak' published in 1983 in her collection *She Had Some Horses*. In this poem, Navajo culture and language, symbolised by the 'speaking ground' are illustrated as powerful since 'the ground still spoke beneath [the] mortar and concrete' of the 'Indian Hospital in Gallup' where the Navajo child was born.³⁴⁴ The poem depicts the growing up of this same child, struggling between two cultures as she 'learned to speak both voices', 'grew up talking in Navajo, in English / [...] / with the people in the towns and in the cities'. Therefore, as Adamson emphasises, she has not forsaken her origins, her culture, since even though she has learned 'the mortar and concrete of an authorized Euro-American vision of history, science, and religion' she also remembers the 'voices of the earth' from the stories told by 'elders'.³⁴⁵ The ground that 'goes on talking' refers to the poet's idea of the Native 'pure, original language' that is inseparable from the 'authentic culture or myth', it symbolises the child's attachment to a culture and spirituality respectful of the earth. In Thoreau's words, this child remembers that 'the wind that blows / Is all that any body knows' since learning about Euro-American science or history did not prevent her from perceiving 'the sound she had always heard, / a voice like water, like the gods weaving / against sundown in a scarlet light', in other words, she did not forget the essential idea of the interconnection of life and nature on earth.³⁴⁶

In the same vein of this latter poem, 'Remember' also conveys this invitation not to abandon the traditional American Indian view of nature. Indeed, the speaker subsequently invites the reader to '[r]emember the sky [she] were born under' or 'the moon' and to 'know

³⁴² Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, pp. 117-119.

³⁴³ Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, p. 121.

³⁴⁴ Joy Harjo, *How We Became Human - New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), p. 33.

³⁴⁵ Adamson, *American Indian Literature*, pp. 123.

³⁴⁶ Harjo, *How We Became Human*, p. 34.

who she is'.³⁴⁷ As Emanuela Jossa stresses, some 'elements of nature[–or, more largely, of the universe–]acquire anthropomorphic forms' in this poem like, for example, the 'moon' that is referred to in the previous line not as 'it' but as 'she' or the 'wind', whose 'voice [...] knows the origin of this universe', which is reminiscent of Thoreau's lines that were mentioned in the previous paragraph.³⁴⁸ This attempt of anthropomorphisation of nature is reminiscent of Dickinson's speaker's description of the bird in 'A Bird, came down the Walk -' but Harjo's speaker's purpose is significantly different since she does not try to appropriate nature to grasp its strangeness, which would refer to the Euro-American definition of the wilderness as separate from humanity, but rather displays the same idea as Silko's narrator in *Ceremony*, which is that we have originated from this land, from earth, and 'we are hers'. This process of 'identification with the earth' is clearer later in the poem when the speaker uses the denomination 'earth' to refer to the human skin or, perhaps more generally, to the human race:

Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their
tribes, their families, their histories, too. [...].³⁴⁹

Through the representation of the self as being 'earth', the poet illustrates a world where all human lives but also natural elements have equal importance as they 'all have their tribes, their families, their histories' that are connected to the earth. In fact, she rejects the dichotomy between human and non-human as well as the race distinctions to advocate a self that is exclusively defined by its relationship to the earth, just like everything is.

In conclusion, though J. Scott Bryson correctly attributes the title of a 'representative example of an ecological poet' to Joy Harjo, the Native American traditions and spirituality are, in a wider sense, ecological.³⁵⁰ Indeed, in the earliest texts as well as in the literature from the Native American Renaissance, the fundamental law of ecology, 'everything is connected to everything else', is embraced as the law regulating the balance of life on earth. This could be summarised by Harjo's poem 'Anything That Matters' in which the speaker claims that '[a]nything that matters is here' and '[a]nything that will continue to matter in the next several

³⁴⁷ Harjo, *How We Became Human*, p. 42.

³⁴⁸ Emanuela Jossa, 'The Colors of the Earth: Nature and Landscape in the Poetry of Joy Harjo and Humberto Ak' Abal', *Journal of the Southwest*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (Winter 2007), p. 588.

³⁴⁹ Harjo, *How We Became Human*, p. 42.

³⁵⁰ J. Scott Bryson, 'Finding the Way Back: Place and Space in the Ecological Poetry of Joy Harjo', *Melus*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), p. 169.

thousand years will continue to be here', which suggests 'on earth'.³⁵¹ As a matter of fact, in the postmodern world where everything has become artificial and lost meaning, Native American writers remind us of a path, a perspective on the world that might have been worth considering instead of prejudicing or rejecting. But in the postmodern world where this idea of a close relationship with nature has become an illusion or is just out of interest for certain people, only some last idealists like Christopher McCandless may still try to rediscover their selves in the remote US wilderness.

6.2. REDISCOVERING AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM: THE CASE OF CHRISTOPHER JOHNSON McCANDLESS (1968-1992)

In 1992, a young American man from a wealthy family named Christopher McCandless decided to abandon his lifestyle and to venture into the remaining wilderness of Alaska. Besides the criticism that has been made against him, some people have regarded his experience as courageous, romantic and influenced by the transcendentalists' writings and especially by Thoreau's. Jon Krakauer (1954 -) tried to reconstruct McCandless's journey in his non-fiction book *Into the Wild* (1996) and included many explicit quotations from and comparisons with Thoreau but also with Muir. Indeed, McCandless knew the American transcendentalist movement and desired to live according to its ideals of simplicity, freedom and unity with nature. In order to demonstrate that McCandless was influenced by the transcendentalists' philosophy as a means of self-(re)discovery, I will now analyse his affinities and divergences with the movement and its representatives' writings.

First of all, the reader is informed in *Into the Wild* that McCandless abandoned his car before starting his expedition, but he left it 'unregistered and uninsured', as José Joaquín Sánchez Vera points out, 'with an expired driving license, and in a place where it was strictly forbidden', which suggests his unconformity and disrespect for society's rules.³⁵² Then, Krakauer writes that McCandless was 'a latter-day adherent of Henry David Thoreau' and that 'he took as gospel the essay of "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience"', which only confirms his devotion to the transcendentalist author and his advocacy for individual freedom.³⁵³ Moreover, McCandless burnt the money he was still carrying, as he had already

³⁵¹ Harjo, *How We Became Human*, p. 59.

³⁵² José Joaquín Sánchez Vera, 'Thoreau as a Mirror for Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*', (Karlstads Universitet, 2013), p. 1.

³⁵³ Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1997), p. 28.

donated 'all the money in his college fund to OXFAM America, a charity dedicated to fighting hunger'.³⁵⁴ This symbolic gesture is reminiscent of Thoreau's view of 'unnecessary' wealth that only urges man to buy 'superfluities' and thus preventing him from enjoying the 'basic necessities' of life.³⁵⁵ However, it is worth stressing that Thoreau's spirituality did not categorically reject money but rather encouraged the use of the 'advantages of market economy' to pursue 'higher goal of freedom and internal growth'.³⁵⁶ For instance, he wrote that his 'purpose in going to Walden Ponds' was 'to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles' and he also bought materials to build his cabin in the woods, claiming that he could use these materials wisely and 'become richer than the richest now are, and make our civilization a blessing'.³⁵⁷ Thoreau would perhaps not have approved of the burning of dollar bills as he only promoted a different use of one's money, not as a means of accumulating 'superfluities' but of embracing a simple and meaningful lifestyle.

Consequently, McCandless's act is more representative of his choice to reject the postmodern process of self-realisation that is based on the accumulation of wealth and luxuries, on consumer capitalism, since he decides to rely on himself to find either food or a job to earn sufficient money to survive before rediscovering the meaning of his self in the wilderness. For example, when McCandless worked for a man called Westerberg that he met during his journey, he told him after being paid that 'tramping is too easy with all this money' and that '[his] days were more exciting when [he] was penniless and had to forage around for [his] next meal'.³⁵⁸ As a result, we may think that McCandless became aware after working for Westerberg that obtaining his food by himself is more 'exciting' and perhaps more rewarding than buying it, which emphasises his value of self-reliance and self-accomplishment as he wants to be able to find everything he needs by himself. Nevertheless, he also found a job at 'McDonald's', leading a 'conventional existence' in 'Bullhead City', a town that Krakauer defines as not exactly 'the kind of place that would appeal to an adherent of Thoreau and Tolstoy, an ideologue who expressed nothing but contempt for the bourgeois trappings of mainstream America'.³⁵⁹ As previously explained, Thoreau did not exactly reject money but rather the people who misused it, which leads us to view Krakauer's reference to Thoreau as inappropriate in that case. In addition, McCandless's experience of this 'conventional existence' did not last long and he has not been corrupted by consumer

³⁵⁴ Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, p. 20.

³⁵⁵ Sánchez Vera, 'Thoreau as a Mirror', p. 6.

³⁵⁶ Sánchez Vera, 'Thoreau as a Mirror', pp. 6-7.

³⁵⁷ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 16.

³⁵⁸ Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, p. 33.

³⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 49.

capitalism and has not embraced a 'bourgeois' lifestyle since he eventually left modern society to live in the wilderness of Alaska. On the contrary, he began to value money for a particular purpose, which is to secure sufficient food to survive. Parenthetically, Muir also spent seven years of his life to 'the primary aim of making money' since, as Edward Hoagland states, he 'valued money and respectability' though he remained, like McCandless, far from becoming a 'tycoon' obsessed by the accumulation of superfluities.³⁶⁰

Furthermore, one of the main reasons of McCandless's departure was to escape his personal 'problems' and the 'expectations of [his] parents or society'.³⁶¹ Therefore, the young man regarded the wilderness of Alaska as the most suitable place for a pure and 'transcendent experience', which would be in analogy with what Thoreau, for instance, experienced in Walden Pond.³⁶² Among the passages from Thoreau's writings included in Krakauer's work, one in particular suggests that he shared the transcendentalist's conception of nature as a daily 'congratulation' to be fully appreciated.³⁶³ As opposed to other quotations that were perhaps added to the book by Krakauer to 'romanticise' McCandless's story, as Sánchez Vera suggests, this specific extract is more open to interpretation since it was discovered underlined in McCandless's copy of *Walden*. In addition, McCandless's sister also stresses his respectful view of natural elements as she claims that he 'would never, ever, [have] intentionally burn[t] down a forest, not even to save his life'.³⁶⁴ Nonetheless, what the young man seems to, like Thoreau, chiefly cherish, is the alienation from modern civilisation that the wilderness offers to the adventurer as he wrote:

Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes, ultimate freedom. An extremist. An aesthetic voyager whose home is the road. [...] And now after two rambling years comes the final and greatest adventure. The climactic battle to kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual revolution. Ten days and nights of freight trains and hitchhiking bring him to the great white north. No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild.³⁶⁵

First, this 'declaration of independence', as Krakauer calls it, illustrates McCandless's hostility towards modern society since he associates his 'freedom' with the absence of 'phone', 'pool', 'pets' and 'cigarettes', which are artificial objects or tamed animals that do not possess the characteristic of 'wildness' he values so much. Then, he refers to himself as 'an aesthetic voyager whose home is the road', the term 'aesthetics' meaning the perception

³⁶⁰ Muir, *The Mountains of California*, p. xi.

³⁶¹ Sánchez Vera, 'Thoreau as a Mirror', p. 10.

³⁶² Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, p. 1.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁶⁴ Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, p. 198.

³⁶⁵ *ibid.*, p. 163.

of beauty, this suggests that his primary goal was to contemplate the beauty of 'the road' that he considers as his 'home', which symbolises a distinct path or way of life that would estrange him from his 'real' home or family house and from the modern lifestyle he despises. His will to change is perhaps best expressed in his intentions to 'kill the false being', which reminds us of the postmodern idea of selfhood as defined by artificiality and simulation, and to complete his 'spiritual revolution', which is reminiscent of what Emerson wrote in his essay 'Nature' conveying that a 'revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit'.³⁶⁶ McCandless was undoubtedly searching for the meaning of his self, he wanted to improve spiritually and even perhaps, 'unlike Muir and Thoreau' as Krakauer stresses, 'went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul'.³⁶⁷ On the other hand, McCandless learnt what 'Muir and Thoreau already knew', which is that 'an extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one's attention outward as much as inward, and it is impossible to leave off the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with that land and all it holds'. Indeed, McCandless certainly experienced a close relationship with nature and grasped its essential meaning but he also ended up meditating on the necessity of human social interactions as he was approaching death.

Like Thoreau or Muir, McCandless did not despise people but did not want them to interfere with the realisation of his objectives as, for example, one of his friends claimed: 'Said [McCandless] [did not] want to see a single person, no airplanes, no sign of civilization. He wanted to prove to himself that he could make it on his own, without anybody's help'.³⁶⁸ Though an advocate of self-reliance, McCandless could enjoy some ephemeral company but he nevertheless had an 'ambivalence toward sex [that] echoes that of celebrated others who embraced wilderness with single-minded passion' like Thoreau and Muir.³⁶⁹ In other words, his 'yearning' for a 'rough congress with nature' was 'too powerful to be quenched by human contact' to such an extent that he renounced the prospect of any long-term human relationship. McCandless's idea of solitude is also close to Thoreau's since it is not defined by the separation of the individual from society but rather by his ability to deal with his thoughts and to make his own choices, which makes it the most 'companionable' of the companions.³⁷⁰ With respect to McCandless's idea of self-reliance or his eventual adherence to

³⁶⁶ Emerson, *Nature*, p. 33.

³⁶⁷ Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, p. 183.

³⁶⁸ *ibid.*, p. 159.

³⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 66.

³⁷⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 111.

Thoreauvian individualism, there are a few clues he wrote in the margin of his copy of *Walden* such as the words ‘absolute truth and honesty’, ‘reality’, ‘independence’ or his commentary indicating that ‘true meaning resides in the personal relationship to a phenomenon, what it means to you’.³⁷¹ The young man was indeed convinced like Thoreau that only an honest, personal and independent experience of natural facts allow us to achieve ‘truth’, ‘true meaning’. However, though McCandless is self-reliant and prefers solitude and independence to civilisation and community, his last moments of reflexions led him to an acknowledgement emphasising the importance of human relationship to one’s achievement of happiness.

As a matter of fact, one of the last notes McCandless wrote in his journal before dying was: ‘Happiness only real when shared’.³⁷² Consequently, this acknowledgment is confusing and contradictory with regard to his conception of individualism. Perhaps he could no longer endure solitude and was prepared to come back to live in society, having probably discovered the ‘truth’ he was seeking in the wilderness. Unfortunately, the young man perished starving and poisoned by the ‘roots of wild potato’ he ate, which happened to contain a toxin called ‘swainsonine’, before returning to civilisation.³⁷³ In addition, he was aware that his death was imminent since he addressed a farewell message in his journal: ‘I have had a happy life and thank the Lord. Goodbye and may God bless all’.³⁷⁴ But most interestingly, McCandless photographed himself before dying and Krakauer notices that ‘[h]e is smiling in the picture, and there is no mistaking the look in his eyes: Chris McCandless was at peace, serene as a monk gone to God’, which stresses the mysterious or mystical character of his disappearance. In fact, McCandless’s spiritual connection with the divine is suggested in the adventurer’s last words who ‘thank the Lord’ but also understood as such by Krakauer who claims he was ‘serene as a monk gone to God’ on the picture. His attitude towards death is, indeed, unexpected to the reader to such an extent that it could be seen as a form of transcendental epiphany, which would confirm McCandless’s affinities with American Transcendentalism.

³⁷¹ Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, p. 159.

³⁷² *ibid.*, p. 189.

³⁷³ *ibid.*, pp. 194-5.

³⁷⁴ *ibid.*, p. 199.

6.3. SEARCHING FOR ‘TRUTH’: THE MYTH OF CHRISTOPHER McCANDLESS’S DEATH

In an article published in 2013 entitled ‘Call of the Wild: The Negative Tendency in Nature Religions of American Youth’, Joseph M. Kramp analyses the reasons that might have pushed Christopher McCandless to alienate himself from civilisation and tries to apprehend the eventual symbolic meaning of his death.

First of all, Kramp’s main argument is based on the fact that there is a frequent ‘negative tendency’ among young people like McCandless, to pursue an ‘experience of community and intimacy with the natural world, unobstructed with the wilderness’ primarily because they are influenced by ‘nature religions’, a phrase he uses to refer to philosophies like American Transcendentalism, which offer the possibility of ‘universal salvation’ through such an experience in the wilderness.³⁷⁵ Then, Kramp examines the causes of McCandless’s departure and identifies ‘challenging family circumstances’ as a source of motivation but most importantly stresses that it is US postmodern society that pushed him to leave civilisation. Indeed, it is McCandless’s ‘aversion to poverty, hunger, and class conflict’, the problems and inequalities that prevail in our contemporary society, which troubled the young man and led him to question the meaning of his self and his place in this world.³⁷⁶ On the other hand, postmodern society also imposes norms and rules that every individual has to respect in order to ‘fit in’. Perhaps like Thoreau who disobeyed the laws of his government because it supported slavery, a system that was a clear violation of man’s freedom, McCandless protested against his society by abandoning it, burning money and embracing a different lifestyle, because it establishes norms such as ‘having a family’ or ‘possessing a mobile phone’ that he would have had to fit if he wanted to be regarded as a ‘normal’ member of any social community. Besides the characteristics of postmodern society that were already discussed in the previous chapter, McCandless’s story illustrates a repressive idiosyncrasy of our society that tends to dictate how a ‘normal’ human being should look, behave and evolve and thus to obstruct his individual process of self-realisation, which could be defined, to some extent, as an abstract and modern form of slavery. As a result, McCandless resisted this ‘modern slavery’ by avoiding corrupted human relationships and by deciding to realise differently his own self, a self that would transcend the cultural parameters of US postmodern

³⁷⁵ Joseph M. Kramp, ‘Call of the Wild: The Negative Tendency in Nature Religions of American Youth’, *Journal of Religion and Health*, (2013), p. 2.

³⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 6.

society and would be more in tune with Thoreau's philosophy and notions of 'truth' or 'authenticity' as described in *Walden*.

However, his comment claiming that 'happiness [is] only real when [it is] shared' suggests that his happiness may be achieved or his self fully realised in a certain social context including other human beings. On the other hand, it also exemplifies, as Kramp writes, 'how our society has [failed] and is failing our youth today' because young people feel the need to 'be part of communities' and 'become accountable to each other's needs without developing any kind of punitive conscience or need to entirely exit society by venturing into the wilderness'.³⁷⁷ Indeed, the critic argues that McCandless was already 'psychospiritually' dead because of a 'culture of collective impotence in America', which unconsciously made him determined to lead a different existence and to risk his life.³⁷⁸ McCandless despised this American 'collective impotence', this absence of personality, selfhood or Thoreauvian 'truth', he did not agree to have his self defined by the norms of postmodern society or by consumer capitalism and so decided to revive spiritually, if we follow Kramp's argument of his 'psychospiritual' death, in the wilderness. Finally, his acceptance of his imminent death is related to the idea that death is an admitted 'part of life' in nature, while it is feared and helplessly rejected in postmodern society, as it is represented in DeLillo's novel. Unwilling to cope with the norms and habits of this postmodern society, contrary to DeLillo's characters that uncomplainingly embrace them, McCandless was therefore more inclined to die in the wilderness, in which he could perhaps achieve his quest for 'truth' and show that the Thoreauvian concept of a 'higher truth' could be accessible through the individual's death in, and perhaps eternal connection to, nature.

As a consequence of the controversy and misinterpretations of McCandless's story, his sister, Carine McCandless (1971 -), published in 2014 her memoir entitled *The Wild Truth*, which presented evidence of her brother's interest in the American transcendentalist movement and information permitting to better understand the mystery surrounding the last moments preceding his death. In her book, Carine McCandless reveals the truth concerning her unstable family situation: son of a remarried father who occasionally beat him, with a mother blaming him for being born, Christopher viewed his parents as a 'disease which can be caught' because 'if one is exposed to [them] too long then one will begin to feel [their] detrimental effects upon one's own soul', which left him his emancipation as the only choice

³⁷⁷ Kramp, 'Call of the Wild', p. 5.

³⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 8.

for salvation.³⁷⁹ Furthermore, the author also frequently demonstrates McCandless's attraction for the natural world and how he uses it as a form of pastoral escape from the oppression caused by his parents. Indeed, she claims that 'nature was always his first choice of backdrop' as a child and that he seemed 'comfortable in the outdoors' and was fascinated by nature and its purity as he told her: 'See, Carine? That's the purity of nature, it may be harsh in its honesty, but it never lies to you'.³⁸⁰ The idealist somehow shares the Native idea of 'comfort', which is provided by time spent 'in the outdoors', by a close connection with the land and, in addition, he values the 'truth', 'purity' and 'honesty' of nature as advocated by Thoreau.

Nonetheless, there are other clues of Christopher McCandless's affinities with the transcendentalist author inasmuch as he also expressed Thoreauvian criticism towards conformity, superfluities and money. For example, McCandless, as his sister reports, described his parents as 'fake people' who 'brainwash themselves into this false sense of security and satisfaction by falling back on their treasured money and worthless luxury expenditures to shield themselves from reality'.³⁸¹ McCandless's remark is evidently reminiscent of DeLillo's characters that desperately try to forget their fear of death through economic transaction or consumption, which could be defined as a 'brainwashing' into an illusion of serenity or a 'false sense of security and satisfaction'. In fact, he refused to be 'conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism', which is supposed to give people 'peace of mind' but is just interfering with their 'adventurous spirit'.³⁸² As a result, McCandless despised the postmodern idea of self-realisation and responded to Thoreau's call for a 'simple way of living' in accordance with nature and more 'truthful' than his parents' illusion of 'reality'. In addition, the author also emphasises her brother's self-reliant and individualistic character since he was a 'solo act' that 'set high goals for himself and achieved them all without the pressure of knowing that others were depending on him', which is also reflected in Krakauer's account of his story.³⁸³ However, the author remains perplexed considering the ultimate moments of her brother's life since the last line he wrote in his journal, 'happiness only real when shared', does not correspond to his self-reliant and autonomous personality.

Indeed, she speculates that McCandless may have 'felt regret for leaving home the way he did' or missed, as Kramp also argued, 'the communal feel of the society he had

³⁷⁹ Carine McCandless, *The Wild Truth*, (New York: HarperOne, 2014), p. 96.

³⁸⁰ McCandless, *The Wild Truth*, p. 34.

³⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁸² *ibid.*, p. 209.

³⁸³ *ibid.*, p. 50.

shrugged aside for its conformity'.³⁸⁴ In addition, she mentions on the same page another piece of evidence, other words that were written in his journal as such:

RELATIONSHIPS: THOSE REAL / THOSE FALSE

This short phrase, almost in the form of an equation, suggests that truth was of capital importance to the young man, he simply could not endure a 'false' or unreal relationship with people, himself or with the world in general. His sister thinks that truth was even perhaps what he had in mind before dying as he 'died at peace, because the paths he had chosen throughout his life had kept him true to himself'.³⁸⁵ His 'final act of self-awareness' or 'his final act of truth' was to thank God for his happy life, as it is expressed in his farewell message, and to say goodbye to humanity. As previously stated, McCandless's death could be related, from a philosophical point of view, to Thoreau's reflexion on the existence of a 'higher truth' in the universe, which would only be accessible after the individual has led a life respectful of the 'truth' symbolised by nature. In other words, McCandless's Thoreauvian and transcendental experience conveys that 'truth' can be grasped in nature and more specifically after man's death in nature. If Joseph Conrad illustrated the concept of 'inner truth' through his protagonist Charles Marlow in his novella *Heart of Darkness* as something which is 'luckily hidden', perhaps because it is too horrible to bear, and that exerts a certain power in the world as one can feel 'its mysterious stillness watching [him]', McCandless portrays 'truth' as a reward achieved after man's individual experience and death in nature.³⁸⁶ As Kramp suggested, and unlike the postmodern mentality that DeLillo's characters epitomise, death is here perceived as a natural incident in the transcendental experience or, more largely, in life, not to be feared but perhaps understood as a means of reaching some 'universal truth'. In conclusion, McCandless's story displays the remaining wilderness, and the meaning of 'truth' that is related to it, not as hidden or dreadful, as Conrad or Burke would imagine, but as reachable, peaceful and comforting, perhaps as the only place for self-recovery and for salvation from our unpromising future in the postnatural world.

³⁸⁴ McCandless, *The Wild Truth*, p. 139.

³⁸⁵ *ibid.*, p. 261.

³⁸⁶ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. 42.

7. ECOCRITICAL CONCLUSIONS

7.1. FROM SELF-DISCOVERY TO SELF-DESTRUCTION

When the European settlers “discovered” the New World, they described it as ‘strange, a component of freshness and mysticism that constituted everything they were looking for to create a new life for themselves and become the “first American men”. Nevertheless, when they set foot in this “unknown wilderness” and attempted to build a relationship with it, they actually started it off on the wrong foot.

Indeed, in order to comprehend the ‘strange’ or ‘mystical’, humans need to appropriate, or to dominate. Bartram’s intentions to travel and examine US wilderness were not condemnable and the transcendentalists’ philosophy was aimed at improving mankind’s spiritual relationship with the natural world, but their approaches were misguided. If the ideal of freedom has been widely praised in America and frequently associated with the process of self-realisation, it does not apply to the natural world. In other words, man needs to be independent, to have free agency, and to feel invincible, capable of accomplishing all his goals. Emerson supported this idea with his ‘aggressive optimism’, but humans are also dependent on their environment and on its balance. The end of ‘nature’s independence’, as portrayed by McKibben, actually began when man used nature to satisfy his own purposes, a relationship thus not based on equality or harmony but on selfishness. Unlike Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’, Dickinson’s poems counter this attitude when they underline the contingency of the self, which adapts itself to the ‘strange’ and unpredictable environment.

Then, when man became aware of what he had destroyed for the sake of economic growth and progress, his efforts to improve the situation were confusing too. As Donald Worster explains, in ‘nostalgia’, we find ‘our only hope of salvation’, but the tendency to lament what was lost, as represented in the literature dealing with the pastoral ideal, is an obstacle to our possible attempt to preserve what we have left.³⁸⁷ For example, Wister’s ‘vanished world’ symbolises our impossibility to occupy limited space on earth as our civilisation had marked every inch of its surface, but not our incapability of protecting the environment. For instance, many scientists claim that ‘humans [] introduced on Earth a “new telluric force which in power and universality may be compared to the greater forces of the earth”’ and that we have entered what atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen defined as the

³⁸⁷ Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature*, p. 3.

‘Anthropocene’, but it does not mean they have yet exactly ‘ended’ the Earth, since, if they are indeed these ‘forces’, they should be able to protect nonhuman life.³⁸⁸ Nostalgia or regrets are powerless against the machine of man’s agency that is blindly defying the laws of nature, impregnating the environment of his latest artificiality that would improve his production and comfort. As Carson demonstrated through her representation of an intoxicated landscape, our tendency to appropriation is unalterable. Indeed, she raised national—or, rather, worldwide—consciousness of the existence of an ‘environmental crisis’ only because she proved that toxicity had a negative impact on human health and safety, but the ‘impact of the technology on the natural environment’, Worster stresses, ‘goes back much further than Rachel Carson’s target at chlorinated hydrocarbons and other pesticides’.³⁸⁹

Consequently, the damage was done, man’s process of self-discovery caused his self-destruction simply because he did not try to first understand his environment before appropriating it and relating it to his own self. The ‘lie’, as Silko calls it, may also refer to our inclination to follow the pre-conceived idea that life has to be a struggle, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s character Terry in her novel *Herland* convincingly claims, and that the world is to be conquered, made as his own image.³⁹⁰ Our failure in the conception of selfhood therefore began with our failure to apprehend the world, which we saw as too different to be comprehended and therefore avoided comprehending and respecting.

7.2. ‘THE WIND THAT BLOWS / IS ALL THAT ANY BODY KNOWS’: FROM SILENCED TO SENTENCED

As Christopher Manes explains, ‘[n]ature is silent in our culture (and in literate societies generally) in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative’.³⁹¹ I would argue that nature is not silent but silenced, the difference being that humans refuse to have a ‘real’, direct relationship with the natural world because of a lack of ‘human’ communication, because we think it has no voice, no language, while its language is simply different. For instance, Bartram thinks that reason overcomes instinct based on the Enlightenment ideas, which was another attempt to demonstrate man’s superiority to—and incomprehension of—nonhuman species. In other words, ideas such as

³⁸⁸ F. M. Gradstein, J. G. Ogg, Mark Schmitz, Gabi Ogg, *The Geologic Time Scale, 1st Edition* (Boston: Elsevier, 2012), p. 1033.

³⁸⁹ Donald Worster, *The Wealth of Nature*, p. 23.

³⁹⁰ Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Herland* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1998), p. 85. “‘Life is a struggle, has to be,’” he insisted. “‘If there is no struggle, there is no life—that [is] all.’”

³⁹¹ Christopher Manes, ‘Nature and Silence’, Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 15.

‘reason’ have shaped our discourse on nature to such an extent that we have believed that our language ‘ha[s] no analogues in the natural world’.

However, the multi-sensorial approach to nature as experienced by certain transcendentalists such as Thoreau or Muir, which was also illustrated in fiction works such as Stratton Porter’s and Wister’s novels, betrays an attempt to find a language that would relate humans to nonhuman elements. Though nature does not ‘speak’, humans were provided with their perception, their senses, to be able to understand and appreciate nature and, therefore, to develop a harmonious relationship with it. Indeed, they suggested that life and natural elements were connected in order to confront our misconceptions of the natural world as dreadful, as it was represented in the Burkean Sublime. In fact, Leopold’s idea of the ‘philosophical eye’ could be perceived as this ability to see but, most importantly, to accept the natural world as it truly is and not, as previously stated, as what humans can make it become. Consequently, what we should remember from Thoreau’s or Leopold’s writings is not the importance of the ‘primitiveness’ or ‘authenticity’ that the ‘wilderness’ symbolises but their construction of a sustainable relationship with the natural world or the nonhuman.

Manes mentions that ‘animistic cultures’—which refer to ‘those that see the natural world as inspirited’ and as ‘able to communicate and interact with humans for good or ill’—have a different approach since nature is regarded as ‘alive and articulate’. Native American traditions should be included in these cultures since, although they have been neglected, Native American spirituality may have had the ecological response to the problems faced by self-centred Euro-American societies. Indeed, while it took Thoreau a moment of solitude in Walden Pond, just as it took McCandless a lifetime pondering, to discover the ‘truth’, Native American people had perhaps always possessed the answer, which is that life on earth consists in only one harmonious community. In fact, Silko’s protagonist Tayo did not exactly reconnect with his ‘Native self’ since, in Native American traditions, there is no such thing as ‘selfhood’ but, rather, people known as ‘earth’, which Harjo’s poem ‘Remember’ illustrates. Their spirituality can be perceived as ecological since it advocates that everything is connected to everything else, but Western contemporary society cannot adopt this way of life. As Greg Garrard states, ‘[n]either contemporary Indians nor other Americans can readily understand th[e] world, let alone inhabit it, as much of the best Native writings affirms’ because the notion of ‘dwelling’ implies ‘various inflections’ that may be ‘political’ but also, I would especially add, economic and cultural. Indeed, the economic and cultural poles characterise our society and have influenced our perception. They have made us almost indifferent to our physical environment to such an extent that humans may have ‘sentenced’

the natural world—and ourselves—to destruction as we forgot the necessity of its preservation to our survival.

7.3. 'I WASTE, THEREFORE I AM': OUR CONSUMERIST ILLUSION OR 'FAKENESS'

As I am writing these lines, I could not help thinking of video games, social networks, and mobile applications such as *Instagram* or *Pokémon GO*. The latter application urges people to roam streets and 'natural' parks in search of unreal creatures to 'capture'. Therefore, people do not actually pay attention to their surrounding but rather to their mobile screen. This attitude of an 'apathetic' wanderer is reminiscent of the postmodern idea of self-realisation but, more interestingly, be related to this study in general.

As previously stated, the Thoreauvian ideas of 'truth' and 'authenticity', which the Western conception of the wilderness symbolises, enables those who have a 'philosophical eye' to develop a close relationship with the natural world but also to experience an aesthetic appreciation of its landscapes. In our postmodern society, if self-realisation led to self-fragmentation—and ultimately self-destruction—it is fundamentally because we lost contact with the beauty of things, with their meaning, and their actual relevance in our world.

Indeed, in Muir's time, when conservation became a major concern, the priority was to preserve the remaining wilderness and enclose it in national parks, which led to, as Alison Byerly suggests, the transformation of the 'sublime landscape into a series of picturesque scenes'.³⁹² This 'aestheticization of landscape', she says, 'permitt[ed] the viewer to define and control the scene' and therefore to consider it as an 'object of artistic consumption'. Consequently, nature was already viewed as a mere commodity, controlled or transformed by man to satisfy his consumerist urges, to such an extent that its meaning, which could have pushed him to develop a harmonious relationship with nature, was lost. Although the conservationists' intentions were respectable, they were misguided because they strengthened our perception of the natural world as subject to our dominance or our consumption. Something similar happened in the early twentieth century when the wilderness was promoted as a place for self-recovery for elite or bourgeois people, which Cronon describes as a way back to the 'wrong' nature. Such examples lead us to think that the beauty of natural

³⁹² Alison Byerly, 'The Use of Landscape: The Picturesque Aesthetic and the National Park System', Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 53.

landscapes, which fosters conservation, is wasted when nature becomes a consumable aesthetic object.

Indeed, in our postmodern or postnatural world, the economic system and media culture control our perception of our physical environment and alienate us from a possible interest in conservation. As Marjorie Perloff states:

If American poets today are unlikely to write passionate love poems or odes to skylarks or to the Pacific Ocean, it is not because people [do not] fall in love or go birdwatching or because the view of the Pacific from, say, Big Sur [does not] continue to be breathtaking, but because the electronic network that governs communication provides us with the sense that others—too many others—are feeling the same way.³⁹³

Perloff's point is that the aesthetic aspect of natural elements, of 'skylarks' or 'the Pacific Ocean', have not changed. On the contrary, their cultural—or 'electronic'—representations have done away with the 'unique' character of our individual perception of landscapes. Media culture or mobile applications alienate us from a direct, or 'authentic' as Thoreau would say, relationship with our physical environment. Although medias may appear as convenient as they rapidly provide us with a wide range of information or visual representations, they prevent people from writing poems that would praise the importance and beauty of the natural world, and would indirectly encourage the rest of the people to preserve it. When the 'feeling' or the experience became universal, the necessity of preservation almost disappeared since natural landscapes became uninspiring or uninteresting because of the 'electronic network', of our modern culture.

In conclusion, while consumerism allows DeLillo's characters to forget their 'toxic anxiety', the actual environmental changes, our contemporary society still seems to alienate us from the physical world. If the sublime still exists, it is in our imagination or in a virtual reality created by new technologies. These mobile applications have made humans become an evolution of what Leopold referred to as the 'trophy-hunter' but in this case as 'passive' or almost 'apathetic'. For example, mobile applications such as '*Instagram*', which displays photographs that people from all around the world took of actual places, allow users to see the world within a very short time, who thus avoid travelling to discover the world's physical beauty. In other words, we think that we waste our time trying to comprehend the physical world, and we thus tend to adopt the shortest way to knowledge and self-discovery, to such an extent that what we actually waste are our selves. As a consequence, this 'consumerist illusion' that characterises our society alienates us from our comprehension of the physical

³⁹³ Marjorie Perloff, 'from RADICAL ARTIFICE: "cage: chance: change"', (July 2007), p. 1.

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world, which is fundamental to its conservation. Our self-destruction could be summarised in the 'fakeness' of our existence since, by desperately searching for the meaning of our selves, we have become 'fake people', who have lost track of what truly defines us, which is our connection to the world: our life.

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