Self-Reliant Transcendentalism in Five Modern American NonFiction Texts

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

at

Rhodes University

by

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November 2016

Supervisor: Professor Gareth Cornwell

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the unwavering guidance of my supervisor and friend, Gareth Cornwell, a swashbuckler of the American literary outback who managed to tame my stress-related outbursts with his reassuring, sagacious temperament. The inhabitants of the Rhodes English Department have become family over the last six years, and the encouragement from them has helped me persevere with this thesis. My heroic mother's overwhelming natural intelligence, strength, and caring disposition, together with my father's valiant ardour and inspiring compassion, have made them the support structure and encouragement of not only my work on this thesis, but my existence in general. Lastly, I need to thank my significant other, Kate Lowen, who has picked me up off the floor and supportively nudged me down the driveway on the little plastic tricycle that has come to be this thesis.

Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the persistence of Self-Reliant Transcendentalist thought in modern American nonfiction. It traces the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (as progenitors of the Self-Reliant strand of the Transcendentalist movement in America) in the patterns of thought and endeavours of individuals as documented in five notable nonfiction texts published between 1968 and 2013. The texts are Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Last American Man*, and Will Harlan's *Untamed: The Wildest Woman in America and the Fight for Cumberland Island*. Each of the seemingly Romantic individuals portrayed in these texts not only seeks to live a life similar to that of Thoreau during his famous sojourn at Walden Pond, but also seems to embody some of Emerson's and Thoreau's key Transcendentalist ideas. These modern and contemporary individuals, and the way in which they are portrayed in texts that fall under the general rubric of "creative nonfiction," are testament to the continuing relevance of Transcendentalist thought in the United States – and in Western society more generally, as it seeks to negotiate a new relationship with Nature in the shadow of massive impending ecological disaster.

Contents

Introduction

There is a striking continuity between contemporary environmentalist and ecological movements and certain ideas traceable to thinkers broadly associated with nineteenth-century Romanticism in its New World inflection. The ideas of American Transcendentalism have persisted into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, emerging recently in association with solitary, eccentric, nature-loving individuals whose exemplary lives are documented in works of creative nonfiction. The conduct and thinking of these figures are strongly aligned with the Self-Reliant strain of the American Transcendentalist movement, of which Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau are the two most iconic representatives.

Transcendentalism was a social and intellectual movement in America that widely emphasized individualism, idealism, intuitive knowledge, and a spiritual connection to Nature and the allegedly divine source that animates it. Emerson and Thoreau forged the Self-Reliant dimension of this movement, choosing to focus on the individual's capacity for spiritual self-upliftment through (mostly) the contemplation of Nature in solitude. This can be distinguished from the thinking of those who advocated communal and socialist approaches to putting Transcendentalist ideals into practice. The core Self-Reliant ideas of Emerson and Thoreau include the value of cultivating the self as a unique subject rather than conforming to the norms of society and other man-made systems; the universal spirit or Over-Soul that unites and is within all living things, and which can be accessed intuitively through introspection and harmonious engagement with Nature; the value of Nature in practical Self-Reliant living (and thus the importance of protecting the environment); and the notion of balancing wilderness and civilization in order to accomplish a workable form of Self-Reliance.

The ideas of Emerson and Thoreau are well known, and traces of their legacy are to be found in a great variety of literature. To cite but one example, a notable work of fiction that portrays the influence of Emerson's ideas on a fictional character is John Edward Williams's *Butcher's Crossing* (1960), recently re-issued on the back of the international rediscovery of Williams's masterpiece *Stoner*. It tells the story of an idealistic young man named William Andrews, who – inspired by Emerson's iconic "Nature" essay – drops out of university in the 1870s and heads West to find himself in the American wilderness

(Williams*). As in large part an ironic subversion of Emersonian ideals, *Butcher's Crossing* is a reminder that there is a rival and opposing tradition of thinking about Nature and the place within it of human beings. This tradition, central to the vision of Modernists like Joseph Conrad, sees the universe as insentient and indifferent, if not actively hostile, to human purposes.

In *Butcher's Crossing*, the young Andrews discovers a natural world utterly at odds with the ideals he has absorbed from Emerson's writings. When he looks out across the plains he finds that "[t]he naturalistic force present there is so different than the one he is accustomed to that it feels as if someone or something is messing with him mentally" (Lezy 13):

> Another strangeness was waiting for him when they left the trail and went into the Colorado territory. His half-closed eyes nearly recaptured the sharp engravings he had seen in books, in magazines, when he was at home in Boston; but the thin black lines wavered upon the real grass before him, took on color, then faded. He could not recapture the strange sensations he had had, long ago, when he first saw those depictions of the land he now was seeking. (Williams 79–80*).

Andrews discovers a natural world different from the "mental images" he had created when reading about and idealizing the wilderness: "[t]hese images clash with what he experiences firsthand," leading him to find that the real western wilderness does not "evoke a sense of freedom and individuality" as he had hoped (Lezy 13–14).

Thomas Lezy observes that the natural events that occur in the book are not exceptional but normal for the American frontier (15). Andrews and the group of buffalo hunters with whom he is riding experience anxiety, frustration and even despair as natural forces, chiefly in the form of the harsh winter that nearly kills them when they are snowed in for the season up in the mountains. But Andrews's first intimation of the strangeness of nature occurs much earlier:

> As far as he could see, the land was flat and without identity. The blades of grass that stood up stiffly a few inches from his nose blurred and merged into the distance, and the distance came upon him with a rush. He closed his eyes upon what he saw, and his vague fingers pushed at the grass until they parted it, and he could feel the dry powdery earth upon his fingertips. He pressed his body against the ground, and did not look at anything, until the terror that had crept upon him from his dizzying view of the prairie passed, as if through his fingertips, back into the earth whence it had come. (Williams 108)

What Andrews encounters when he enters the wilderness is a blind system of material forces utterly careless of human beings. The aspirations of the hunting party are scorned and thwarted by these forces, and Andrews is forced to acknowledge the supremacy of

contingency: that there is no meaning inherent and discoverable in Nature, and whatever meaning there is to be had must be independently constructed by the individual for himself. Thus at the end of the novel, having experienced what since Camus we have learned to call a vision of absurdity, Andrews again heads westward to seek his destiny – but on essentially different terms from those on which his previous attempt had been based.

It is probably worth stressing that this view of the world and our place in it is *the* modern view, the dominant view since the anti-Romantic iconoclasm of Modernism itself. Williams's version of the West and of humanity in the context of nature is an immediate anticipation of Cormac McCarthy's bleak and sanguinary masterpiece, *Blood Meridian*, and beyond that, the dystopian vision of his *The Road*. What this world-view arguably shares with the texts discussed in this study is the notion of self-reliance; what it strenuously denies is the very possibility of transcendence.

Each individual figure documented in the nonfiction texts discussed in this thesis has different experiences and views of Nature, yet all in some sense overlap with each other under the rubric of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism. For example, in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Christopher McCandless endeavours to live a nomadic lifestyle through his faith in ideas linked to notable authors – principally Thoreau. Similarly, in her book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard ponders on her natural surroundings and finds that the natural world is characterized as much by cruelty and monstrosity as it is by beauty, but remains somehow "fitted to the Mind" (as Wordsworth put it in *The Recluse*, 54). Eustace Conway of Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Last American Man* seems to see Nature and the idea of living close to Nature as the ultimate source of truth and purpose. He believes that learning about the environment and learning to use it properly and sustainably to survive is paramount. Carol Ruckdeschel's view of Nature in *Untamed* is similar to Conway's, in that she construes Nature as a circle of life to be protected, and in which instinct reigns supreme. She also tends to view humans as animals who have strayed from the wilderness.

These five modern American texts were selected to cover the past half-century (publication dates range from 1968 to 2013). To the extent that they admix elements of speculative fancy and fictional technique with the auto/biographical genre, the texts can be classified as creative nonfiction. They all portray actual American individuals living out Self-Reliant Transcendentalist ideas that clearly echo those of Emerson and Thoreau.

I shall therefore begin by exploring both Emerson's and Thoreau's thinking (after first examining the movement as a whole), so as to formulate a succinct account of the Self-

Reliant emphasis within Transcendentalism. Then I briefly examine the genre of the selected texts and the implications of this genre for any analysis of the portrayal of their protagonists. Analyses of the five texts through the Transcendentalist lens will ensue, followed by concluding remarks on the relevance of Self-Reliant Transcendentalist ideas in modern American society.

Chapter One
Transcendentalism: An Overview

1.1 A Complex Movement

Defining Transcendentalism is no simple task: the philosophers within the movement were several and various, and "any brief description of their views tends to be reductive" (Meyer 9). Paul Lauter even goes so far as to observe that "[t]here are as many ways of thinking about Transcendentalists as there are literary historians to think about them" (23). Similarly, Joel Myerson notes that "[d]efining Transcendentalism is a lot like grasping mercury: both are fluid and hard to pin down" (xxxv). The problem is that Transcendentalism "was not [...] an organized movement at all" (Myerson, Petrulionis and Walls xxiv). The only Transcendentalist who sought to provide some kind of definition of the 'movement' was Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1841 lecture "The Transcendentalist," in which he stated: "Transcendentalism [...] is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842;" it is "the Saturnalia or excess of faith" (Myerson, Petrulionis, and Walls xxiii). Emerson's definitions, however, are "maddeningly vague" and do not provide a clear understanding of the term (Gura, *American Transcendentalism* 15). For the purpose of a concise analysis of the Transcendentalist 'movement' as a whole, it will be vital to engage with broad interpretations, since, as Myerson puts it, "the looser the definition [of Transcendentalism], the more appropriate it is" (xxv).

M. H. Abrams broadly refers to Transcendentalism as "an intellectual mode and emotional mood" in nineteenth-century America "which was prominent in the intellectual and cultural life of New England from 1836 until just after the Civil War" (375). It "had no systematic philosophy" but was rather a "[R]omantic, idealistic, mystic, and individualistic belief" (Hart 772); and it was only in the 1840s that members of this "New Thought" eventually became "comfortable describing their beliefs with the label Transcendentalist" (Gura 4). Those considered Transcendentalists were "[b]y and large [...] opposed to rigid rationalism; to eighteenth-century empirical philosophy of the school of John Locke, which derived all knowledge from sense impressions; to highly formalized religion, especially the

Calvinist orthodoxy of New England; and to the social conformity, materialism, and commercialism that they found increasingly dominant in American life" (Abrams 375–76). Joel Myerson provides a concise historical overview of the movement, highlighting the feeling of 'newness' that surrounded it:

> Transcendentalism came about during a major shift in thought and sensibility in American life. The Calvinism of the Puritan past was replaced by less fearful, more humanized religious practices; empirical philosophy was challenged by the role of intuition; classical literature (broadly defined) was under siege by new writers who expressed their beliefs in different literary forms; the function of education was changing from imparting knowledge to bringing out the best in the child; reform movements were sweeping the country; and the proper role of the individual—and the individual's role in democratic society—was of the greatest concern. There was a sense of "newness" in the air, and the Transcendentalists were often called the "New School." (*Transcendentalism: A Reader* xxvii)

This sense of newness about Transcendentalism can be attributed "to its rejection of all authority outside of the individual," in that the Transcendentalists recognized neither Biblical scripture nor empirical rationalism as a binding authority (Howe 205). Their primary concern "was that all partake of divinity, that there is divinity within humankind and within nature, and that all divinity is perceivable by each person who lives life in a way that is in harmony with spirit" (Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* xxxviii).

In order to understand early Transcendentalism, one has to begin with Unitarianism, which "formed the spiritual foundation for the Transcendentalist movement" (Wayne 294–95). While Transcendentalism was most certainly "literary, political, [and] philosophical," it was, at foundation, "a religious movement," for all the "[early] members of the Transcendentalist movement were affiliated at some point with New England Unitarian churches" (Grodzins 51).

1.2 Unitarianism

Unitarianism in America "was a form of liberal Christianity that arose in the early [nineteenth] century," and received its name "from the belief in 'unifying' the concept of God as an overarching Divine Nature, rather than as three distinct entities as in the 'trinity' of father, son and Holy Ghost in traditional Christianity" (Wayne 295). The Unitarians broke away from Orthodox Calvinism (Goodman, "Transcendentalism par. 2), which was "[t]he Protestant theological system of John Calvin [... and which] develop[ed ...] Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone into an emphasis on the grace of God and [...] the doctrine of

predestination" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The Unitarians' break from Calvinism comprised two fundamental aspects: first, "they believed in the importance and efficacy of human striving, as opposed to the bleaker Puritan picture of complete inescapable human depravity"; and secondly, they stressed the unity of God as opposed to the traditional notion of the "Trinity of God" (Goodman, "Transcendentalism" par.2).

The origins of Unitarianism as a church can be traced to Reverend William Ellery Channing's 1819 sermon "Unitarian Christianity," which "created a sense of community among other Boston liberal congregants who then joined together as part of the new denomination of Unitarians" (Wayne 294). In this sermon, Channing identified Unitarianism's distinguishing features from traditional Christianity:

> Jesus Christ is the only master of Christians, and *whatever he taught, either during his personal ministry, or by his inspired Apostles, we regard as of divine authority, and profess to make the rule of our lives* [...]. This authority, which we give to the Scriptures, is a reason, we conceive, for studying them with peculiar care, and for inquiring anxiously into the principles of interpretation, by which their true meaning may be ascertained. [...] Our leading principle in interpreting Scripture is this, that *the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men,* and that its meaning is to be sought in the same manner as that of other books. [...] Need I descend to particulars, to prove that the Scriptures demand the exercise of reason? Take, for example, the style in which they generally speak of God, and observe how habitually they apply to him human passions and organs. Recollect the declarations of Christ, that he came not to send peace, but a sword; that unless we eat his flesh, and drink his blood, we have no life in us. [...W]e believe in the doctrine of *God's UNITY, or that there is one God*, and one only. To this truth we give infinite importance, and we feel ourselves bound to take heed, lest any man spoil us of it by vain philosophy. The proposition, that there is one God, seems to us exceedingly plain [...]. *We object to the doctrine of the Trinity*, that, whilst acknowledging in words, it subverts in effect, the unity of God [...]. We believe, then, that *Christ is one mind, one being, and, I add, a being distinct from the one God* [...] *We object* [...] *to that system which arrogates to itself the name of Orthodoxy,* and which is now industriously propagated through our country. This system indeed takes various shapes, but in all it casts *dishonour on the Creator.* According to its old and genuine form, *it teaches, that God brings us into life wholly depraved.* (Channing par. 3–40, my italics)

As the new denomination's "spiritual and intellectual leader," Channing wanted to "focus [...] on the positive approach to a spiritual life offered through Unitarianism, rather than defining the split solely in the negative terms of a critique of Calvinism" (Wayne 294). Despite the fact that the Unitarians kept with the Christian notion that "the Bible [w]as a divinely inspired revelation to humankind and [that] the historical figure of Jesus Christ [w]as a moral example of human perfection," they studied it using scientific methodology in order better to "understand the supernatural events included within it" (Wayne 168, 295).

Among the main influences on the Unitarians were the philosophers of the Enlightenment period – the eighteenth-century movement "that stressed the belief that science and logic give people more knowledge and understanding than tradition and religion" (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, Definition 2). Their thinking was particularly shaped by the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) by the British empirical rationalist John Locke, in which he suggested that "all knowledge and ideas are gained from lived experience, from observation of the physical world around us" (Wayne 167). Locke asserts that the mind is blank and has to be written on by experience:

> Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any *ideas*; how comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy and boundless fancy of man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? When has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from *experience*: in that, all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately drives itself. Our observation employed either about *external, sensible objects; or about internal operations of our minds, perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that, which supplies understandings with all the materials of thinking.* These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the ideas have, or can naturally have, do spring. [...O]*ur senses* [...] do *convey into the mind*, several distinct *perceptions* of things, according to those various ways, wherein those objects do affect them: and thus we come by those *ideas* [...] This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our senses, and derived by them to understanding, I call SENSATION. (Locke 33–34)

For Locke, the world "was one in which all knowledge must be verified by the senses" (Myerson xxix). The Unitarians used this "empiricist methodology to legitimate Scripture" – a method known as "supernatural rationalism" (Howe 205) – and argued that "the Bible would not contain acts against Laws of nature and science" because "humans had not accurately defined methods of understanding some of the laws and therefore fully [...] explaining the so-called supernatural events of the Bible" (Wayne 168). This particular issue would be controversial, eventually dividing Unitarians into conservative and liberal positions on whether or not the miracles of the New Testament actually occurred (Myerson xxviii).

The conservative Unitarians, such as Andrews Norton, asserted that the miracles in the New Testament "resulted from God's choosing to violate the laws of nature—laws that God had established—in order to prove [...] that Jesus spoke on God's behalf" (Grodzins 53). On the other hand, the more radical Unitarians (who would end up breaking away and becoming the early Transcendentalists), such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and George Ripley, argued that the miracles were "symbolic of spiritual and moral truths, but not the work of a supernatural being" (Wayne 295). They also asserted that if the miracles were paranormal,

then they would detach "humankind from God by placing a barrier where none should exist" (Myerson xxviii). In his "Divinity School Address," Emerson discusses how the Biblical miracles were being misread, and how ordinary folk were not so different from Jesus himself:

> Alone in all history, [Jesus Christ] estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to what is in you and me. He saw that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world. He said, in this jubilee of sublime emotion, 'I am divine. Through me, God acts; through me, speaks. Would you see God, see me; or, see thee, when thou also thinkest as I now think.' *But what a distortion did his doctrine and memory suffer in the same, in the next, and the following ages! There is no doctrine of the Reason which will bear to be taught by the Understanding.* The understanding caught this high chant from the poet's lips, and said, in the next age, 'This was Jehovah come down out of heaven. I will kill you, if you say he was a man.' The idioms of his language, and the figures of his rhetoric, have usurped the place of his truth; and churches are not built on his principles, but on his tropes. Christianity became a Mythus, as the poetic teaching of Greece and of Egypt, before. *He spoke of miracles; for he felt that man's life was a miracle, and all that man doth, and he knew that this daily miracle shines, as the character ascends. But the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain* [...]. He felt respect for Moses and the prophets; but no unfit tenderness at postponing their initial revelations, to the hour and the man that now is; to the eternal revelation in the heart. Thus was he a true man. Having seen that the law in us is commanding, he would not suffer it to be commanded. Boldly, with hand, and heart, and life, he declared it was God. Thus is he, as I think, the only soul in history who has appreciated the worth of a man. (Emerson, *Divinity School Address* par. 13–14; my italics)

The Transcendentalists felt that Unitarianism had failed, particularly its "[s]obriety, mildness and calm rationalism," with Emerson going on to characterize it as "corpse-cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street and Harvard College" (Emerson, qtd. in Finseth 8). In particular, they believed that "the restrictive structure of Puritanism had been replaced by an equally restrictive [...] order [of Unitarianism]" (Myerson xxvii). Ian Finseth stresses, however, that Transcendentalism did not necessarily dismiss Unitarianism, but instead "evolved as an organic consequence of its parent religion," particularly since Unitarianism itself "open[ed] the door wide to the exercise of the intellect and free conscience, and encourag[ed...] the individual in his quest for divine meaning" (7).

Emerson and other more liberal Unitarians would become known as the Transcendentalists, causing the opposed traditional Unitarians to regard the loose movement "as a new variety of infidelity or enthusiasm" (Grodzins 55). The Transcendentalists would democratize religion by "translating complex theological and philosophical concepts into language and imagery that could be understood by lay people," and would replace the Unitarians' "anthropomorphic God with a nonanthropomorphic force of spirit, one that was

present in all things" (Myerson xxviii). As an extension of this latter notion, Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson would emphasize "the importance of observing nature" – precisely because if "God, humankind, nature [...] emanate from the same source, then the natural world and its inhabitants are microcosms of the macrocosmic divinity" (Myerson xxviii–xxix). In his essay "Nature," Emerson notably conveys this notion of God as embodied in the natural world:

> In the woods is perpetual youth. Within these *plantations of God*, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival in dresses, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. *In the woods, we return to reason and faith*. There 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 infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the *currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God* [...]. The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. [...] *Its effect is like that of a higher thought* or a better emotion coming over me. ("Nature" 6–7, my italics)

Self-reliance and "the individual's interpretation of religious texts" would also become key ideas in the Transcendentalist movement (Myerson xxix). The stress on individualism can arguably be linked to the rise of the middle-class Andrew Jackson to the presidency in 1828, inaugurating the "period of Jacksonian Democracy" and the "emergence of the [...] self-made man," whereby prosperity "was achievable through hard work and by a reliance upon the self" (Myerson xxxi). Emerson himself, one of the most prominent advocates of the philosophy of self-reliance (along with Henry David Thoreau), was initially against the Jacksonian Democrats, deeming them "the bad party," but eventually became a reformist himself in the 1830s (Dorrien 68). The Transcendentalists' emphasis on independence also developed from their fondness for intuition – which they received from the philosophies of German Idealists such as Immanuel Kant (Grodzins 56). Kant "gave the mind, not matter, ultimate control over the shape of human experience," and would convince the Transcendentalists that the empiricism of John Locke was erroneous (Grodzins 56).

To summarize, most of the original Transcendentalists were initially associated with Unitarianism, which attempted to rationalize religion with tools from John Locke and the Enlightenment period. The more liberal Unitarians (who would become the Transcendentalists), however, rebelled against the religious movement's frigid empirical approach to religion and ideas, and subsequently broke away – although a few (such as Frederic Henry Hedge and Theodore Parker) would keep their ties with Unitarianism (Wayne

295). Transcendentalism, however, was also largely influenced by other parts of the globe, as those considered Transcendentalists were essentially "borrowing from various philosophers, literatures, and religions whatever they felt was appropriate to their developing beliefs, and forging these borrowings into a new system" (Myerson xxv). Philosophy and literature from Europe and Asia in particular would play a vital role in shaping the Transcendentalists' philosophies.

1.3 External Influences and the Transcendental Club

The very name "Transcendentalism" has roots outside of America, and in particular can be linked to German philosopher Immanuel Kant's notion of transcendental knowledge. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant observed: "I call all knowledge *transcendental* which is concerned, not with objects, but with our mode of knowing objects as far as this is possible *a priori* [without experience]" (qtd. in Hart). This notion, amongst others, would be crucial to the ideas and beliefs informing Transcendentalism. While different Transcendentalists were no doubt influenced personally by a variety of unique factors, influences on the Transcendentalist movement as a whole can be linked to Germany, Britain, France, and Asia.

What the early Transcendentalists had in common was that they found the contemporary "opinion in theology and philosophy" to be "unsatisfactory," particularly the "empiricist philosophical foundation on which Unitarianism was based" (Gura 70). On September 12, 1836, Frederick Henry Hedge, who was a Unitarian minister himself, organized a gathering of "like-minded" thinkers to discuss what was deemed the poor state of philosophy in America (Gura 69). This group had a variety of names internally, including "Hedge's Club," and "The Symposium," but was dubbed "The Transcendental Club" by the public (Crawford, Kern, and Needleman 86–87). The name stems from the Kantian idea of "transcend[ing] mere sensory experience," and most of the club members had an interest in German Idealism (Myerson, Petrulionis, and Walls xxiv). While the numbers of the club fluctuated, it generally consisted of Hedge, Emerson, Ripley, Thoreau, Amos Bronson Alcott, Orestes Brownson, Parker, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth and Sophia Peabody, Convers Francis, J. S. Dwight, and Charles T. Follen (Crawford, Kern, and Needleman 87). The Transcendental Club had one main rule, which was "that no man should be admitted whose presence excluded [discussion of] any one topic," and even William Ellery Channing attended some of the gatherings, despite his reputation as a "great Unitarian preacher" (Gura 70).

In order to create a forum through which Transcendentalists could "disseminat[e …] their ideas into the larger public," a journal publication, *The Dial*, was created in July 1840, and lasted until 1844, with a peak of 300 subscribers (Wayne 78). This quarterly periodical would be the "organ of the Transcendental movement" during this time (Crawford, Kern, and Needleman 87), and was particularly appealing to those Transcendentalists who sought an "alternative to the popular periodical literature of the day" (Wayne 78). With George Ripley, Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau serving as editors at some point or other throughout *The Dial*'s existence, the journal was a valuable part of the movement, and "[s]ome of the most important Transcendentalist philosophical essays first appeared" in its pages – one example being Margaret Fuller's 1843 essay entitled "The Greatest Lawsuit. Man versus Men. Woman versus Women" (Wayne 78). *The Dial* also included segments of Thoreau's essays and poetry, and even contained non-literary pieces such as articles on the Transcendentalists' social collaborations – like Ripley's Brook Farm (Wayne 78). Despite its disintegration in April 1844, *The Dial* served as an instrument of expression for the Transcendentalists, promulgating a variety of the central ideas that made them stand out as so-called "Transcendentalists" (Wayne 78–79).

The "Transcendental Turn," or, the Transcendentalists' gravitation towards the 'transcendental,' can be linked to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the main ideas of which are summarized by Günter Leypoldt as "the attempt to base the theories of knowledge (epistemology) and practical reason (morality and ethics) on principles internal to the human mind, severing them from their traditional foundations (in empirical reality, human-sentiment, or utility)" (9). Leypoldt goes on to note that what Kant's theory implies is "that the most direct route to moral truth lies in the 'pure' judgements of innate reason purged of the fickle impulses and feeling and the calculation of its consequences" (9). Experience depends on external representation, and "the reality *behind* appearances" can never be apprehended (Leypoldt 11). Kant's theory suggests that while one can analyse "the mental filters (*a priori* categories) with which the human mind fashions the spatial, temporal, and causal parameters of experience and synthesizes them into ideas about coherent existence, such as God" we nevertheless have to accept the fact that "these ideas can ever be grounded in actual reality" (Leypoldt 11).

What is important to note is that Kant's theories were, to a certain degree, misinterpreted by "[R]omantic idealists," who valued his "turn to interiority but resisted his radical scepticism" (Leypoldt 11). Kant's idea of "pure reason" – initially attached to a "subjective mode of structuring experience" – was altered to become "an innate organ for

intuiting spiritual knowledge" (Leypoldt 11). This new "Transcendental Reason" would come to be categorized as a natural capability "through which sensitive artist types who immersed themselves in the primal beauties of natural environments could reach levels of introspection that revealed mystical [...] experiences of [...] Nature" – with this spiritual idea of 'Nature' receiving a variety of names, such as 'the infinite,' 'the Absolute,' 'Oversoul,' and 'the World Spirit' (Leypoldt 11).

This reshaped version of Kant's transcendental philosophy initially started with what Leypoldt calls the "speculative idealism" that entered Boston through works like James Marsh's 1829 edition of the English Romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection,* along with Frederick Henry Hedge's account of Coleridge's philosophical sources (Leypoldt 11). Richard Geldard observes the importance of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* in connection with the Transcendentalists, noting how Coleridge highlights the distinction between the faculty of reason and the faculty of understanding, stipulating that Understanding is discursive and "refers to some other faculty as its ultimate authority," whereas Reason is fixed and "appeals to itself as the ground and substance of their truth" (Geldard 36). This separation of Reason and Understanding is what would influence Transcendentalists to develop ideas on intuitive, unified knowledge and what Geldard calls "infinitude" (Geldard 35).

The effect of German influence on American Transcendentalism was both direct and indirect (Crawford, Kern, and Needleman 85). Margaret Fuller and Theodore Parker, for instance, were directly influenced, as they were able comfortably to read and engage with the German language (Crawford, Kern, and Needleman 85). Patrick Labriola describes Parker as "the greatest authority on German theology, philosophy, and literature" among the Transcendentalists (101). Hedge was also directly influenced by German philosophy, but this was due to his interaction with the idealism of Kant, Friedrich von Schiller and Johan Wolfgang von Goethe on his travels to Germany (Wayne 142). Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau would encounter German idealism second-hand through the work of British Romantic thinkers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle, and would receive a conventional overview through the poetry of the popular English Romantic writer William Wordsworth – especially in poems like "Tintern Abbey" (Crawford, Kerd, and Needlemen 85).

Emerson travelled to Europe in 1833 where he met and formed a close friendship with Thomas Carlyle (Geldard 15). He was particularly drawn to Carlyle because of the Scottish Romantic writer's emphasis on "the moral foundations of human life" and "the recognition

that all human beings shared the same nature" (Geldard 15). Emerson was also intrigued by "his passionate response to the social ills of industrial England at the beginning of the nineteenth century" and his firm "intellectual grasp of the work of the German Idealists, including [the German writer Wolfgang von] Goethe" (Geldard 15). Goethe would serve as an imperfect example for the Transcendentalists, because although his rejection of "dogmatic religious beliefs, sectarian differences, and the reductive specializations in science and literature" reinforced the Transcendentalists' idea of unity, he was nevertheless imperfect in "his cavalier attitude toward social mores" (Geldard 12). Emerson, in particular, admired Goethe's "grasp of the multiplicity of existence," and his communion with nature:

> Goethe was the philosopher of this multiplicity, hundred-handed, Argus-eyed, able and happy to cope with this rolling miscellany of facts and sciences, and by his own versatility to dispose of them with ease; manly mind, unembarrassed by the variety of coats of convention with which life had got encrusted, easily able by his subtlety to pierce these and to draw his strength from nature, with which he lived in full communion. [...T]here is no trace of provincial limitation to his muse. He is not a debtor to his position, but was born with a free and controlling genius. (Emerson, qtd. in Geldard 13)

While in Britain, Emerson also met with other influential writers of the Romantic movement, like Wordsworth and Coleridge, who seemed to "share the same love of beauty, morality, and God that animated both Kant and the American [T]ranscendentalists" (Brodrick par. 13). The poetry of Romantic poet William Wordsworth was highly appealing to the Transcendentalists because of his "natural style, autobiographical honesty, and depth of feeling" in the face of "academic formalisms" (Geldard 13). One can plainly observe in Wordsworth's commentary on his poem "Intimations of Immortality" (in which he gestures to a sense of synchronization with the world) how his philosophies of unity would have influenced the ideas of the Transcendentalists: "I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence, and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature" (Wordsworth, qtd. in Geldard 14).

Emerson's last stop abroad was to meet Coleridge, "the father of the Romantic movement," whose writings and ideas were enormously appealing, particularly because he was inspired by Goethe and Kant, and stressed that "the reasoning faculty [...] was capable of a higher perception of divine things" – a notion that would lead the Transcendentalists to "make the same argument as the basis for personal revelation and intuitive spiritual gnosis" (Geldard 15–16). To Emerson and those with similar Romantic sensibilities (like Thoreau), Coleridge "was the prophet of liberated self-authenticating spirit" (Dorrien 65). Another

Transcendentalist, George Ripley, would find that Kant's theories were best conveyed in the work of the German Philosopher Jakob Friedrich Fries.

Ripley, one of the main figures in Transcendentalism, had tremendous admiration for Fries, and with good reason. Fries can be grouped with German philosophers like Friedrich Henry Jacobi, who stressed that "human understanding can bring mankind only so far toward the first principles of knowledge and never to the point of absolute truth," and thus epistemology that is "based on understanding alone will lead [...] to scepticism and, potentially, fatalism" (Gura 53). Jacobi endorsed the Idealism of Kant (who had a "sceptical view of theology") by proposing a different concept – "intuition" or "faith" (Gura 53–54). Fries continued this line of thought, stressing the importance of intuition as direct knowledge, and maintaining that "[m]an learns of the absolute not solely through objective knowledge but as well through spiritual intimation" (Gura 54). Despite Fries's contribution to putting Kant's ideas "on more solid psychological grounds" (Gura 53), George Ripley nevertheless came to the realization that German Idealism was "too subjective" and that there was a need for "a deeper foundation" (Gura 56). To find this foundation he looked to, and sponsored, French philosopher Victor Cousin – a move that "provides another important clue to why and how [...] Idealist thought found its way across the Atlantic [to America]" (Gura 56).

Cousin's work included a "reintegration of religion into contemporary philosophical debate on a scientific basis," and he would go on to contribute "Eclecticism" to the philosophy of the time (Gura 57). The main ideas of Eclecticism can be summarized in the following three points: 1) philosophy is based on psychology; 2) "the highest problems of ontology may be solved by inductions from the facts which psychology ascertains" (the French did the opposite of post-Kantian philosophers, and began with man and "descended to the absolute"); and lastly, 3) "psychology and the history of philosophy reciprocally explain each other" (Gura 57). In essence, what Eclecticism did was fuse the dualities of matter and spirit, revealing that Nature, God, and Humanity are connected and have the same laws, and encouraging "mankind to survey all relevant philosophical systems to cull and order their most important principles into an overarching system" (Gura 57, 77). Eclecticism became popular after English copies of Cousin's work were made in the 1830s, a popularity which can be attributed to the degree of clarity provided by the Frenchman, as opposed to the "often seemingly wilful obscurantism of the German philosophers" (Gura 7). Ripley himself would praise Cousin for turning complicated philosophical musings into "the language of the market," which served American readers particularly well (Gura 7–8).

French influence on Transcendentalism also came in the form of Fourierism, which was first brought into America in the 1830s by Albert Brisbane "who had met with the French Utopian Socialist Charles Fourier in Paris" (Wayne 110–11). Ripley was greatly influenced by Fourier, who believed that "morality [w]as a false system set up by [...] society to meet material and economic goals," and that society would function best if every person were allowed to follow their own unique desires and passions (Wayne 110). Fourier's ideas had a particular influence on Ripley's social experiment – Brook Farm (Wayne 110). After encountering Fourierism, Ripley felt motivated to create a community "based on the rejection of capitalism and its underlying values" (Wayne 110).

The shaping of American Transcendentalism, however, went beyond the European continent. Asia provided the works of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Islam, all of which "nourished" the Transcendentalists' yearning for "timeless transcultural spiritual truths" (Lewis and Bicknell 12). The Oriental influence on Transcendentalism, however, is not widely evident and seems to have had only a minor effect on some of the thinkers: there are "passing references to Hinduism in [... Thoreau's] *Walden*," while Emerson "paid homage to these [Oriental] sources in poems like 'Brahma' and essays such as 'The Oversoul' and 'Persian Poetry'" (Lewis and Bicknell 14). The reason for this, according to Todd Lewis and Kent Bicknell, is that the Transcendentalists did not wish "to alienate their readers" with esoteric ideas, and rather sought to "reach as broad an audience as possible" (14).

The philosophy and literature of the Orient, however, was nonetheless significant to Thoreau and Emerson. Thoreau kept a copy of the Hindu scripture *Bhagavad Gītā* in his cabin at Walden pond (Lewis and Bicknell 15), while Emerson encountered Hinduism through the work of Victor Cousin, who emphasized that the general idea of unity in Hinduism was that "God [...] is everything, and that everything is he, and that he has a myriad upon myriad of forms" (Cousin, qtd. in Goodman, "East-West" 627–28). This idea of spiritual unity is arguably what most attracted the Transcendentalists to Asian philosophy and literature, and Emerson became particularly enthused after finding out that the *Gītā* "contained an attack on knowledge obtained from books" – a notion which no doubt had some influence on his doctrines in "American Scholar" (1837) and "Divinity School Address" (1838), in which he placed emphasis on introspection over external sources of knowledge (Goodman, "East-West" 628). Thoreau, on the other hand, was not as concerned about "Asian metaphysical ideas" as Emerson, and mainly appreciated the "various methods

and meditative techniques [of Hinduism and Buddhism] for achieving detachment, discipline, contemplation, and spiritual fulfilment" (Lachs and Talisse 57).

These wide-ranging influences all fed into the broad spectrum of the elusive Transcendentalist movement. The Transcendentalists were brought together by the Transcendental Club and *The Dial* – which both created a sort of "unified entity" for the complex movement (Gura 71). Despite the fact that the Transcendental Club allowed for the Transcendentalists to integrate and fuse their thinking, they would eventually find themselves separated over particular views and reforms, especially after the club came to an end (Gura 71).

1.4 Transcendentalism Divided: Socialist Transcendentalism

While the common ground among most Transcendentalists was that they strove to "cultivate [...] a vibrant openness to social and cultural ideals" that critiqued America's "materialism and insularity," they were nevertheless divided when it came to approaching this social reformation (Gura xiv). This split had Ralph Waldo Emerson (and Henry David Thoreau) on the one hand, who "championed introspection and self-reliance"; and those like George Ripley and Theodore Parker, on the other, who advocated "the brotherhood of man" and "behaviour for the common good" (Gura xiv).

George Ripley, like Emerson and Theodore Parker, was a prominent member of the Unitarian movement in Boston who became "disillusioned by the country's focus on wealth," but unlike Emerson, he "encouraged his congregation to become more engaged in social reforms" (Twomey 11–12). Frustrated by "his congregation's apparent indifference to those who were less fortunate," Ripley left his position as Unitarian minister at Purchase Street (Twomey 12). His disillusionment was evident in his final farewell sermon, in which he observed how he was both an abolitionist and a Transcendentalist, but felt that "his flock was not following him down these paths [of social reform] as far as he wished" (Gura 144). He argued for societal transformation on a religious and humanitarian level, and deemed this social reform "the practice of religion" (Ripley, qtd. in Schultz and Pochmann 14). He stressed that mankind was created in the image of God, and thus had the intuitive capability "to distinguish right from wrong and true from false"; people could be platonic and selfless in taking care of one another, with no expectation of recognition or reward (Twomey 13). Ripley's beliefs would eventually be realized in his utopian experiment – Brook Farm.

The "communal living experiment" of Brook Farm was started by Ripley and his wife Sophia in West Roxbury, Massachussets in April 1841; and remains, according to Tiffany K. Wayne, the "most successful attempt to translate the IDEALISM of Transcendentalism into practical living" (29). The farm was essentially a commune based on "cooperative enterprise" and a "rearrangement of social life" (Robinson par. 6). Other Transcendentalists such as Emerson, Alcott, Brownson and Fuller would occasionally visit the farm, but never lived there – and Thoreau would avoid the experiment entirely (Crawford et al. 87). A similar communitarian project, Fruitlands, was initiated by Amos Bronson Alcott, Charles Lane, and Henry Wright in 1843, but in contrast to Brook Farm, lasted only eight months and engaged considerably less interest (Wayne 118).

Two of Ripley's most likely influences in initiating the social project were his visits to the German Separatists community in Ohio, and his interest in European social thought (Gura 153). Both Ripley and his wife had visited the German community of Separatists in Zoar in 1838, and were "struck by the group's social harmony and their enjoyment of various kinds of labour" (Gura 153). With regard to the latter influence, Ripley had come across the philosophies of French socialist Charles Fourier in Albert Brisbane's *The Social Destiny of Man* while contributing to *The Dial* (Twomey 16). Fourier stressed that communities would function best if work "could be distributed in such a way as to match people's tasks with their individual desires and ability to do them" (Robinson par. 7). Fourier's ideas encouraged Ripley to create a communal living space that would seek to combine "intellectual, manual, and managerial labour in a harmonious social system" (Crowe, qtd. in Twomey 16). Fourier's influence is evident in a letter from Ripley to Emerson (attempting to convince him to join Brook Farm), in which he states that he intends to use the commune to:

> Combine the thinker with the worker, as far as possible, in the same individual; to guarantee the highest mental freedom, by providing all with labor, adapted to their tastes and talents, and securing to them the fruits of their industry; to do away with the necessity of menial services, by opening the benefits of education and the profits of labor to all; and thus to prepare a society of liberal, intelligent, and cultivated persons, whose relations with each other would permit a more simple and wholesome life. (Ripley, qtd. in Gura 152)

Ripley intended not only to change the lives of those who resided at Brook Farm, "but for their community to provide a model for American society at large" (Wayne 30).

Brook Farm, the embodiment of Ripley's "socialization of Christianity," came to an end in 1847 and ultimately bankrupted him: he "had literally given his all" to the farm (Schultz and Pochmann 18). Even his beloved library was lost with the failed experiment,

although he rested easier knowing that his books were in the care of Theodore Parker (Schultz and Pochmann 2). Parker was a friend and fellow Transcendental Club member whom Philip Gura describes as part of "the social conscience of the Transcendentalist movement" (218), and who Emerson deemed "one of the four great men of his generation" (Commager 257). Parker began as a Unitarian minister at West Roxbury (Wayne 210–211). As a Transcendentalist he gained a reputation for being "an outspoken activist" and someone who "was willing to take risks" (Coppel 17). After the criticism attracted by his *Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity* and *Discourse of Matter Pertaining to Religion* – in which he "questioned the necessity of a divine conception of Jesus" and "criticized other liberal Unitarians for preaching a version of Christianity which they themselves did not fully embrace" (Wayne 211) – Parker travelled overseas and met with well-established thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle and Friedrich Schelling, who "influenced his notion of American democracy and its destiny" (Gura 217). When he returned, he had moved from "a road of religious radicalism to a much more committed social and political involvement" (Gura 218). He was strongly influenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher's recognition "of man's cosmic dependence" – which meant selflessly devoting oneself to all of God's creation in order to ensure a wholesome life closer to God; and for Parker, this translated into "a commitment to social action" (Gura 218). This turn toward immediate social concerns produced a variety of radical sermons addressing issues such as crime and poverty in the Boston area, the self-serving bourgeoise class of America, the Mexican War, and slavery (Gura 218).

Parker maintained that social and political injustices could be identified intuitively, as evident in his "Sermon of War": "War is an utter violation of Christianity. If war be right, then Christianity is wrong, false, a lie. But if Christianity be true, if reason, conscience, the religious sense, the highest faculties of man, are to be trusted, then war is the wrong, the falsehood, the lie" (Parker, qtd. in Commager 271). Although most Transcendentalists shared Parker's concern over the issue of the Mexican War, Parker "found occasion to express it more frequently and more publicly" (Commager 270). He believed that it was the duty of the church to address "unjust conditions of political practices," evident in his sermon on "The True Idea of the Christian Church" (Coppel 18). In this sermon he writes that "[a] Christian church should be the means of reforming the world [...]. If there be a public sin in the land, if a lie invade the state, it is for the church to give the alarm" (Parker, qtd. in Coppel 18).

For Transcendentalists like George Ripley and Theodore Parker, "selfless work for humanitarian reform was at the heart of Transcendentalism's promise" (Gura 217). For others, however, this was not the most appropriate approach to the concerns of society. Ralph

Waldo Emerson (who influenced Henry David Thoreau) is no doubt the most well-known advocate of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, which stressed that "only after an individual experiences paradise within can he join the others, similarly enlightened, to restore the outer paradise" (Gura 211). Emerson "doubted the use of communitarian attempts for spiritual regeneration" (Leypoldt 23).

1.5 Self-Reliant Transcendentalism: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau

In his speech entitled "The Transcendentalist," Emerson observes how Transcendentalism is merely another term for idealism, and that while "there is no pure Transcendentalist," there are certain idealists who represent, more adequately than others, the true ideas behind the term. These individuals "respect[ed] the intuitions," allowing these instincts to have "all authority over [... their] experience," and also "[withdrew] themselves from common labors [... to] shun general society" ("Transcendentalist" par. 13–16). At the forefront of championing individualism and Self-Reliance as the core of the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson is deemed by some to be the "intellectual center of American Transcendentalism" (Wayne 98).

Emerson was born on May 25, 1803, to William and Ruth Haskins Emerson. His family were "descendants of a number of noteworthy New England ministers" (Schulman par. 1–2). He was greatly influenced by his father's sister, Mary, who "introduced him to many of the ideas and perspectives that would form the basis of his Transcendentalist break from Unitarianism in the 1830s and his formative views on nature, spirituality, and the soul" (Wayne 97). Mary gave Emerson "an understanding of the symbolic meaning of nature as a 'wilderness,' a corollary to the wilderness of the inner soul" (Wayne 98). Frank Schulman notes that through her liberal thinking and "openness," Mary "anticipated [...] the Transcendentalist sensibility" (par. 5). After graduating from Harvard at age 18, Emerson (with the encouragement of his aunt) entered into Harvard Divinity School where he became a full Unitarian minister in 1830, following in the footsteps of his father who was a "distinguished minister of First Church, Boston" (Schulman par. 2–10).

Emerson's sermons were controversial since he made "use of biblical texts to illustrate his sermons, as opposed to preaching from the texts" (Schulman par. 10). In 1832 he withdrew from his position at the Second Unitarian Church of Boston because he "found that he could not conduct the communion service with his whole heart, and, [was] unwilling to

administer the Lord's Supper according to the Unitarian ritual, which is mild enough" (Cook vi). Tragedy had also struck Emerson when his wife, Ellen died from consumption in 1831. Emerson, "in need of recuperation" (Porte par. 3), decided to voyage to Europe, where he met with influential Romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Carlyle. On the way back to America, he summarized his own personal philosophies at the time as: "(1) self-sufficiency, (2) individualism, (3) the subjectivity of good and evil, (4) the doctrine of compensation, (5) recognition of the correspondence between man and the eternal world, (6) self knowledge as the purpose of life, and (7) living in the present" (Cook vii).

After his return in 1833, Emerson started a career in lecturing, taking inspiration from Eastern philosophy and the idealism of Immanuel Kant, "especially as it came to him through the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth" (Schulman par. 13–17). In 1834 tragedy struck again when his brother Edward died from tuberculosis, but the most profound grief came in 1842 when Emerson lost his young son Waldo to scarlet fever, leaving him "permanently darkened" (Porte par. 5–12). In 1836 he published *Nature* (his first book), and became more influential through his involvement in the Transcendental Club (which started in September, 1836), where he "was widely seen as their leader" (Schulman par. 18).

In 1838 he delivered a speech at the Harvard Divinity School at the request of a group of seniors who were graduating (Schulman par. 19). This address, which "spoke in protest against a stale, inherited Christianity and called for fresh religious inspiration," was met with controversy, notably because of his "harsh dismissal of Biblical miracles long accepted by Unitarian theologians" (Schulman par. 20–21). After this address he found more popularity on the lecture circuit (Schulman par. 23), earning a reputation for having a "seer-like" temperament, "oracular" expression, and a "scriptural" tone (Cook viii).

The ideas that run consistently throughout Emerson's writings are that non-conformity, individualism, and the individual's right "to expand into universal relations" are paramount to achieving a fulfilling existence (Michaud 76). He argued that God is present in every person – so that fully grasping the self (the ideal self) meant becoming "innately capable of a natural experience of and knowledge of the Divine, present in all creation" (Schulman par. 27). Emerson's essays that most accurately convey his notions of self-reliance, rejection of societal conformity, and intuitive divinity are: "Self-Reliance" (1841), "The American Scholar" (1837), "Divinity School Address" (1838), and "The Over-Soul" (1841).

In "Self-Reliance," which formed part of his series of *Essays* (1841), Emerson emphasized that individuals should rely on themselves rather than depend on society. They should trust "that gleam of light which flashes across the mind from within," because individual experience is more valuable and credible than gaining knowledge from external sources ("Self-Reliance" 165). The 'self' that Emerson encourages readers to trust is that "primary wisdom" called "Spontaneity or Instinct" ("Self-Reliance" 176). Emerson classifies this wisdom as Intuition, "whilst all later teachings are tuitions" ("Self-Reliance" 176). He also stresses that despite the fact that there is a great amount of beneficial "good" in the world, there is none more valuable than that which comes to a person from within themselves ("Self-Reliance" 166). This instinctive capability to penetrate reality was seen by Emerson as not only "a principle of human nature," but "also a faculty of the intellect at the highest level" (Geldard 80). In "The American Scholar," for example, Emerson observes that while books are important, students should not rely on them completely, but should rather entrust knowledge to personal, intuitive thought and creativity:

> Books are the best type of the influence of the past [...]. The scholar of the first age received into him the world around; brooded thereon; gave it the new arrangement of his own mind, and uttered it again. It came into him life; it went out from him truth. [...] In proportion to the completeness of the distillation, so will the purity and imperishableness of the product be. But none is quite perfect. [...] Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this. Yet hence arises a grave mischief. The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, the act of thought, is transferred to the record. [...] Instantly the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant. The sluggish and perverted mind of the multitude, slow to open to the incursions of Reason, having once so opened, having once received this book, stands upon it, and makes an outcry if it is disparaged. Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles. [...] Books are the best of things, well used; abused, among the worst [...]. They are for nothing but to inspire. ("The American Scholar" 51–52)

Richard G. Geldard notes in his analysis of "The American Scholar" that Emerson's assertion of the "intuitive grasp or instinctive knowledge of the true nature of things" is more than a mere inkling or suspicion, but rather an intuition that is imperative to grasping both the external and inner worlds, and gave Emerson (and other like-minded Transcendentalists) the "confidence to assert their beliefs in the face of the sense-based experience of the materialists" (79). Geldard goes on to observe that, for Emerson, intuition was "an immediate knowledge of reality arising from spiritual sources" (Geldard 81). This notion of a "spiritual source" relates to a fundamental aspect of Emerson's doctrine of self-reliance – the notion

that each person has access to the divine within themselves. In the "Divinity School Address," Emerson stresses that the divine is present in all individuals, and that the soul in each person "invites every man to expand to the full circle of the universe" (Emerson, "DSA" 76). He stipulates that individuals have the capacity to let God speak through them – and that this universal inner voice should be trusted and relied upon:

> A more secret, sweet, and overpowering beauty appears to man when his heart and mind open to the sentiment of virtue. Then he is instructed in what is above him [...]. The sentiment of virtue is a reverence and delight in the presence of certain divine laws [...]. The intuition of the moral sentiment is an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul [...]. That is always best which gives me to myself. The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, Obey thyself. That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me, makes me a wart and a wen [...] only by coming again to themselves, or to God in themselves, can they grow forevermore [...] the gift of God to the soul is not a vaunting, overpowering, excluding sanctity, but a sweet, natural goodness, a goodness like thine and mine, and that so invites thine and mine to be and to grow. (Emerson, "DSA" 70–77)

So individuals need only look inward to their own divine soul in order to discover that they are themselves capable of being their own prophets. In the same vein, Emerson argues that Jesus Christ had merely tapped into this soul that is within all individuals: "Jesus Christ belonged to the true race of prophets. He saw with open eye the mystery of the soul [...]. Alone in history he estimated the greatness of man. One man was true to *what is in you and me*. He saw that God incarnates himself in man" ("DSA" 74–75, my italics). Emerson thus highlights that, instead of believing "society is wiser than their soul," individuals should realise that "one soul, and their soul, is wiser than the whole world" ("DSA" 84), which for Emerson meant that individual introspection takes precedence over societal extrospection. It is in his essay "Self-Reliance," however, that Emerson's opinions and beliefs about the harms of social conformity are most clearly brought to the fore.

In "Self-Reliance," Emerson stresses that self-trust and individualism are more beneficial than conformity and collective social reforms. He observes that our internal, intuitive voice becomes stifled by society, which "is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members" ("Self-Reliance" 168). He goes on to condemn society as the corruptor of individualism, as it is "a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better of securing 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" (168). This statement, according to Philip Gura, can be read as "a transparent dig at the Brook Farm experiment" (213). For Emerson, improving the world is accomplished by the inward-looking individual at home, rather than by charitable organizations or tertiary education:

> be good-natured and modest; have that grace; and never varnish your hard uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home [...]. Expect me not to show cause why I seek or why I exclude company. Then again, do not tell me [...] of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor? [...] There is a class of persons to whom by all spiritual affinity I am bought and sold [...] but your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at colleges of fools; the building of meetinghouses to the vain end to which many now stand; alms to sots, and the thousand-fold Relief societies; – though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give the dollar, it is a wicked dollar, which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold. ("Self-Reliance" 169)

So for Emerson, self-reliance can be far more beneficial than conforming to social norms and engaging in collective reforms. In particular, he insists that society's mechanical and scientific progress, along with materialism, can be healed or "cured" by self-reliant individuals. Emerson criticises the belief that society is advancing through technological achievements, which only detract from the ability of individuals because they become reliant on mechanized inventions rather than on themselves: "The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much the support of muscle" ("Self-Reliance"189). Reliance on convenient apparatuses only detracts from the individual living a wholesome and effective life, much in the way that materialism does. Through constant "dependence on [...] foreign goods," people end up enslaving themselves to numbers ("Self-Reliance" 191). They end up measuring their worth by possession of material objects, without realizing that they themselves define the worth of material objects rather than the other way around: "The picture waits for my verdict; it is not to command me, but I am to settle its claims to praise" ("Self-Reliance" 175). Those who measure themselves by material wealth judge others on their possessions, rather than "measure the esteem of each other [...] by what each is" (190). The true worth of a man, according to Emerson's philosophy, lies in who he is as his own person, which is a value that "perpetually renews itself" (191).

Emerson's focus on Self-Reliance generated considerable criticism from those who found his beliefs to be egotistical. Elizabeth Peabody, for instance, argued that Emerson's views lead to a suicide of faith, whereby a person becomes self-absorbed by failing to recognize that there is "inconceivable Power, Wisdom, and Love" in the world "beyond our conception" (Peabody, qtd. in Gura 216). Even Henry James Snr, a friend of Emerson's, criticised his peers who had anti-socialist leanings: "The curse of our present times, which eliminates all their poetry, is the selfhood imposed on us by the evil world" (James, qtd. in

Gura 216–17). Steven A. Carbone makes reference to a more recent critic of Emerson's "Self-Reliance," Alfred S. Reid, who stresses that Emerson's philosophies are nothing more than "extreme self-righteousness" and an "extreme view of isolationism" (qtd. in Carbone).

In defence of Emerson's philosophy of strong Self-Reliance, Reginald L. Cook asserts that Emerson "has been most frequently compromised by those who have misinterpreted his doctrine of individualism, a doctrine which does not justify self-indulgent centrality of personality and an exaltation of egotism," but which is actually "ethical and consists in the perception that there is One Mind, and that all the powers and privileges that lie in any lie in all" – especially since self-reliance, for Emerson, means dependence on God (Cook x). Emerson's thinking on self-reliance and individualism can thus be construed as playing into a greater scheme for improving humanity as a collection of unique individuals who are all part of a greater whole, revealing a "universal appeal to the consciousness of capacity within man" (Cook xii).

In his essay "The Over-Soul," Emerson argues that the intuitive force, the soul within every person, is part of a broader divine spirit or 'soul' that unites all of God's creation, regardless of a person's "age [...] or his breeding [...] or his company [...] or books [...] or actions [...] or talents" ("The Over-Soul" 137). Emerson calls this unifying divine force the Over-Soul, and argues that every person on earth has access to it through introspection:

> The Supreme Critic on the errors of the past and the present. And the only prophet of that which must be, is that great nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere, that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is *contained and made one with all others*; that common heart of which all sincere conversation is the worship, to which all right action is submission; that over-powering reality which confutes our tricks and talents, and constrains every one to pass for what he is, and to speak from his character and not from his tongue, and which evermore tends to pass into our thought and hand and become wisdom and virtue and power and beauty. We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime *within man is the soul of the whole*; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. ("The Over-Soul" 126, my italics)

Yet the Over-Soul cannot adequately be comprehended or defined in language, so Emerson notes that one "cannot speak for it," and rather describes this "transcendent simplicity" as the very soul in every man that "is not an organ, but animates and exercises all the organs; is not a function, like the power of memory, of calculation, of comparison, but uses these as hands and feet; is not a faculty, but a light; is not the intellect or the will; is the background of our being, in which they lie, – an immensity not possessed and that cannot be possessed" ("Over-Soul" 127). Despite the Soul's perplexing nature, Emerson stresses that this divine force

needs to be accepted by every individual, because it unites each individual with God (and thus each other), and, if one immerses oneself in and accepts the spirit, one will find that it assists in developing one's moral virtue:

> If he have not found his home in God, his manners, his forms of speech, the turn of his sentences, the build, shall I say, of all his opinions will involuntarily confess it [… but] [i]f he have found his centre, the Deity will shine through him, through all the disguises of ignorance, of ungenial temperament, of unfavourable circumstance. The tone of seeking is one, and the tone of having is another. (137)

Echoing the theme of non-conformity that is prominent in "Self-Reliance," Emerson stresses in "The Over-Soul" that individuals in society should concentrate on developing themselves, rather than concern themselves with the judgements of general society, because social conformity will always distort the purity of true thought and the "influx of the Divine into our mind" – which Emerson calls "Revelation" ("The Over-Soul" 133). Social conformists, whom Emerson deems "sceptics," "scoffers," and "foolish people," will always question "what they do not wish to hear" (133). He urges individuals not to let society "interfere with […their] thought, but […rather] act *entirely*, or see how the thing stands in God," so that they may "know the particular thing, and every thing, and every man" (133, my italics).

So the underlying thread in Emerson's Self-Reliant Transcendentalism is, arguably, as Cook puts it, "that harmony in life was secured, not by opposing, but by recognizing and working with the laws by which the natural universe operated." This shows that Emerson's beliefs are not an egotistical dismissal of the suffering of others, but rather a philosophy that "has a universal appeal to the consciousness of capacity within man" (Cook xi–xii). In Emerson's philosophy, the interconnectedness implied by the seraphic and universal Over-Soul overlaps with his belief in harmony with Nature itself. Divine truth is encompassed in the natural world (as God in nature), a notion that is explored thoroughly in his famous 1836 essay "Nature" – considered one of the defining texts of Transcendentalism, along with Henry David Thoreau's *Walden.* It is in this text that Emerson encapsulates the beauty of the merging of all of God's creations – which includes both human beings and the natural world.

In the introduction to "Nature" Emerson "interrogates man's relation to nature" (Gura 94), stating that his generation should observe and immerse themselves in nature in order to experience the world, rather than see it through a retrospective lens of "biographies, histories, and criticism" ("Nature" 3). He defines nature philosophically as "all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body" ("Nature" 4). Emerson, however, notes the difference between nature and art,

stating that nature (in the common sense) consists of the "essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf"; whereas art is "the mixture of his will with the same things, as in a house, a canal, a statue, a picture" (4). He stipulates that for this particular essay he will "use the word in both senses; – In its common and in its philosophical import" (4).

According to the ideas put forward in "Nature," God is present in the natural world, and Emerson uses his famous "transparent eyeball" metaphor to convey this notion of being in the "plantations of God" and allowing oneself to integrate into the divine spirit: "In the woods [...] I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part of the parcel of God" ("Nature" 6). So to worship and engross one's self in Nature is to immerse oneself in the spirit of the divine. The overarching unity between all that is part of Nature, "between man and the vegetable," is considered by Emerson to be a delight; and the power to generate this happiness is not in man alone, but "in a harmony of both [Nature and man]" (7). In Emerson's belief, all of God's creation is connected as part of this greater divine whole:

> We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man; that the dread universal essence, which is not wisdom, or love, or beauty, or power, but all in one, and each entirely, is that for which all things exist, and that by which they are; that spirit creates; that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound it does not act upon us without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves; therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God. ("Nature" 38)

One of the pervasive symbols of this unity and connectedness throughout Emerson's writings (linking directly with the notion of the Over-Soul) is that of the circle or the symmetrical globe – shapes which are perfectly round and thus suggest unison and continuity. This is a particular focus in his essay "Circles," in which he discusses the infinitude of circles and how this shape fits and interconnects everything within the ever-changing universe, noting how "St Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere" ("Circles" par.1). The life of each and every person "is a self-evolving circle" which expands "to new and larger circles," and this "same law of eternal procession" even includes "all that we call the virtues" ("Circles" par. 22). The natural world itself "may be conceived of as a system of concentric circles" which reveal the ever-changing reality of the universe, and which is comprised of "these manifold tenacious qualities, this chemistry and vegetation, these metals and animals [that] are words of God" ("Circles" par. 21). The shape of the circle (with its implied infinite continuity) is a perfect tool for Emerson

to use in order to communicate the interconnectedness of all within the universe, and that connection to God.

In the "Beauty" section of "Nature," Emerson observes that the eyeball is the perfect unifying tool for observing and absorbing the beauty of Nature, because through "the mutual action of its structure and [...] the laws of light, perspective is produced, which integrates every mass of objects, of what character soever, into a well colored and shaded *globe*, so that where the particular objects are mean and unaffecting, the landscape which they compose is *round* and *symmetrical*" ("Nature" 9, my italics). He emphasizes that it is natural for individuals to seek beauty, as it is the "nobler want of man," and Nature provides this beauty because it gives individuals pleasure from "the sky, the mountain, the tree, the animal [... as they are] *in and for themselves*" (9). Only a few people, however, are truly able to 'see' the natural world for all its parts integrated as a whole ("Nature" 5). Most adults will view it superficially: they will see the sun ostensibly as it "illuminates only the eye of the man"; but those "whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other [... and] who retain [...] the spirit of infancy," will truly appreciate nature and experience the subsequent "wild delight" (5–6). Over time, the "simplicity of character and the sovereignty of ideas" in man has been corrupted by superficial wants, such as "the desire of riches, of pleasure, of power, and of praise" (18). Despite this corruption, Emerson believes that the creative force in man can be rehabilitated through immersion in and bonding with Nature, because "the country life" is more innovative and advantageous to "a powerful mind" than "the artificial and curtailed life of cities" ("Nature" 18).

Briefly to recapitulate: according to Emerson, everything including humans and Nature are connected by the divine spirit or Over-Soul. As Nature is divine in itself, man should live in harmony with his natural surroundings and indulge in the beauty that nature provides – a notion that is stressed by Emerson's emphasis on unity and synchronization. Nature also "mirrors the spirit" and "makes man acknowledge his relation to the Over-Soul, the spiritual ether that flows through all creation" (Gura 95). It is imperative for man to learn from the natural world, because "to know the [natural] world is to know the divine" (Gura 94).

Emerson's writings would come to have a huge impact on his fellow Romantic idealist and Self-Reliant Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau, Emerson's junior by over a decade, would go on to prove himself a man who truly did "not keep pace with his companions" (*Walden* 210). Influenced by Emerson's *Nature*, "American Scholar," and "Self-Reliance," Thoreau turned these ideas into physical reality by building and living in a

cabin on Emerson's property at Walden Pond. In this way he put into practice Emerson's ideas of complete self-reliance, anti-materialism, and immersion in the natural world, adopting a primitive lifestyle on the fringe of society in which he "combine[d] periods of meditation, practical gardening and subsistence farming with regular literary pursuits" (Leypoldt 2). This experience became the focus of his enormously influential and iconic Transcendentalist text, *Walden*. It is, however, important to note that the achievements of Thoreau were not just "a practical handyman's imitation of Emerson's thought" (Meyer 15). Emerson's work, rather, "encouraged [Thoreau] to see [...the] landscape from a Transcendental perspective" (Meyer 15).

Born in Concord, Massachusetts (an area he would never stray too far from throughout his life) on 12th July 1817, Thoreau encountered "the ever pressing problem" of "remain[ing] free" in the face of economic realities – which he had to come to terms with early on being the son of an unsuccessful pencil-maker (Madison 110). After enlisting at Harvard at age sixteen, and graduating in 1837 "without literary distinction" (Cook 295), Thoreau became a public school teacher, but quickly resigned due to his disapproval of the school's "use of corporal punishment instead of moral suasion" (Madison 110). He went on to work as a pencil-maker and as a teacher at a private school that focused on "advanced pedagogical principles," but this closed in April 1841 (Madison 110).

It was around this time that Thoreau grew close to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who convinced him to keep a daily journal so that he could cultivate his desire to be a writer (Madison 110). Thoreau's diary would be a large part of his life since both *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden* (the only two books published during his lifetime) were "culled and polished largely from his journal" (Harding 5). In the summer of 1841, Thoreau moved to live on Emerson's property as a handyman and house-keeper (Gura 200), although he also assisted with editing *The Dial* (Madison 111). After experiencing the tragedy of his brother's death from tetanus in 1842 (which would serve as the impetus for his first book *A Week*) he moved to Staten Island to tutor the children of Emerson's brother, William (Gura 200–201). While in New York, he shared some of his writings with various publishers, whose reactions were less than satisfactory, and which only strengthened his disdain for city life (Gura 200–201).

Thoreau eventually returned to Concord, but abandoned teaching, as he felt that "freedom meant learning to do without the trappings of more complicated life" (Meyer 17). In July 1845 he decided to put his Self-Reliant ideas on living into practice, and moved to a self-built cabin on Emerson's property at Walden Pond where he lived for two years

documenting his meditations and activities, with the purpose of "transacting some private business with the fewest obstacles" (*Walden* 12). His activities at the pond included philosophizing and writing (he wrote *A Week* while at the cabin, while also carefully documenting his stay), and engaging with and exploring his natural environment (he took various trips and excursions while at the Pond). His stay at Walden would serve as the foundation for his iconic text *Walden*, which has since become one of the foundational texts of American Transcendentalist Literature.

Thoreau's Transcendentalism can, paradoxically, be examined as a type of anti-Transcendentalism. He "was disinclined to join hands with his contemporaries," and generally avoided organizations within the Transcendentalist movement itself, choosing to distance himself from Unitarianism (despite the fact that Unitarianism had been strong at Harvard), as well as the communal endeavours of Ripley and Alcott (Meyer 10–11). What he did admire about the Transcendentalists (particularly Emerson) was their concern over "the lack of integrity they saw in American life" combined with "attitudes concerning the necessity of cultivating one's self" (Meyer 12).

Emerson's ideas are evident in early and (to a certain degree) later writings of Thoreau. As previously discussed, Emersonian ideas involved the belief in an intuitive, divine, interconnecting Over-Soul universally present in all beings, which means that individuals should practice Self-Reliance to cultivate their true selves. Individuals can also commune with this divine spirit in the natural world. Thoreau was captivated by Emerson's *Nature*, "American Scholar," and "Self-Reliance"; and although he had other interests, (including Classical literature, travel writing, Oriental literature, and American Indian culture), Meyer stresses that the "seminal" influence on Thoreau was Emerson's work (15). Thoreau's first book, *A Week* – the first draft of which was written while he was at Walden pond – reveals Thoreau's early reliance on Emerson's ideas.

Thoreau did not gather materials for *A Week* until 1844, and worked on the text for nearly a decade. The book centres on a two-week boating excursion undertaken by Thoreau and his brother in 1839 (Johnson 41–43). Each chapter (except for the introductory chapter "Concord River") is set up as a separate day of the week, structured from Saturday to the following Friday, and might, at first glance, "seem [...] to be a fairly straightforward travel book" (Johnson 40). But a careful reading of the text reveals that a great deal of it consists of digressions; in fact in his introduction to *A Week*, John McPhee notes that the text "is ninety per cent digression and ten per cent narrative," including "a nine-thousand-word digression on friendship" (xxviii). It contains inserts of some of Thoreau's own poems, along with

references to and criticisms of writers and thinkers such as Chaucer, Ossian, Aulus Persius, and Shakespeare. These apparent digressions, however, "are not turnings away but simply different approaches to the main subject of the book" – which is a voyage of self-discovery and mourning for his brother (Johnson 40). The book is in this sense "a pastoral elegy, a poem expressing grief at the loss of a friend" (Johnson 47). It contains traces of Emersonian notions of the Over-Soul and the intuitive capability of all beings to tap into their divine inner spirit that forms part of the macrocosmic Over-Soul. Thoreau also has recourse to typically Emersonian techniques like treating nature as an allegory for the divine (Leypoldt 3), and Transcendentalism is most notably expressed in the symbolic descriptions of the rivers and the ocean as representative of the universal divine flow of life, or, in Emersonian terms, the Over-Soul.

In the first chapter, "Concord River," Thoreau observes how rivers "must have been the guides which conducted the footsteps of the first travellers. [...] They are the constant lure [...] and, by natural impulse, the dwellers on their banks will at length accompany their currents to the lowlands of the globe." In the final paragraph of this section, he goes on to suggest that he will be giving himself over to this all-encompassing, panoramic flow of life:

> I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of all progress, *following the same law with the system*, with time, and all that is made [...] the shining pebbles, not yet anxious to better their condition, the chips and weeds, and occasional logs and stems of trees that floated past, fulfilling their fate, were objects of singular interest to me, and at last *I resolved to launch myself into its bosom and float whither it would bear me.* (*A Week* 13, my italics)

This notion of an infinite universal spirit is explored in the "Monday" section, in which Thoreau observes the ebb and flow of the river and its connection to all living things. Large bodies of water are described as a divine, balanced "whole" that encompasses all the valuable microcosms that make up its celestial current:

> We occasionally rested in the shade [...] while we contemplated at our leisure the lapse of the river and of human life; and as the current, with its floating twigs and leaves, so did all things pass in review before us [...] There is, indeed, a tide in the affairs of men, as the poet says, and yet *as things flow they circulate, and the ebb always balances the flow. All streams are but tributary to the ocean*, which itself does not stream, and the shores are unchanged, but in longer periods than man can measure. Go where we will, we discover *infinite* change in particulars only, not in generals. (*A Week* 100, my italics)

Thoreau continues this allegory of the river (and the ocean) as a holy, unifying spirit, in the "Tuesday" chapter, referring to how the smaller streams and tributaries unify (and thus become "sweeter") to make up "life's stream":

> So near along life's stream are the fountains of innocence and youth. [...] Some youthful spring, perchance, still *empties with tinkling music into the oldest river*, even when it is falling into the sea, and we imagine that its music is distinguished by the river-gods from the general lapse of the stream, and *falls sweeter on their ears in proportion as it is nearer to the ocean*. As the evaporations of the river feed thus these unsuspected springs which filter through its banks, so, perchance our aspirations fall back again in springs on the margin of *life's stream to refresh and purify it*. The yellow and tepid river may float his scow, and cheer his eye with its reflections and its ripples, but the boat-man quenches his thirst at *this small rill alone*. It is *this purer and cooler element that chiefly sustains his life*. (*A Week* 157, my italics)

If one reads the ocean and river as representative of the general overarching Over-Soul, then the "small rill" within this all-encompassing force that satisfies the thirst of the boat-man, can be read as the intuitive, divine spirit present inside all beings that unites them all with the Over-Soul. By tapping into this intuitive spirit within one's self, one can become "purer" and closer to God. A similar example is evident in the final chapter of the book, in Thoreau's discussion of poets, genius, and popularity. In this extract, Thoreau discusses how poets, as seekers of beauty, possess God within themselves. He writes:

> The poet is no tender slip of fairy stock, who requires peculiar institution and edicts for his defence, but the toughest son of earth and of Heaven, and by his greater strength and endurance his fainting companions will recognize the *God in him*. It is worshippers of beauty, after all, who have done the real pioneer work of the world [...]. Orpheus does not hear the strains which issue from his lyre, but only those which are *breathed into it*; for the original strain *precedes* the sound, by as much as the echo follows after. The rest is the perquisite of the rocks and the trees and beasts. (*A Week* 277)

These few examples provide a concise idea of Emerson's early influence on Thoreau, and of Thoreau's writing and ideas before the publication of *Walden*. Egill Arnaldur Ásgeirsson suggests that *A Week* gives an accurate account of Thoreau's views during his stay at Walden Pond – more so than *Walden* itself (12). In his earlier work it seemed that he had an "ambition to become the American scholar and poet that Emerson advocated" (Ásgeirsson 20). *Walden*, however, also displays the influence of Emerson's Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, as well as Thoreau's additions (such as balancing certain binaries, like wilderness and civilization, which are stabilized in later writings such as *Maine Woods* and "Walking").

Thoreau put the notion of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism expounded by Emerson into practice during his stay at Walden Pond, and recorded the experiment in *Walden*. The book itself was only published in 1854 due to the "mediocre reception of *A Week*," although his actual stay at the pond lasted from 1845 to 1847 (Meyer 21). Thoreau spent nine years adding to and crafting the book, "skilfully incorporat[ing] and revis[ing] journal materials from 1839–1854" (Meyer 21). During this time he was able to mould the experience into a single year (despite the fact that he was there for two years and two months), so that he could reveal his spiritual growth through the cycle of the seasons (Meyer 21).

The prominent features of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism in Thoreau's writings (especially *Walden*) are Thoreau's emphasis on individualism, practical self-sufficiency, introspection, simplicity, unity and communion with nature as a spiritual source, all of which he put into practice during his stay at the pond (building his own house, spending time exploring and contemplating the natural world). Self-Reliance, from a Transcendentalist perspective, however, means more than just supporting one's self physically; it also means growing as an individual in the absence of social conventions so as to realize a higher Transcendental self and thus become closer to the divine. Thoreau makes it clear in *Walden*, that "[w]e must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake," because every person has the "ability [...] to elevate his life by conscious endeavour" (*Walden* 59). This notion of consciously endeavouring to "elevate" one's self is reflected upon again in the chapter, "Solitude" in which, apart from declaring "it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time," he discusses the benefits of acquiring "solitude" as a state of being (*Walden* 88). Here, Thoreau emphasizes the equivalent of the "Atman" or "higher self" in Indian philosophy (Wolfe 4). He stresses the importance of becoming "awake" to one's self, and how this "involuntary mindfulness" means knowing a truer, divine self, by "observing one's thoughts, feelings, and actions on the background of that inner silence" (Wolfe 4). George Wolfe draws attention to Thoreau's discussion of this Transcendental experience in a passage from "Solitude," which reads:

> By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. [...] I *may* be affected by theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I *may not* be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me much more. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another [...] I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me [...]. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbours and friends sometimes. (*Walden* 87–88)

By characterizing his experiences as "a work of the imagination," Thoreau is, to a certain extent, "consistent with Indian philosophy" which "sees the world as a projection of "maya or illusion" which leads one away from one's self (Wolfe 5). Thoreau reiterates these notions of self-exploration, self-mastery, and self-realization in the "Conclusion" of *Walden*, in which he states that, before physically exploring the external world, you should first "be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you" because "[e]very man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state" (*Walden* 207).

Similarly, in the "Higher Laws" chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau distinguishes between a divine and a savage self. He contemplates an animalistic urge to "devour" a woodchuck, and proceeds to discuss the concept of going beyond this "savage" self to a divine, more authentic self, although he values both aspects of his character:

> I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as most men do, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. [...] If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes, or even insanity, it may lead him; and yet that way, as he grows more resolute and faithful, his road lies. [...] We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens proportion as our higher nature slumbers. [...] He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established. (*Walden* 136–142)

He chooses to refrain from eating the flesh of animals not only because of its "uncleanness," but because meat, coffee, tea (and other such unnecessary substances) "were not agreeable with [... his] imagination" (*Walden* 139). He goes on to argue that one needs to go beyond these primitive urges to attain a higher self, noting "that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind" (*Walden* 139). Here, Thoreau clearly aligns himself with Emerson's notion of the intuitive divine spirit, and how one can come closer to accessing this spirit by taking "command over our passions [... so as] to be indispensable in the mind's approximation to God" (*Walden* 142). This experience of "awakening" or connecting to our inner "Genius" is, according to Thoreau, most ardently felt in the morning, which he calls the "awakening hour," a period of the day in which we are more likely to be "awakened by our own newly-acquired force and aspirations from within [...] to a higher life" (*Walden* 58).

Being true to your distinctive, divine self, and holding individualistic endeavour in the highest regard is an integral part of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, and throughout his works Thoreau emphasizes the importance of extreme devotion to subjectivity in living a meaningful existence. His ideas about opposing the norms of society are perhaps best

demonstrated in his famous 1849 essay "Civil Disobedience," in which he argues that individual freedom should not be second to government policies, and that resistance to unjust governments is imperative. Thoreau opens the essay by voicing his support for the idea that the best type of government is that "which governs not at all," but makes it clear that he does not wish for there to be no government, but rather "at once a better government" – one that has not been "perverted and abused" ("Civil Disobedience" 227–28). According to Thoreau, an ideal state of governance would involve the conscience of individuals deciding right and wrong ("Civil Disobedience" 228), in other words, the innate moral compass within all of us that points to what is right:

> Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?—in which majorities decide those questions to which the rule of expediency is applicable? Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? ("Civil Disobedience" 228)

The laws of government do not make men more just, or secure justice at all, but rather ensure that "the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice" ("Civil Disobedience" 228). Thoreau highlights the injustices of the American government, particularly the war with Mexico and the continual support of slavery – and notes how an unjust government is more like a machine, robbing its people of their individuality and turning them into appliances:

> A common and natural result of an undue respect for law is, that you may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys, and all marching in admirable order hill and dale to the wars, against their wills, ay, against their common sense and consciences, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart.[...] Now, what are they? Men at all? Or small moveable forts and magazines, at service of some unscrupulous man in power? [...] The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly but as machines, with their bodies. ("Civil Disobedience" 229)

Thoreau encourages us to break the laws of the unjust state ("Civil Disobedience" 234), and argues that the government should not demand money from its people but rather elevate itself the way Thoreau helps himself as an individual ("Civil Disobedience" 239). The majority of citizens merely bow to the government and pay taxes, and thus are aiding the injustices of the government (funding wars and supporting slavery) ("Civil Disobedience" 242). He concludes the essay by observing that democracy is not the final or "last improvement" of a government, but that an ideal government could advance "to recognize the importance of cultivating the individual as a higher and independent power," and even allow individuals to live removed from the state if they so desire ("Civil Disobedience" 246).

Thoreau's ideas on individualism and subjective cultivation are also brought to the fore in other works. In his 1862 essay "Life without Principle," Thoreau's ideas on the value of individualism are also demonstrated when he mentions the valuable "gold" of his own individual self: "I asked myself why I might not be washing some gold daily, though it were only the finest particles, – why I might not sink a shaft down to the gold within me, and work that mine" ("LWP" par. 20). In *Walden* he encourages the reader not to stray from his or her individual path, and not to conform to societal norms. Each individual ought to follow their own voices so that they can define and shape their own life: "Public opinion is a weak tyrant compared with our own private opinion. What a man thinks of himself, that is which determines, or rather indicates, his fate" (*Walden* 4). He observes how a man can succeed at living life purposefully if he moves forward "confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined" (*Walden* 209). In Thoreau's view, success is measured by individual endeavour, self-exploration, and getting in touch with one's divine inner self. A person who "does not keep pace with his companions" should not be forced to succeed in "desperate enterprises," but should rather "step to the [intuitive] music which he hears" as a unique individual (*Walden* 210). One of the main ways to live purposefully as a unique Self-Reliant individual is to simplify one's life, rejecting consumerism and unnecessary material wealth.

Thoreau offers his time spent at Walden Pond as an exemplification of a simplified, unconventional life lived away from the "getting and spending" of society. He narrows down his needs to the bare essentials, which consist, as he explains in *Walden*'s opening chapter, "Economy," of clothing, food, fuel, and shelter (7). Lauriat Lane Jnr observes how Thoreau challenges the reader's own "material life" by emphasising these four basic necessities, and thus "attacks our materiality itself as false and unreal [...] bringing us [...] face to face with one of *Walden*'s essential meanings" (198–99). In the "Economy" chapter Thoreau provides detailed lists and keeps meticulous track of all his spending, revealing how little is required for one to live comfortably, as well as the cheap lifestyle that one can live if one relies on the natural world to provide for some of one's needs. For Thoreau, living a simple "Spartan-like" lifestyle allows for a richer existence because material wealth and excess detail are superficial and "fritter" away at the lives of mankind (*Walden* 59). By simplifying his life, Thoreau is able "not only to discipline his body but also to purify himself and keep his imagination and intuition fresh and responsive" (Rokugawa 214). Thoreau stresses that all aspects of life can be simplified: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand. [...] Instead of three meals a day, if it be necessary eat but one"

(*Walden* 59–60). One should dispense with all other luxuries because "[m]ost of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are [...] positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind [...] the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor" (*Walden* 8–9). To minimalize and to live in seeming poverty is necessary for Thoreau to focus on his "quest for transcendental reality under the guidance of the higher laws" (Rokugawa 214).

By following social conventions and acquiring excess wealth, people complicate their lives unnecessarily, provide more labour for themselves, and thus waste valuable time and freedom that could be used for cultivating one's self and connecting with the universal spirit in the natural world. Thoreau notes how he personally "preferred some things to others, and especially valued [... his] freedom," and thus did not want to waste time "earning rich carpets or other fine furniture": "It is not necessary that a man should earn his living by the sweat of his brow, unless he sweats easier than I do" (*Walden* 46). In this same chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau goes so far as to compare the unnecessary, relentless work of his neighbours (in their pursuit of material wealth) to the tasks of Hercules: "The twelve labors of Hercules were trifling in comparison with those which my neighbours have undertaken; for they were only twelve and had an end; but I could never see that these men slew or captured any monster or finished any labor" (*Walden* 2). The "superfluously coarse labors" associated with the pursuit of wealth prevent a person from discovering "the finer fruits" of life, and so become a hindrance to individual spiritual development (*Walden* 3). This notion is further developed in "Life without Principle," where Thoreau discusses money, labour, true rewards, inheritance, human relations, and the structure of business and wealth in society. One major point in this essay is Thoreau's condemnation of those who work for monetary gain rather than for the joy of doing the task itself. He cautions that one should "not hire a man who does your work for money, but him who does it for the love of it," and that "[t]here is no more fatal blunderer than he who consumes the greater part of his life getting his living" ("LWP" par. 9–12).

What society is lacking, according to Thoreau at the end of "Life Without Principle," is "a high and earnest purpose" which is beyond unnecessary complications and materialistic wants, and which "alone draws out 'the great resources' of Nature" (par. 45). The mention of nature's resources here reminds the reader of an earlier observation regarding the irony of the fact that a man who spends time sauntering through a forest will be looked down upon by society, whereas a man who cuts down the forest and abuses nature's resources will be praised as an "industrious and enterprising citizen" ("LWP" par. 45). Thoreau knew that nature was mostly exploited at the behest of the materialist society which he so greatly

condemned (Ásgeirsson 21), and the very quest for a purposeful existence most certainly involved communion with nature as an educational, practical and spiritual source (Smith 131).

The natural world plays a large role in Thoreau's Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, bearing a "spiritual as well as material significance" (Buell 528). At Walden Pond, Thoreau endeavoured to engage practically with nature (most notably evidenced in the heavily-detailed "Economy" chapter), as "a means of making a living which would preserve the time he desired in order to cultivate his craft as a writer, while maintaining a mode of life that permitted generous swaths of time for outdoor walks, leisure and meticulous nature study" (Gould 1634). Thoreau's practical engagement with nature thus enabled his Transcendental and literary endeavours.

Thoreau's very reason for going to Walden Pond, according to Stanley Edgar Hyman, was to "attempt to work out a satisfactory relationship between man and his environment" (26). On a practical level Thoreau did accomplish this – he built his own house and grew some of his own food – but Rokugawa notes that the "essential theme of *Walden* is the quest for the spiritual life through organic communion with nature" (216). By becoming synchronized or harmonized with nature (through immersion and contemplation), Thoreau strove to achieve the "ideal rapport between [...] spirit and the spiritual presence of the Universal Spirit manifested in natural phenomena" (Rokugawa 215). To be more specific, the chapters "Sounds" and "Solitude" are most revealing of the manner of Thoreau's contemplation of nature, of how he "is intimately acquainted with nature through meditation, patience, expectation, and immobility," and how he connects with a perpetual universal force of life that is present in the natural world (Rokugawa 215). This is particularly evident in the following passages:

> This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, *a part of herself* [...] all the elements are unusually *congenial* to me [...]. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, the skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature's watchmen, – links which connect the days of animated life. (*Walden* 84, my italics)

> In the midst of the gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficient society in Nature, in the very patterning of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, *an infinite and unaccountable* friendliness all at once like an *atmosphere sustaining me*, as made the fancied advantages of every human neighbourhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle *expanded* and swelled with sympathy and *befriended me*. (*Walden* 86, my italics)

Robert Milder notes that moments such as these are, for Thoreau, "a matter of harmonious adjustment to the world" (86). In the "Spring" chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau suggests a unity with Nature when he discusses the human body as being nothing separate from the world of plants: "What is man but a mass of thawing clay? The ball of the human finger is but a drop congealed. The fingers and toes flow to their extent from the thawing mass of the body. [...] Is not the hand a spreading *palm* leaf with its lobes and veins? The ear may be regarded, fancifully, as a lichen, *umbilicaria*, on the side of the head, with its lobe or drop" (*Walden* 199). Thoreau exploits and indulges all the senses, particularly hearing, to harmonize with the unifying force in Nature. An example of this occurs in the "Sounds" chapter of *Walden*, where he observes that "[a]ll sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the *universal lyre*, just as our eyes by the azure tint it imparts it" (*Walden* 80, my italics). Thoreau's engagement with his senses allow for the "feature[s] of the external landscape" to guide and direct his "exploration of his inner landscape" (Smith 137).

Interconnectedness with Nature is also a theme in several of Thoreau's works published after *Walden*, one of which is his essay "Walking," which Don Scheese describes as "a philosophical defense of the need to walk, to engage in the rite of pastoral pilgrimage" (58). Thoreau opens "Walking" with an assertion of man's unity with nature – "I wish to [...] regard man as an inhabitant, or part and parcel of Nature" ("Walking" 260) – and goes on to stress how he connects with the universal spirit of Nature as it draws on his own internal spirit: "I believe that there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright" ("Walking" 268). When choosing where to wander, Thoreau allows the divine force within the natural world to guide him by following his own spiritual intuition: "When I go out of the house for a walk, uncertain as yet whither I will bend my steps, and submit myself to my instinct to decide for me, I find [...] that I finally and inevitably settle [...] toward some particular wood or meadow or deserted pasture" ("Walking" 268). This sympathy with Nature is also evident in the posthumously-published *Maine Woods*, which rather than a "unified book," can be described as a "three-decker sandwich of woodland excursions," including: "Ktdaan," "Chesuncook" and "The Allegash and East Branch" (Theroux xiv). In this book Thoreau implies that the pine trees, the moose, and man "are all connected" (Lebeaux 183), and Richard Lebeaux highlights this in a passage from the "Chesuncook" chapter in which Thoreau writes: "But the pine is no more lumber than man is. [...] There is a *higher law* affecting our relation to pines as well as to men"

(*Maine Woods* 684–85, my italics). Thoreau is able to see "in the intricacy of nature the universal laws that underpin all life" (Gura 205), and by contemplating and harmonizing "with the visible world" he "seeks the union of the human spirit with the spiritual reality" of nature (Rokugawa 214). The natural world, apart from providing access to a sense of universality and the intertwined spiritualities of existence, also provides a source of personal renewal for the self-reliant individual as they find their place within this benign and all-encompassing natural force.

The self-cultivating individual who contemplates and immerses him- or herself in Nature so provides nourishment for their individual spirit. This idea is explored in "Walking," in which Thoreau discusses the benefits of sauntering through the local natural environment. The term "sauntering" here means "a form of walking which [leads] to self-discovery and spiritual renewal" (Smith, "Walking as Spiritual Discipline" 130). Thoreau himself walked for roughly four hours a day, and "developed the art of walking into a highly cultivated spiritual discipline" (Smith 130–31).

By sauntering through and interacting with the wilderness around him, Thoreau was able to acquire "nothing less than the essential material of human life" (Worster 8), generating "a special kind of thinking – spiritual intuitions which flowed spontaneously and creatively during the sauntering adventure," and which required only "[t]he influences of nature and a receptive mind" (Smith 134). This is revealed by Thoreau's observation that "there is something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires" individuals to "be more imaginative" and have clearer thoughts ("Walking" 271). Smith finds a similar sentiment in Thoreau's October 14th 1857 diary entry, in which he discusses why he enjoys walking through the wilderness. For him, walking in the wild is a spiritual experience that provides him with the necessary nutrients to cultivate himself as a unique individual:

> I take these walks to every point of the compass, and it is always harvest-time with me. I am always gathering my crop from these woods and fields and waters, and no man is in my way or interferes with me. My crop is not their crop [...] I am not gathering beans and corn. Do they think there are no fruits but such as these? I am a reaper; I am not a gleaner. [...] I go abroad over the land each day to get the best I can find, and that is never carted off even to the last day of November, and I do not go as a gleaner. (Thoreau, qtd. in Smith 131)

In another passage from his 1851 journal, Thoreau writes that during his walks "the ovipositors plant their seeds in me; I am flyblown with thought, and go home to hatch and brood over them" (Thoreau, qtd. in Smith 135).

So by meandering through and engaging with the natural world, Thoreau "practises a form of internal sauntering," his mind connecting with "the stimuli provided by the surrounding environment" (Smith 132). "Sauntering" in the wilderness also allows Thoreau to exercise the natural, absolute freedom that he values so highly. He distinguishes, at the opening of "Walking," between organic "absolute freedom" associated with wildness and Nature (with which he aligns himself), and a governed freedom that is "merely civil" ("Walking" 260). The latter "depends on the legitimacy and authority of government" and is "supervised by society" (Worster 9). Absolute freedom, in contrast, "thrives beyond the reach of authorities" and "it is the solitary man who can find and retrieve that better sort of liberty from the wild" (Worster 9). Thoreau uses the natural world to chart his internal growth or spiritual development. This is made particularly evident in the changing seasons as they are presented in *Walden*.

By structuring the chapters of *Walden* as a cycle of seasons in one year (starting in Summer with Independence Day), Thoreau is able to convey his inner rejuvenation in, and through, his organic surroundings. This is particularly evident in the transition from the winter chapters to "Spring," in which a sense of sublime newness is evoked. The symbolic death of winter mirrors Thoreau's transition to a better Self-Reliant self, and in "Spring" he describes in vivid poetic detail the beauty and magnitude of this rebirth. As Spring approaches, the "rains and warmer suns are gradually melting the snow" (*Walden* 195), but when the warmth and revitalizing force of Spring is in full swing, Thoreau describes how "Walden is melting apace," and likens the fresh green grass to an internal flame of youthfulness: "The grass flames up on the hillsides [...] as if the earth sent forth an inward heat to greet the returning sun; not yellow but green is the color of its flame; – the symbol of perpetual youth" (*Walden* 201). This image of inner youthfulness sprouting up from the earth reflects how Thoreau himself discovers fresh "perpetual youth" within himself. He makes references to childhood and innocence throughout the "Spring," chapter to further emphasize his symbolic rebirth. Lauriat Lane Jnr notes that just as Walden Pond "was dead and is alive again, [...] so likewise is the soul of man on that symbolic spring morning" (202). Thoreau's soul has been rejuvenated and awakened, a process "like the creation of the Cosmos out of Chaos and the realization of the Golden Age" (*Walden* 203).

The authentic Transcendental experience and state of being that Thoreau describes can be accomplished by anyone in pursuit of a harmonious engagement with natural surroundings: "God himself culminates in the present moment [...]. 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" (*Walden* 63). It is plain to see why the preservation of wilderness became for Thoreau a matter of high priority.

In his later years, Thoreau shifted away from his purely Transcendentalist approach and developed a solid knowledge of environmental science and natural history, advancing to be what Lawrence Buell describes as "a field biologist of considerable skill: in botany especially, but also in zoology, ornithology, entomology, and ichthyology" (538). His later, naturalist approach to the environment is perhaps best exemplified in *The Dispersion of Seeds* – which Michael Benjamin Berger calls "Thoreau's most scientific work" (96) – and in his speech "The Succession of Forest Trees," in which he criticizes deforestation and the damaging practices of particular farming methods. Thoreau's insistence on the preservation of the environment can, however, be traced back through earlier works such as *A Week, Walden,* "Walking" and *Maine Woods*; and he is widely considered to be "the first American environmentalist saint" (Buell 527). Linck C. Johnson points to the "Saturday" chapter in *A Week*, where Thoreau details a variety of native fishes and discusses the impact of manmade constructions on the fish and their migratory patterns:

> Salmon, Shad, and Alewives were formerly abundant here, and taken in weirs by the Indians, who taught this method to the whites, by whom they were used as food and as manure, until the dam, and afterward the canal at Billerica, and the factories at Lowell, put an end to their migrations hitherward; though it is thought that a few more enterprising shad may still occasionally be seen in this part of the river. [...] Perchance, after a few thousands of years, if the fishes will be patient, and pass their summers elsewhere, meanwhile, nature will have levelled the Billerica dam, and the Lowell factories, and the Grassground River run clear again, to be explored by new migratory shoals, even as far as the Hopkinton pond and Westborough swamp. (*A Week* 28–29)

Similarly, Buell points out, in "The Ponds" chapter of *Walden*, while reminiscing about his childhood, Thoreau contemplates the destruction of the forest and the impact this has on the wildlife there:

> When I first paddled a boat on Walden, it was completely surrounded by thick and lofty pine and oak woods, and in some of its coves grape vines had run over the trees next to the water and formed bowers under which a boat could pass. The hills which form its shores are so steep, and the woods on them were then so high, that, as you looked down from the west end, it had the appearance of an amphitheatre for some king of sylvan spectacle. [...] But since I left those shores the woodchoppers have still further laid them waste, and now for many a year there will be no more rambling through the aisles of the wood, with occasional vistas through which you see the water. My Muse may be excused if she is silent henceforth. How can you expect the birds to sing when their groves are cut down? (*Walden* 124, 125).

The thinning of the groves was indeed a reality, as Buell notes that "the percentage of woodland in the town of Concord had been steadily declining during Thoreau's lifetime, reaching an all-time low of little more than 10 percent" at the time that Thoreau was writing *Walden* (529–30). This destruction of the landscape is also pondered in his "Walking" essay, as he notes how the "progress" of civilization sees the destruction of Nature's essence: "almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap" ("Walking" 276). Further on he observes that the trees are being felled at such a rate that he has grown "accustomed to say in New England that few and fewer pigeons visit us every year. Our forests furnish no mast for them" ("Walking" 285).

In *Maine Woods* one can also find evidence of Thoreau's environmentalist stance. In the "Chesuncook" section of the book, Thoreau asserts that civilized Western man "clears the land permanently" and "changes the nature of the trees as no other creature does" for purposes such as the farming of grain, depriving the environment of "its wild, damp, and shaggy look" and leaving only "fallen and decaying trees" (*Maine Woods* 708). Richard Lebeaux observes that in this text, Thoreau views himself "as the protector and defender of the pines," particularly (183). Thoreau stresses that the best use of nature is to embrace and regard the universal spirit that lies therein, noting that he who destroys the forest at great length must rather "converse with the spirit of the tree he fells" and regard "the mystic lore of the wilderness" (*Maine Woods* 769).

In "The Allegash and East Branch," (the last chapter of *Maine Woods*), after observing "[a] belt of dead trees," Thoreau describes the search for an outlet on the lake, only to discover that a dam had been built, and that the "the natural sandy or rocky shore, with its green fringe" had been "concealed and destroyed," leaving "bears to watch the decaying dams" (*Maine Woods* 768). In this section Thoreau is intent on "denouncing loggers" and others who threaten the environment (Theroux xxiv), noting shortly after discovering another dam, that:

> The wilderness experiences a sudden rise of all her streams and lakes, she feels ten thousand vermin gnawing at the base of her noblest trees, many combining, drag them off, jarring over the roots of the survivors, and tumble them into the nearest stream, till the fairest have fallen, they scamper off to ransack some new wilderness, and all is still again. (*Maine Woods* 769)

Thoreau clearly advocates preservation of the natural environment and its inhabitants. His seeming disdain for the civilized Western world, however, is not completely static. These are indications in his work that (as a Self-Reliant Transcendentalist) he requires a balance

between opposing qualities, and that a balance between dichotomous binaries (such as civilization and the wilderness) is arguably more practical than a complete rejection of civilization.

In his early work, *A Week*, Thoreau sets up such a dichotomy. In the "Sunday" chapter, contemplating Native American ways of life, he contrasts the positive primitiveness of the Indians (and their closeness to Nature) with the poisonous civilization of white men:

> And thus he plants a town. The white man's mullein soon reigned in Indian cornfields, and sweet-scented English grasses clothed the new soil. Where, then, could the Red Man set his foot? [...] The white man comes, pale as the dawn, with a load of thought, with slumbering intelligence [...] not guessing but calculating [...] yielding obedience to authority [...] We talk of civilising the Indian, but that is not the name for his improvement. By the wary independence and aloofness of his dim forest life he preserves his intercourse with his native gods, and is admitted from time to time to a rare and peculiar society with Nature[...]. Steel and blankets are strong temptations; but the Indian does well to continue Indian. (*A Week* 44–47)

That binaries like this (wilderness versus civilization) are reconciled in Thoreau's later works is expressive of his unique contribution to the Self-Reliant Transcendentalism. He suggests that Self-Reliant Transcendentalism can lead to a realm of equilibrium between civilization and society, in terms of which wilderness (and solitary, primitive living) is balanced with civilization and contact with members of society. A good example is the train that travels past Walden Pond, close to where Thoreau is living, and which he at first seems to disdain for intruding and poisoning the wilderness.

Leo Marx observes how the locomotive (as representative of civilized industrial society) seems at first to disgust and disturb Thoreau, as revealed in statements such as: "That devilish Iron Horse [...] has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore" (*Walden* 125). The comment implies that industrialization and society's machinery is diabolical, and that the machine is "an instrument of oppression" (Marx 249). When, in the "Sounds" chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau hears the locomotive's approach, he first emphasizes his placid and meditative state of mind, stressing his liberation from time as he harmonizes with his environment (Marx 249). In a meditative, Transcendental state he is liberated from the clocks that are the "master machine" of the Englightenment and civilized society (Marx 249): "I minded not how the hours went [...]. My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into house and fretted by the ticking of a clock" (*Walden* 73). This organic harmony is then disturbed by the sound of the train penetrating through the wilderness "sounding like the scream of a hawk" and reminding him "that many restless city merchants are arriving

within the circle of the town" (*Walden* 75). But the presence of the train is not shunned by Thoreau, as it was in his earlier assertion that: "We do not ride upon the railroad; it rides upon us" (*Walden* 60); rather, he goes on to "admire [...] the punctuality, the urge towards precision and order, the confidence, serenity, and adventurousness of the men who operate this commercial enterprise" (Marx 252):

> [W]hen 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 don't 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! If the cloud that hangs over the engine were the perspiration of heroic deeds, or as beneficent as that which floats over the farmer's fields, then the elements and Nature herself would cheerfully accompany men on their errands and be their escort. (*Walden* 76)

Thoreau here suggests that "Nature herself" is in compliance and harmony with the machine, a notion that he goes on to emphasize in his observation that the train gives him the same joy that Nature does: "I watch the passage of the morning cars with the same feeling that I do the rising of the sun" (*Walden* 76).

While Thoreau is not wholly accommodating of the locomotive in *Walden* (Lauter 244) – he goes on to say: "I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing" (*Walden* 80) – he does, however, allow the train and all that it represents to be absorbed "into the larger design of the natural world where he resides" (Lauter 244). Paul Lauter refers to this process of blending the train (and what it symbolizes) into the organic world as "the 'naturalization' of the machine," and points out that it is most clearly evident in passages of the "Spring" chapter (244), the re-birth chapter that offers a climatic rounding off of Thoreau's experience. Lauter draws particular attention to the section in which Thoreau examines the railroad's cutting through the hillside: Thoreau views the locomotive not as an "unnatural machine upsetting the integrated harmony of Walden," but rather as that which "can be accounted for in the very universal terms nature [...] has taught Thoreau" (Lauter 244):

> Few phenomena gave me more delight than to observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad through which I passed on my way to the village, a phenomenon not very common on so large a scale, though the number of freshly exposed banks of the right material must have been greatly multiplied since railroads were invented. [...] The whole bank, which is from twenty to forty feet high, is sometimes overlaid with a mass kind of foliage, or sandy rupture, for a quarter of a mile on one or both sides, the produce of one spring day. What makes this sand foliage remarkable is its springing into existence thus suddenly. When I see on the one side first; – and on the other this luxuriant foliage, the creation

> of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me; – had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about. I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body. You find thus in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf [...]. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit. [...] The whole tree itself is but one leaf, and rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth, and towns and cities are the ova of insects in their axils [...]. Thus it seemed that this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operation of Nature. (*Walden* 197–99)

This demonstrates what Lauter calls Thoreau's "transcendentalist optimism," to the extent that Thoreau connects humans (what humans have built – the railroad) with "basic forms of nature" (Lauter 245). Human beings are one with Nature, and so are their creations, and Thoreau makes it clear in these passages from "Spring" that this railroad is not intruding on Nature, but is "a form responsive to the very laws governing the leaf, the river, the human hand and face – in short, the fundamental structures of the *universe*" (Lauter 246).

Thoreau takes this idea further in "Walking" by suggesting that society and civilization are dependent on wilderness, and vice versa. Don Scheese highlights a particular passage which demonstrates this notion, where Thoreau "ultimately links wilderness and civilization" and shows that "wilderness is civilization's necessary complement" (Scheese 60). Thoreau writes:

> The civilized nations—Greece, Rome, England—have been sustained by the primitive forests which anciently rotted where they stand. They survive as long as the soil is not exhausted. Alas for human culture! Little is to be expected of a nation, when the vegetable mould is exhausted, and it is compelled to make manure of the bones of its fathers. (*Walden* 276)

Thoreau did not despise industrialization and civilization, but merely detested the fact that culture and society were dominated by them (Marx 248). Indeed, in an 1851 journal entry he voices his admiration for machines and how they can ease the workload of the individual, suggesting a balance between "system[s] of production" and "the noble aim of self-culture" (Stoller 45). After taking "a tour of a gingham mill" in 1851, Thoreau reports in his journal on the efficiency of the machinery and the workers: "I was struck by the fact that no work has been shirked when a piece of cloth is produced. Every thread has been counted in the finest web. [...] The operator has succeeded only by patience, perseverance, and fidelity" (Thoreau, qtd. in Stoller 46). Even in *Walden,* José Joaquín Sánchez Vera points out, Thoreau draws the reader's attention to the fact that he has not totally disregarded money while living

at the pond, but rather used stringent economy to his own advantage – to "achieve a life with freedom left for his 'proper pursuits'" (Vera 7):

> Though we are not so degenerate but that we might possibly live in a cave or a wigwam or wear skins to-day, it certainly is better to accept the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind offer. In such a neighbourhood as this, boards and shingles, lime and bricks, are cheaper and more easily obtained than suitable caves, or whole logs, or bark in sufficient quantities, or even well-tempered clay or flat stones. I speak understandingly on this subject, for I have made myself acquainted with it both theoretically and practically. With a little more wit we might use these materials so as to become richer than the richest now are, and make our civilization a blessing. (*Walden* 25–26)

In *Maine Woods*, Thoreau suggests that he needs a balance between wilderness (and primitive living) and civilized society. Richard Lebeaux asserts that Thoreau kept returning to Maine Woods because he "wanted "to come closer to the Indian" (182), closer to a people whom he believed were more in tune with nature and the spirit therein. In the "Chesuncook" section Thoreau has a Native American guide by the name of Joe Aitteon, and in the final section, "The Allegash and East Branch," he has a Penobscot Indian guide by the name of Joe Polis. Thoreau preferred Polis to Aitteon because he was (to a certain degree) more connected to what Thoreau believed was the true traditional Indian culture, skilled in the arts of wilderness navigation and native botany, and seeming to embody "the Thoreauvian ideal" of simplicity (Theroux xix). Thoreau, who had previously idealized the idea of Native American Indians (and the primitiveness he associated with them), came to realize, however, that he was not comfortable with the extent of "savagery" and wildness he experienced in the woods, most notably after the moose hunting experience in the "Chesuncook" chapter. While he knew that the Indians hunted out of necessity and were thus "justified in their killing of moose," he nevertheless could not console himself with the "grim reality" of the true wildnerness (Lebeaux 10). After witnessing a hunter kill a moose, Thoreau notes:

> But, on more accounts than one, I had had enough of moose-hunting. [...] The afternoon's tragedy, and my share in it, has affected the innocence, destroyed the pleasure of my adventure. [...] The afternoon's experience suggested to me how base or coarse are the motives which commonly carry men into the wilderness. [...] For one that comes with a pencil to sketch or sing, a thousand come with an axe or rifle. What coarse and imperfect use Indians and hunters make of Nature! [...] I already, and for weeks after, felt my nature the coarser for this part of my woodland experience, and daintily as one would pluck a flower. (*Maine Woods* 683–84)

Here, Leabeaux stresses the importance of Thoreau's use of the terms "base" and "coarse" in describing "his intense and horrified response to actual savagery and primitiveness" (181).

He realises that he does not want to live on the purely primitive and wild end of the spectrum between wilderness and civilization.

In the conclusion of "Chesuncook," Thoreau openly states that he would not be able to live permanently in the wilderness, and that he looked forward to returning to the "smooth" area that he chooses to call his "permanent residence" (*The Maine Woods* 711). Yet he knows that he will still need to have doses of the wilderness to maintain his own preferred balance between savagery and wilderness, and civilization and society. Thoreau writes:

> [I]t was a relief to get back to our smooth, but still varied landscape. For permanent residence, it seemed to me that there could be no comparison between this and the wilderness, necessary as the latter is for a resource and a background, the raw material of all our civilization. The wilderness is simple, almost barrenness [...]. A civilized man, using the word in the ordinary sense, with his ideas and associations, must at length pine there, like a cultivated plant, which clasps its fibres about a crude and undissolved mass of peat [...] the poet must, from time to time, travel the logger's path and the Indian's trail, to drink at some new and more bracing fountain of the Muses, far in the recesses of the wilderness. (*Maine Woods* 711–12)

Thoreau admits that he is "most at home" in the more civilized part of the country and now arguably sees himself as the "cultivated plant" pining in the wild (Lebeaux 184). He will, nevertheless, still "travel the logger's path and the Indian's trail" to satisfy his thirst for the wilderness. Thoreau had suggested before that he never sought to be a complete hermit in the wilderness, and that a certain amount of socialization was essential to living life purposefully as a Self-Reliant Transcendentalist. Most notably, in the "Visitors" section of *Walden* Thoreau stresses that he does not completely isolate himself from society, and that he enjoys having visitors over at his cabin.:

> I think that I love society as much as most, and am ready enough to fasten myself like a bloodsucker for the time to any full-blooded man that comes my way. I am naturally no hermit [...]. I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society. When visitors came in larger and unexpected numbers there was but the third chair for them all. (*Walden* 90–91)

The Self-Reliant Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau stresses that Self-Reliance takes precedence over the social engagement and socialism advocated by Transcendentalists such as Ripley and Parker. Self-Reliant Transcendentalism is nevertheless compatible with the greater Transcendentalist notions of the universal spirit uniting man and nature in that, in cultivating the self, one becomes more in tune with the harmonious spirit that unites all of mankind. One should harmonize the self with this divine Over-Soul in Nature (and in oneself) before seeking to undertake social reforms. Each person has the ability to better themselves and find the divine both within themselves and the natural world.

To sum up, the main ideas of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism evident in the work of Emerson and Thoreau are: 1) The importance of cultivating one's self as a unique individual rather than conforming to the systematic norms of society, which include materialism, environmental destruction and consumerism. 2) The universal, all-encompassing divine soul within all living things – and the capacity of every person to access intuitively this divine spirit through introspection, individualism, and harmonious engagement with Nature. 3) Simplifying one's self and life in order to discard unnecessary (material) things that serve only to hinder spiritual development and communion with Nature. 4) The importance of the natural world in spiritual communion with the divine spirit and in practical self-sustained living, and thus the importance of preserving the environment. Thoreau himself was particularly concerned about environmental destruction. 5) The ideas of balancing wilderness and civilization in order truly to accomplish Self-Reliant Transcendentalism: Thoreau "craved the wild but also yearned for and appreciated civilization" (Holt par 22). Attempting to live primitively, completely isolated from civilization, results in the unnecessary sacrifice of the benefits and comforts of society and technological advancements. One should seek a balance between primitiveness (and wilderness) and society (and civilization). Thoreau also suggests that mankind's inventions, just like man and Nature itself, are part of the interconnecting universal vitality.

Emerson's principle of Self-Reliance also influenced fellow Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller, who "stressed the importance of individual responsibility" and "became the foremost advocate of women's rights in her day (Gura, "Social Reform" par. 6–9). But Emerson was the father of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, and Thoreau his disciple who developed the principles of Self-Reliance and put them into practice at Walden Pond. But, as intimated earlier, *Walden* should not be treated as pure autobiography or reportage, because there are elements of design and creativity that place it in the genre of Creative NonFiction.

Chapter Two
Understanding Creative NonFiction

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, which is written in the first person and documents Thoreau's musings and activities during his sojourn at Walden Pond, can (and arguably, should) be examined not as an autobiographical record of facts and truth, but rather as a creatively manipulated work of literature that seeks to inspire its readers by portraying an idealised Transcendentalist figure. *Walden* "presents itself as the report of an experiment undertaken in open inquiry and set before the reader with a scrupulous regard for truth" (Milder 57), but is "too full of philosophical content to be a mere report" (Rokugawa 207). While Walden is most certainly "based on Thoreau's actual experience at the pond," it is also "a deliberate creation" (Rokugawa 207), involving the editing of facts and the addition of other material so as to enhance the Transcendentalist notions that Thoreau wished to promote.

Paul Theroux points out that Thoreau romanticizes his time spent at the pond, and fails to mention that despite "moralizing about solitude" he actually "brought his mother his dirty laundry and went on enjoying her apple pies" (ix). Egill Arnaldur Ásgeirsson points out that Thoreau had no choice but to grow his own food and simplify his needs, since "after building the hut he had no money to live on, though he grew beans in an attempt to create an income" (14). In the "Higher Laws" chapter, in which Thoreau discusses food and the avoidance of animal flesh, he deliberately leaves out the fact that he had "had all his teeth pulled (they troubled him for years) and replaced by dentures" (Meyer 24).

Thoreau's 1845 summer journal entries also reveal that *Walden* did not start in "actual discovery" (as his retreat to the pond had not yet commenced) but rather began from an oratorical position "whose assumption of authority lacked as yet the earned basis of a life in nature" (Milder 57–58). So in this regard, the narrator of *Walden* can be examined as what Milder calls a "consciously mythologized biographical personality" who is more progressive and determined than the 'real' Thoreau (Milder 58). Thoreau presents this ideal Transcendentalist figure of himself not to feign truth but rather to inspire the reader to "discover the truth for themselves" (Fish, qtd. in Milder 59). He "establishes his credentials" in the opening paragraph of *Walden* by "portraying its speaker as manly, self-reliant, rigorously exact, and licensed to speak" (Milder 59):

> When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbour, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my

> hands only. I lived there two years and two months. At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again. (Thoreau, *Walden* 1)

Thoreau also chose to relocate several deleted passages from *A Week* to *Walden*. Richard Smith points out that certain passages on fashion and tattooing (originally part of *A Week*) were transferred to drafts of *Walden* years later (par. 24). Moreover, Thoreau moulded his narrative of his experience at the pond into one year, despite the fact that he lived there for two years and two months (for reasons I have already discussed) – which further highlights the fact that this text is "less genuinely autobiographical than it is an image of Transcendental individualism carefully posed, cropped, and retouched" (Meyer 24). In short, *Walden* is not pure nonfiction or autobiography, but is rather what is nowadays generally known as creative nonfiction (Hesse 18).

Creative nonfiction can be defined as "stories that carry both literal truthfulness and a larger Truth, told in a clear voice, with grace, and out of passionate curiosity about the world" (Gerard, qtd. in Bloom 278). To put it concisely, creative nonfiction is a rubric for "true stories well told" (Gutkind par. 1). This genre "presents the unauthorized version, tales of personal and public life that are very likely subversive of the records and thus of the authority of the sanctioned tellers" (Bloom 278). Creative nonfiction is the use of "literary craft" (the techniques of the novelist) to present nonfiction – "factually accurate prose about real people and events" – in a way that is "compelling, vivid" (Gutkind par 3). Lynn Z. Bloom also notes that the main "ethical standard" of creative nonfiction writers is their desire to convey "their understanding of both the literal and the larger Truth." Because these authors "are dealing with versions of the truth," it is up to them to "look deep beneath the surface" and "render their versions of reality with sufficient power to compel readers' belief" (278). On the topic of biographical fact versus fiction, Bloom asserts that "[i]n its presentation of truth, creative nonfiction—like an artist's rendering of any kind of person, event, or place, in any medium—doesn't have to be fair, just faithful to the vision, understanding of the '"the implacable *I*"' (Bloom 279). Similarly, Joan Didion notes that there is no real difference between what is and what could have been, observing that she is altogether unconvinced of the supposed distinction "between what happened and what merely might have happened" (qtd. in Bloom 279).

Creative nonfiction originally began in America as a reaction to "the co-optation of memoir by the publishing industry" (Cappello 244). The genre of memoir "revolutionized biography" by making the lives of ordinary people worthy of being recorded, but the market

of American publishers would eventually construe "all memoir as trauma-driven" (Cappello 244). Creative nonfiction would carry on "where memoir's potential for formal investigation left off," allowing "the line between biography and autobiography to blur so as to realize that autobiography is also writing about an other who is the self" (Cappello 244). Kelly Clasen traces creative nonfiction even further back to the seventeenth-century colonial era in America, when it originated in the form of captivity narratives which "dramatized the savagery of Native American captors and highlighted the Puritan principles of their hostages" – an example being the 1682 text *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (3). Slave narratives would also fall into this genre, using both "direct reportage" and "literary devices to capitalize on the reading public's voracity for these tales" (Clasen 3).

Travel writing would become a key element in the early years of creative nonfiction as it "encouraged readers to consider the ever-evolving sense of American Identity as it is reflected in the writings of travelers on both American soil and abroad" (Clasen 5). Travel writing in this context is not necessarily about pleasant or unusual vacations as the modern reader might think, but includes involuntary movement – such as a result of the slave trade or being ship-wrecked (Clasen 8). Slave narratives like *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, a Slave, Written by Himself* (1789), which document the brutal treatment of slaves, would vary in their "attention to literary technique," with some questioned for their authorship (Clasen 8).

British American travel writing would continue into the eighteenth century, and records of expeditions would start to "dominate early American letters," such as those of Thomas Jefferson, who "recorded his experiences in France, Holland, and Germany from 1784 to 1789" (Clasen 6). Mark Twain's *Roughing It* is perhaps the best-known (early) American creative nonfiction travel text, documenting "with characteristic humor [Twain's] travels West to the Sandwich Islands" (Clasen 6). Travel writing would "adopt diverse forms in the twentieth century," one such example being Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964), which Clasen describes as "a memoir about the expatriate experience in 1920s Paris" (7).

During the second half of the twentieth century more creative nonfiction forms arose, such as literary journalism (one of its famous pioneers being Hunter S. Thompson), whose proponents "challenged the status quo by infusing their reporting with literary techniques that are traditionally associated with fiction" (Clasen 10). Even though the traditional memoir has grown in the twenty-first century (with stars such as Oprah Winfrey, Ellen Degeneres and Jon Stewart becoming memoirists), creative nonfiction has evolved to a point where there are

now dog memoirs (referred to as "dogoirs"), especially since "the success of John Grogan's *Marley and Me* (2005)" (Clasen 12). Well-known examples of general creative nonfiction include Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928), Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1965), Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), Annie Dillard's *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (1982), Bill Bryson's *Notes from a Small Island* (1995), and Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat Pray Love* (2006).

Controversy has arisen from time to time regarding the line between fiction and truth in creative nonfiction. One of the most notorious cases is that of James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* (2003). Frey's text, which was published as a memoir, documents his triumph over drugs and crime, capturing how he "battens down his cravings, sprays spit and snot and blood and urine, recounts his misdemeanours, finds friendship, and falls in love" (Barton par. 3). The book sold well and was even selected for Oprah Winfrey's book club, but in 2006 the investigative website *Smoking Gun* announced that the text was "far from honest," and that "a six-week investigation had cast doubt on some of the details in Frey's memoir, including his incarceration, the severity of his crimes, and his experiences in rehab" (Barton par. 5). Reporters with the *Smoking Gun* had investigated Frey's story with the police and found that a great deal of his claims were in fact not true (Barton par. 6). Winfrey brought Frey on to her show to explain himself and declared: "I feel that you betrayed millions of readers" (Winfrey, qtd. in Barton par. 6). Frey and his publisher eventually had to "provide refunds to readers who felt they were defrauded in buying a book classified as memoir," and include an apology at the beginning of the book as "a note to the reader" (Barton par. 7).

Frey nevertheless argues that in most memoirs there is a mix of fiction and truth, and stresses that he never aimed to "create or write a perfect journalistic standard of [his] life" but rather to "effectively [...] manipulate information," because that is how stories are made interesting (Frey, qtd. in Barton par. 21). Readers in the United States, in Frey's opinion, were more hysterical about his memoir than in other parts of the world, which Frey believes is because of America's view of the concept of truth:

> People feel frustrated by a lot of distortions by politicians, by members of the media, by movie stars, by tabloid journalists, and it was like a sorta confluence of events that I happened to be in the middle of. [...] America in a lot of ways is still a puritan society. [... T]here are a lot of issues related to truth that are at the forefront of our culture right now because of what happened [in Iraq]. I think it has in certain ways to do with being a young culture, with being a culture that has less of an artistic and literary canon than some of the older European cultures. (Frey, qtd. in Barton par. 19–22)

Barton suggests that modern American society's "increased appetite" for non-fiction and fact is linked to American culture becoming "increasingly synthetic," and that when there is a period of political uncertainty in the country "the bestselling publications at the news agent are reality magazines" (Barton par. 19). Frey's case of controversy is a representative example of the suspicion visited from time to time upon creative nonfiction on account of its truth claims, which, as suggested above, are in reality claims about an essential or higher truth rather than a strictly literal one.

Douglas Hesse places *Walden* in the category of creative nonfiction, and rightly so. Thoreau substitutes "an idealized persona for the 'actual man'" both to inspire his readers and "in the hope that by inscribing such a self he might genuinely become it" (Milder 58). The Self-Reliant Transcendentalist figure he presents to the reader is Thoreau's truth, based on his actual experiences and activities. He is a writer of creative nonfiction, especially in terms of Lyn Z. Bloom's definition: "Every writer of creative nonfiction is an Ishmael who alone has lived to tell the tale – the true story that only he or she can tell" (Bloom 277). Bloom stresses that subjectivity in creative nonfiction is key, observing: "If 'the implacable *I*' means that the author will insist on [… their] own perspective in contrast, even in opposition to others' interpretations, so be it" (279). Thoreau himself declares at the beginning of *Walden*: "In most books the *I*, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking" (*Walden* 1). While Lee Gutkind asserts that the main objective of creative nonfiction is to "make nonfiction stories read like fiction so that your readers are as enthralled by fact as they are by fantasy" (par. 3), in the case of *Walden*, Thoreau's main objective is to provide an inspirational Transcendentalist figure (based on himself and his actual experiences at the Pond) to his readers: "The facts of his life are shaped and reconstituted for the purpose of telling not so much the whole truth as they are for creating a representative identity that readers [can] use" (Meyer 24). This purpose is similar to that seemingly informing the modern American nonfiction texts that will be discussed in this study.

Like *Walden*, the texts that I will be analysing – *Desert Solitaire, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Into the Wild*, *The Last American Man*, and *Untamed* – all document real American 'practical idealists' (most of whom are still alive today), who commit to endeavours similar to Thoreau's at Walden Pond, and in doing so both express and embody thinking similar to that of Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is vital to regard these texts as creative nonfiction, whether written from a first-person autobiographical perspective (*Desert*

Solitaire, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *The Last American Man*), or from a third person biographical perspective (*Into the Wild*, *Untamed*). Like Thoreau in *Walden*, the authors of these texts are, rather than simply reporting biographical facts, presenting and amplifying the activities and ideas of real-life figures in order to convey specific ideas and inspire the reader. The self-reliant individuals and the events in these texts are portrayed in such as a way as to enhance the ideas they represent, which, I will argue, resonate with Self-Reliant Transcendentalism.

Chapter Three
Self-Reliant Transcendentalism in Selected Modern American Creative NonFiction Texts

3.1: Desert Rat: Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968)

Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* has been described as "a hard pastoral experience in a land of rock and sand and cactus," in which the author seeks "refuge in the nonhuman world in order to resolve key conflicts between himself and society" (Scheese 109). It is based on the time Abbey spent as a seasonal park ranger in Arches National Monument, Utah, in the 1950s, living in a trailer in an isolated part of the reserve. Abbey's activities at the park include wilderness excursions, solitary contemplations of civilization and the vast beauty and emptiness of the desert, criticism of the environmental destruction and overpopulation occurring in Arches, and of the impact of society on the individual. The book has been compared to Thoreau's *Walden* for a variety of reasons, most notably the broad similarity of the two authors' contemplations while withdrawn from society, and the use of "the [seasonal] cycle of a year as the basic narrative structure" (Bryant 16). In fact, Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* echoes not only Thoreau's ideas, but the collective Self-Reliant Transcendentalism of both Emerson and Thoreau.

Like Thoreau, Abbey exaggerates his solitariness in the desert, and chooses not to mention that "for his second season at Arches [he] was accompanied by his wife and son" (Pozza 10). Also like Thoreau's *Walden*, *Desert Solitaire* covers two years of experience compressed into one seasonal cycle, starting in April (Spring) and ending in September (Autumn). This period is moulded around "a single tourist season" (Bryant 5), and throughout the text Abbey contemplates the effect and implications of tourism on national parks and the wilderness. Disillusioned by the impact of man on the environment, Abbey takes a Transcendentalist stance in his musings on nature. One of his main concerns is the intrusion of urbanized society into the desert wilderness.

Most of Abbey's conservation focus is on the desert canyons and surrounding areas of Arches. In the "Down the River" chapter, Abbey observes that there are plans to dam up the Grand Canyon (as had previously been done to the Glen Canyon). Abbey describes the building of the dam as a crime, and considers himself lucky to have been able to see Glen Canyon "before it was drowned" (189). The creation of dams results, in Abbey's view, in the

total destruction of the natural landscapes of the area. He recalls a paddling trip down the Colorado River with his friend Ralph Newcomb, and remembers their unpleasant realization that "very soon the beauty [... they] were passing through [would] be lost" (Abbey 205). The intrusion of industrialism on nature, and the expansion of urbanized society into the wilderness only results in modern man "seal[ling] himself off from the natural," thus "exiling himself from the earth" and "isolat[ing] himself within a synthetic prison of his own making" (Abbey 211). One of the possible reasons for man's desire to penetrate, control, and possess the desert wilderness is the primeval silence and the unknown that the environment embodies, stirring in humans "an unconscious fear" to which they respond by attempting to "reduce the wild and prehuman to human dimensions" (Abbey 240).

Perhaps *Desert Solitaire's* most forthright condemnation of wilderness eradication is Abbey's assertion that it is "quite insane" for anyone to see environmental destruction as a positive move in the name of progress (58), and that the "true original sin [...] is the blind destruction for the sake of greed of this natural paradise which lies all around us" (208). He also audaciously declares that he will not attempt to deal with those readers who "advocate the eradication of the last remnants of wilderness and the complete subjugation of nature to the requirements of [...] industry" (Abbey 58). Abbey is inspired by people who have endured tribulations in the wilderness yet still admired it and sought to preserve it from exploitation. These figures include Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, John James Audubon, George Caitlin, and Major J. Wesley Powell. Abbey emphasizes that these men "wandered on foot over much of [... the] country" and "endured hardships [...] no less severe than those of the frontiersman," yet still "found in it something more than merely raw material for pecuniary exploitation" (Abbey 209).

Environmental destruction is also committed by those who are supposed to be in the practice of conservation. After witnessing the mating of two Gopher snakes in the early "Cliffrose and Bayonets" chapter, Abbey details some of the local flora and fauna, only to deplore how the local ecosystem has been disturbed by the actions of the local Wildlife Service. The pinyon pines have nearly all been destroyed by porcupines, whose population numbers are excessive because their natural enemies have been hunted to near extinction. The Wildlife Service "keeps its people busy in trapping, shooting and poisoning wildlife, particularly coyotes and mountain lions" (Abbey 34). The deerslayers (as Abbey calls them) also arrive in the Arches "by the thousands," but do nothing to dent the excess populations of deer who have, like the porcupine, multiplied dramatically due to the excessive killing of

their predators. Because of their numbers the deer do not have enough food, so "each year [they] are condemned to a slow death by starvation" (Abbey 37).

Companies associated with the national parks, apart from contributing to environmental instability, also assist in estranging man from nature. The wildlife services support and implement Industrial Tourism, otherwise known as "the mechanized tourists" (61). In a quest for more visitations, the wildlife parks allow developers in to build modern roads so that once remote (and thus untainted) locations become easily accessible to the general public with their vehicles and technology. Abbey is particularly concerned with the fact that most people will not take the trouble to walk or hike to remote and beautiful locations that are otherwise inaccessible to vehicles and caravans. Critical of the Park Service's eagerness to accommodate "the indolent millions born on wheels and suckled on gasoline, who expect and demand paved highways to lead them in comfort, ease and safety into every nook and corner of the national parks," Abbey praises those who "wander on foot or on horseback through the ranges [...] hungry for a taste of the difficult, the original, the real" (Abbey 60). Industrial tourists are merely "robbing themselves" of the real "treasures of the national parks," and become distanced from "the strange warmth and solidity of Mother Earth" (Abbey 64).

As proposed solutions to the encroachments of people and their technology, Abbey suggests the following: 1) No cars be allowed in national parks, 2) No new roads be built in national parks, 3) Give the park rangers proper outdoor work (outside of the office and patrol cars) to monitor hikers, trails and the wilderness. Abbey himself physically does what he can to reduce environmental threats, even if it involves breaking the law (Scheese 114). After seeing government surveyors scouting for new routes for a modern road through the park, Abbey decides to follow and rip out all the wooden survey stakes and destroy all the marked taping in order to disrupt the project.

Even outside of *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey had a bold reputation for defending the environment, with Misiroglu going so far as to state that he "was one of the most influential and radical environmentalists of the twentieth century," even being credited with introducing "the Earth Day generation to the desert Southwest" (3). After World War II, Abbey headed for the American Southwest, where he found in the desert wilderness "a kind of individual freedom" that was "lacking during the 1950s of the conformist Dwight D. Eisenhower administration," and in this new home Abbey "devoted himself to protecting the wilderness" (Misiroglu 3). In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey presents himself as an early eco-warrior because he actively advocates preservation and conservationism, yet he does so in the belief that Nature

provides Transcendental nourishment for the human spirit and the means to rediscover the elemental unity of the cosmos.

While Abbey states in his introduction that he "know[s] nothing whatever about true underlying reality" and that he is quite "pleased enough with surfaces" (xi), he suggests a Self-Reliant Transcendentalist vision of Nature throughout the text, starting with his first morning at the national park, when he expresses his deep desire to penetrate the reality of the wilderness. As he stands and looks out across the vast desert landscape, Abbey feels a "ridiculous greed and possessiveness," an extreme will to truly "know" the desert wilderness, to "possess it all, embrace the entire scene intimately, deeply, totally," and to "confront [...] the bare bones of existence, the elemental, the fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us" (6). Here, like Emerson and Thoreau, Abbey implies a Transcendentalist desire to understand the core reality embedded in Nature. Paul T. Bryant observes that Abbey's will to acquire the underlying truth in the wilderness echoes Thoreau's Transcendentalist observation in *Maine Woods* (17). Thoreau examines Mount Ktaadn and gives vent to his desire to possess the reality and absolute truths inherent in nature and the universe: "Think of our life in nature,– daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,– rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense! Contact! Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *where* are *we*?" (Thoreau, *Maine Woods* 646). Abbey also gestures towards a divine force within nature, with which he establishes a unique bond, enabling the desert to become his personal spiritual wilderness. When he leaves the desert to return to civilization at the end of the book, he takes one last turn around the park and describes all its features as his own personalized celestial assets now absorbed into his very individuality: "I walk for the last time this year out the trail past Tunnel arch, Pine Tree Arch [...] all the way out to Double-O Arch at the end of the path. My own children, mine by right of possession, possession by right of love, by divine right" (Abbey 333).

The wilderness is for Abbey "a necessity of the human spirit" (Abbey 211), and provides him with certain absolute and divine truths that transcend surface reality – despite his assertion that the desert wilderness possesses a "quality of strangeness" (303). These truths are arguably synonymous with a spiritual domain or sphere, an idealized wilderness that permeates all life, similar to the universal divine soul which Emerson called the "Over-soul." Through contemplation of nature, Abbey is able to "transcend [...] limitations" and "glimpse [... this] deeper and more elemental world" unspoiled by humans (Knott 332). This idealized and infinite reality is approached when Abbey contemplates and immerses himself in nature. John R. Knott observes that in *Desert Solitaire* Abbey is "preoccupied with this

other world" (344) or universal soul. Knott cites passages that evoke the presence of this infinite and all-encompassing spirit in the text (344) – such as Abbey's contemplation and description of the Colorado landscape as "a section of eternity" (Abbey 243), and his almost physical entrance into this sphere as he floats down the river through "a kind of waking dream," "deeper into eden," where he is able to "enjoy [...] a very intimate relation with the river" (Abbey 191, 199).

David Tagnani points out how Abbey associates city life with compression, and the desert wilderness with the expansion of the mind into a sense of unity and limitlessness (Tagnani 329). In particular, Tagnani draws our attention to the "Cowboys and Indians Part II" chapter, in which Abbey observes that in his trailer he is lonely and "surrounded by the artifacture of America" (Abbey 121), but as soon as he steps out into the open desert "his loneliness dissipate[s]" (Tagnani 329), as he is "invited to contemplate a far larger world, one which extends into a past and into a future without any limits known to the human kind" (Abbey 121). Making physical contact with the vast desert wilderness, Tagnani argues, Abbey's mind expands "as his world expands": "the expansive desert invites contemplation of the infinite complexities of this vast, strange ecosystem, and his mind therefore strains to encompass more—hence things appear more meaningful" (Tagnani 330). In one particular scene, when Abbey is sitting on his terrace watching the light fall upon the landscape as night approaches, he acknowledges a mystical sense of relationship between the individual thing and a universal ether:

> In the mixture of starlight and cloud-reflected sunlight in which the desert world is now illuminated, each single object stands forth preternatural through transient brilliance, a final assertion of existence before the coming of night: each rock and shrub and tree, each flower, each stem of grass, diverse and separate, vividly isolate, yet joined each to every other in a unity which generously includes me and my solitude as well. (Abbey 124)

In this "clearly mystical experience," Abbey demonstrates the Self-Reliant notions of both spiritual unity (or the universal soul uniting all life) and individualism, as "he finds not only union but individualism as well, the paradox of unity-in-diversity, as each individual organism is isolate yet joined" (Tagnani 330). Abbey yearns for this universal "womb of the earth" which is "beyond us and without limit," because this Transcendental realm "is a necessary part of the whole truth" (Abbey 208). But to access these truths in this seraphic wilderness "where boundaries are dissolved" (Knott 332), Abbey suggests that we need to overcome or transcend our primitive fears.

In the early chapter "Serpents of Paradise," two Gopher snakes slither towards Abbey outside his trailer. Abbey is at first enthralled and curious, but then "stung by a fear too ancient and powerful to overcome," he backs away, only to observe later that if he had risen above that fear he "might have learned [...] some truth so very old we have all forgotten it" (24–25). In order to approach the higher truths offered to him through experience with or of these reptiles (as components of the spirit within nature), Abbey would need to transcend the primitive fears and urges in all of us, in much the way that Thoreau emphasizes overcoming the savage self to reach a higher identity more in tune with the universal spirit. Abbey seeks a Transcendental merging with the all-encompassing soul within nature, "to recover a capacity for direct, unmediated vision and to bridge the gap between the human and nonhuman," but still wishes to keep his individuality untouched (Knott 336). According to Knott this is emphasized in Abbey's first night in the desert:

> I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities. [...] I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual. (Abbey 7)

Distinguishing between culture and civilization, Abbey aligns the former with destructive qualities, and the latter with nature and beneficial qualities. Culture, for Abbey, is more in line with Thoreau and Emerson's ideas of civilization (estrangement from nature, industrialism, materialism, etc.). He recalls an encounter with a tourist in the park who accused him of "being against civilization, against society," but after pondering on the subject Abbey concludes that he is in fact "not opposed to mankind but to man-centredness" and culture (305–306). Abbey defines culture as "the way of life of any given human society considered as a whole," including "all aspects of such organizations—their economy, their art, their religion" (306–307). Culture is "that inert mass of institutions and organizations which accumulate around and tend to drag down the advance of life" (308). America and the U.S.S.R. are, in Abbey's opinion, not civilizations but rather what he calls "*industrial* cultures" which compete against each other – one a monopoly of capitalism and the other a monopoly of socialism (307).

On the other hand, Abbey refers to civilization as "the conscious forefront of evolution," the "semi-independent entity," an "Invisible Republic open to all who wish to participate, a democratic aristocracy based not on power or institutions but on isolated men" (307). In order to clearly convey the distinction between culture and civilization, Abbey resorts to a series of analogies: "Civilization is mutual aid and self-defense, culture is the

judge, the lawbook and the forces"; "Civilization is uprising, insurrection, revolution; culture is the war of state against state, or of machines against people"; "Civilization is tolerance, detachment and humor, or passion, anger, revenge; culture is the entrance examination, the gas chamber, the doctoral dissertation and the electric chair"; and, perhaps most powerfully: "Civilization is the wild river; culture, 592,000 tons of cement" (Abbey 308). So Abbey is opposed not to civilization but to modern, urban culture, which is characterized by materialism and monotonous routines that choke our freedom and impede the development of our individuality:

> My *God*! I'm thinking, what incredible *shit* we put up with most of our lives—the *domestic* routine (same old wife every night), the stupid and useless and degrading *jobs*, the *insufferable* arrogance of elected officials, the crafty *cheating* and the *slimy* advertising of the businessmen, the tedious wars in which we kill our buddies instead of our *real* enemies back home in the capital, the foul, diseased and *hideous* cities and towns we live in, the constant *petty* tyranny of automatic washers and automobiles and TV machines and telephones. [... W]hat *intolerable* garbage and what utterly *useless crap* we bury ourselves in day by day, while patiently enduring at the same time the creeping strangulation of the clean white collar and the rich but *modest* four-in-hand garrotte! (Abbey 193)

Here Abbey seems to demonstrate a typical hippie take on "the establishment," which is entirely to be expected as *Desert Solitaire* was published in 1968, between the 1967 'summer of love' in San Francisco and the Woodstock concert in 1969, "at the height of the 1960s counterculture" (Misiroglu 3). Abbey emphasizes two of the primary principles of the hippie movement in America at the time: rebellion against a life aimed primarily at accumulating money, and condemnation of the manner in which money was typically acquired, that is, through work seen as "either meaningless or intrinsically demeaning" (Howard 46). In the concluding chapter of this study, I will return to this topic and enlarge upon the reasons why each of the modern American figures I am discussing embrace Self-Reliant Transcendentalist ideas and beliefs.

In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey observes that materialistic urbanized cultures are detrimental not only to those who are born into them, but also to those who are encroached upon by them. The civilization of native American Indians in America has all but been destroyed by the expansion of modern Western culture and industrial urbanized society. Before their conquest in the nineteenth century, the Southwest pre-Columbian Indians had a great deal of leisure time because they were not burdened "by the necessity of devoting most of their lives to the production, distribution, sale and servicing of laboursaving machinery" (Abbey 127). Independent of capitalist society, the native Indians "were free to do that which

comes as naturally to men as making love – making graven images" (Abbey 127). Because of overpopulation on the reservations to which they were initially moved by the American government, the Navajo Indians migrate into the "rural slums of the white man's towns which surround the reservation" and end up turning to alcohol and drugs, as they fall prey to Western consumer culture and the "ferociously competitive world of White America" that is so foreign to them (129–30). Abbey notes that in this environment, the Navajo Indians suffer poverty, broken families, mental illness, crime, and prostitution, not only because they are handicapped by their skin colour, a language barrier, and insufficient education, but also because they do not understand the drive to profit from other people's labour (134). They come from a tradition "which honours sharing and mutual aid above private interest," so allowing someone to prosper while someone else suffers is considered immoral in their culture (134). While Industrial Tourism has been considered a solution to this crisis, Abbey does not consider it the best way to proceed. Industrial tourism might add to the economy of the Indian reservations, but it will also further degrade the civilization of the Navajo Indians:

> The natives must learn to accustom themselves to the spectacle of hordes of wealthy, outlandishly dressed strangers invading their land and their homes. They must learn the automatic smile. They must expect to be gaped at and photographed. They must learn to be quaint, picturesque and photogenic. They must learn that courtesy and hospitality are not simply the customs of any decent society but are rather a special kind of commodity which can be peddled for money. (Abbey 135)

So the society of modern America is destructive alike to the indigenous civilizations which preceded it, and to individuals (such as Abbey) born into it. To protect his individuality, his spirit, from materialism and what he calls "industrial culture," Abbey chooses to lives a life of simplicity and solitude in the national reserve.

Abbey's stay in the Arches National Park is a practical rejection of this culture (rather like Thoreau's time at Walden Pond), and he finds that he can regain individual freedom and joy when he is alone and far from modern society: "I am twenty miles or more from the nearest fellow human, but instead of loneliness I feel loveliness. Loveliness and quiet exultation" (Abbey 16). For Abbey the wilderness is appealing because it is "a place where he could escape the constraints and preoccupations of the everyday world and test himself against whatever hazards nature might present" (Knott 337).

Abbey maintains that he enjoys his job precisely because he is a man of simplicity who has "small needs" (51), and who admires the desert wilderness for its "simplicity and order" along with its paradoxical "veil of mystery" (301). When recalling his trip down the river with Ralph, Abbey contemplates the possibility of living a life of simplicity in the

wilderness away from "syphilization," because nature would provide all the necessities (199). He would have everything he needs in the wild – he would survive off catfish and venison, using "cottonwoods for shade and shelter, juniper for fuel, mossy springs (not always accessible) for thirst, and the everchanging splendor of the sky, cliffs, mesas and river for the needs of the spirit" (Abbey 200). As much as Abbey admires living in the desert, however, he knows that he cannot live there permanently, and that he in fact prefers a balance of wilderness and modern society.

Abbey draws attention to this tension between society and the self, wilderness and civilization throughout the book, but in the chapter entitled "The Moon-Eyed Horse" we encounter a symbol of one of these poles, solitude in the wilderness. While moving a herd of Roy's cows with his friend Mackie, Abbey notices a set of unshoed hoof prints in the sand, and is informed by Mackie that the prints belong to a mysterious independent horse who has been roaming the nearby canyon for ten years. This horse, called "Old Moon-Eye," has a bad temper due to a "moonblindness" condition in one of his eyes, and after bucking off a woman rider he was severely beaten by one of the ride leaders (173). Moon-Eye galloped off with the saddle still on his back, never to return. This rebellious horse who is distrustful of others and lives a solitary life in the canyon is representative of the side of Abbey that strongly yearns for a solitary life of contemplation away from society and civilization (Bryant 9).

Abbey tells Mackie that horses are gregarious and that it is "not natural for a horse to live alone" (Abbey 175), so he decides to find the horse and bring him "back to the comforts of society" (Bryant 10). Even though he eventually comes across Moon-Eye, he fails to capture him. In this episode Abbey is "examining in his own nature, that part of him that rebels against the structures of civilisation" (Bryant 10). Like Moon-Eye, there is a part of Abbey that wants to "throw [...] off the saddle and bridle of civilization and [become] a hermit in an isolated desert canyon" (10). But while Moon-Eye is free and independent from structure and control, he is handicapped by the blindness in his eye, which means that his vision of the world "lacks perception of depth" (Bryant 10). The horse also has a "limited future" because of his monotonous anti-social daily routine – much the same as Abbey would experience were he to exploit this one extreme of his divided allegiance to the wilderness and to human society (Bryant 10). Abbey comes to realize that he cannot live that kind of life because it would be lonely and repetitious. When he asks what the rogue horse does all day, Mackie replies "He eats. He sleeps. He walks down to the creek once a day for a drink. He turns around and walks back. He eats again. He sleeps again" (175) – more-or-less the life that Abbey would live as a hermit in the Arches park were he to remain there permanently

without contact with civilization (Bryant 10). The "Moon-Eyed Horse" chapter reveals one side of the divide between society and isolation in the wilderness, representing "individuality and independence held at all costs, including loss of society, comfort, [and] friendship" (Bryant 9–10). As Abbey comes to realize, he needs a balance rather than the extreme at either end of this spectrum.

The final chapter of *Desert Solitaire* marks the end of his stay in the park, until the next season. In this "farewell chapter," Abbey says his goodbyes to the aspects of the desert wilderness he has become so fond of (Bryant 13). The chapter also explicitly declares Abbey's realization of his need for a balance between urban life and solitariness in the park. He informs the reader that the time has come for him "to leave the canyon, if only for a season," and return to "the howling streets of Megalomania, U.S.A" (330–31). While he admits that he hates the "grim business" of civilization and even compares it to a battlefield, he concedes that the secret is balance, that "moderate extremism" is the key to a fulfilling existence for him (331). He longs for the vast desert landscape devoid of human presence, but also "for a view of the jolly, rosy faces on 42nd Street and the cheerful throngs on the sidewalks of Atlantic Avenue" (331). Choosing not to align himself wholly with the solitary Moon-Eyed horse who symbolizes extreme loneliness in the wild, Abbey decides that he needs a dose of civilization, to "hear the wit and wisdom of the subway crowds again [...] the happy laughter of Greater New York's one million illegitimate children" (331). Knowing that he will return to the desert the following spring for solitary contemplation in order to maintain this necessary balance, Abbey remarks that he will be "back before [... he] is out of sight," and he takes one last trip around the park to "surrender" the various natural features of the park "to the winds of winter" (333–35).

Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* can be read as extending several of the founding ideas of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism. He initially endeavours to live in the desert alone in contemplation of nature (as Thoreau did at Walden Pond), and intimates the presence of a universal spirit (with absolute divine truths) in the desert wilderness with which he discovers an individual spiritual bond – a notion that resonates with Emerson's idea of the Over-Soul and the individual spirit. Abbey's idea of simplicity and finding a higher self above a savage one also resonates with the Self-Reliant Transcendentalist idea of elevating the individual self to its truest form through introspection and self-reliance, and without interference from others. While, at various points throughout the text, Abbey demonstrates a hatred of the monotony and demoralizing aspects of urban civilization (as Thoreau did early on), he concludes that he cannot permanently live a solitary existence in the wilderness, but requires

regular contact with society. Abbey's middle ground mirrors Thoreau's Self-Reliant balance between spiritualized nature and interaction with civilized society, and like Thoreau's concern for the protection of nature as a component of the divine soul, Abbey demonstrates a fierce passion for safeguarding the environment as a spiritual necessity for union between man and Nature.

A writer who was greatly admired by Abbey is Annie Dillard, whom he described as a woman who "has earned the right to wear the Master's pants [...] she alone has been able to compose, successfully, in Thoreau's extravagant and transcendentalist manner" (Abbey, qtd. in Pozza 11). To find this Thoreauvian character in Dillard's writing, one need look no further than *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

3.2 Waterside Transcendentalism: Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974)

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek presents itself almost self-consciously as a modern Transcendentalist text, elaborating a vision incorporating core precepts of Emerson and Thoreau. In describing her sojourn at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard provides a strong argument for Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, expressing ideas that resonate primarily with Emersonian notions of the Over-Soul and of Nature as a spiritual source, while at the same time advocating self-cultivation and simplicity. At the same time, she offers a "darker view of God and the dynamics of the natural world" than either Emerson or Thoreau (Scheese 129), along with other perspectives critical of traditional Transcendentalist notions such as the purity of the unfiltered Transcendental vision and the concept of uniting with Nature and the universal spirit.

Dillard won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a narrative that documents her musings and experience at and around her "anchor-hold" home next to Tinker Creek in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia. The events that inspired the book can arguably be linked to a "near-fatal bout with pneumonia" in 1971 which "made her determined to live life more fully and to increase her sensibility to the world outside the mind" (Scheese 122). But it was also profoundly shaped by Henry David Thoreau and his stay at Walden pond. At Hollins College Dillard completed her Master's thesis on "Walden Pond and Thoreau," and *Pilgrim* can be read as "an updated version of *Walden* [...] a chronicle of solitude" exploring the "beauties [but also the horrors] of nature, [... and] the power of the present moment in the world that's constantly being created" (Saverin par. 2).

Like Thoreau at Walden Pond, Dillard did not really leave civilization: the Blue Ridge Mountains location of her home cannot be considered true wilderness but rather what Don Scheese describes as a "soft pastoral" environment at most (123). Rather, Dillard "simply left civilization out of the book" (Saverin par. 50) so as the better to characterise herself as an isolated Transcendentalist figure. She is nevertheless faithful to her pared-down life of contemplation at the creek. Putting into practice the Self-Reliant ideal of simplicity during her stay, Dillard reminds the reader early in the text that she values the simple life supremely, and that by simplifying one's wants and needs one can add value and purpose to one's life:

> There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. [...] It is dire poverty indeed when a man is so malnourished and fatigued that he won't stoop to pick up a penny. But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. It is that simple. (Dillard 17)

While Dillard cannot be considered a true hermit, she rarely mentions other people in *Tinker*, and when she does, they are merely references by name in passing (McIlroy 114) – for example: "The little Atkins kids are here, and they are hopping up and down" (157), and "the Bings came home and their house was ruined" (159). Gary McIlroy observes how Dillard's isolation from society is brought to the fore in the "Flood" chapter (which serves as a bridge from her praise of nature to her shock at its brutality), where the flood and the "coming together of the community to combat it paradoxically suggest an even greater detachment than those chapters which do not mention society at all" (McIlroy 116). While she refers to all the locals coming together during this scene – they "come together quickly and disperse even faster" (McIlroy 116) – the only individual that Dillard comes into contact with is a man she encounters while walking along a brick wall during the flood. The man is walking in the opposite direction, obliging Dillard to join him in a moment of what McIlroy describes as "mute fellowship" (McIlroy 117): "I met a young man who's going in the opposite direction. The wall is one brick wide; so we can't pass. So we clasp hands and lean out backward over the turbulent water; our feet interlace like teeth on a zipper, we pull together, stand, and continue on our ways" (Dillard 157). Dillard's attitude toward society is a typically Self-Reliant one: she seeks solitude and self-contemplation (along with contemplation of nature) above the concerns of society. Her attitude is perhaps best conveyed in her metaphor regarding the women of the town: "Some of the women are carrying plastic

umbrellas [...]. They can see out dimly, like goldfish in bowls. Their voices from within sound distant" (Dillard 158). What Dillard arguably implies here is that the conventional citizens of the town are trapped in social conventions, that their own individual voices are stifled, and that they are hindered from experiencing individual growth and the true life outside of the 'bowl' of society.

McIlroy views Dillard's move away from societal norms in her stay at the creek as that of a "displaced romantic" who is "out of touch with the fashion of the time," and compares her to Thoreau – who also, for the most part, viewed society as "a world of shadows and symbols" (114). McIlroy goes on to draw parallels between Thoreau's and Dillard's lack of common ground with other members of society, and highlights the similarities between Dillard's observation – "I have often noticed that these things, which obsess me, neither bother nor impress other people even slightly" – and Thoreau's February 1857 journal entry which reads "I have seen my auditors standing on their terra firma [...] watching my motions as if they were the antics of a ropedancer or mountebank pretending to walk on air" (Thoreau, *Journal* 172). Both Dillard and Thoreau are conscious of their unique character and imply that their individuality should be nourished without condemnation or hindrance resulting from society's lack of understanding. This subjectivity is imperative to the Self-Reliant ideology, and works hand-in-hand with a view of Nature as source of the Divine.

Don Scheese emphasizes Dillard's spiritual view of Nature in his description of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* as a "pastoral retreat to explore spiritual issues": Dillard investigates "the nonhuman world" in order to attain "a religious experience, a way to communicate with God" (Scheese 120). She uncovers unlimited beauty and complexity in the natural world, which she links with evidence of God's creation. In the "Intricacy" chapter, which examines the minute details of creation, Dillard praises the extravagance of God's work, his knack for "pizzaz," and acknowledges her desire to acquire and hold in her mind the true spiritual reality of all these intricacies of Nature (Reimer 186):

> The chloroplasts do stream in the leaf as if propelled by a mighty, invisible breath [...]. This is the truth of the pervading intricacy of the world's detail: creation is not a study, a roughed-in sketch; it is supremely, meticulously created, created abundantly, extravagantly, and in fine. [...] Look at the fruit of the Osage orange tree, big as a grapefruit, green, convoluted as the human brain. [...] The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another, or millions simultaneously [...], the creator loves pizzaz. [...] What I aim to do is not so much learn the names of the shreds of creation that flourish in this valley, but to [...] try to impress myself at all times with the fullest possible force of their reality. I want to have things as multiple and intricately as possible present and visible in my mind. (Dillard 136–39)

Like the Transcendentalist practice of Thoreau and Emerson, which sought to find the spiritual in Nature, Dillard immerses herself in the natural world "for religious reasons—to become one with God" (Scheese 124). This is evident in the "Present" chapter where she stops at a gas station, looks out across the mountains and experiences a divine unified moment which she defines as the "present":

> I am absolutely alone. [...] Before me extends a low hill trembling in yellow brome, and behind the hill, filling the sky, rises an enormous mountain ridge. [...] I have never seen anything so tremulous and live. [...] My mind has been a blank slab of black asphalt for hours, but that doesn't stop the sun's wild wheel. [...] The ridge's bosses and hummocks sprout bulging from its side; the whole mountain looms miles closer, the light warms and reddens; the bare forest folds and pleats itself like living protoplasm before my eyes, like a running chart, a wildly scrawling oscillograph on the present moment. [...] This is it, I think, this is it, right now, the present, this empty gas station, here, this western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue, and I am patting the puppy, I am watching the mountain. (Dillard 79–80)

Here Dillard suggests that she has almost absorbed her surroundings, somehow contriving to unite them all in that very moment, experiencing true present-ness. Stephen H. Webb defines the present that Dillard refers to as "the moment of the now in which we are at one with the world" (441). The divine in Nature, according to Dillard's ideas, can thus be examined as "the present" rather than what should or will be – and she quotes Huston Smith accordingly: "In nature the emphasis is in what is rather than what ought to be" (Smith, qtd. in Dillard 241). The Transcendental moment – a moment of transcendence – is achieved by Dillard in feeling at one with the spirit of Nature in the experience of this unmediated present-ness.

Dillard also, however, expresses her doubts about integrating one's self into the spiritual ether of Nature. She contemplates how becoming one with Nature could "paradoxically [...] lead to alienation from nature" (Scheese 124). She observes how one can lose one's self-consciousness and individuality when this happens, a process that necessarily creates a conflict: "[h]ow does a person become one with nature, that is, lose one's self-consciousness, and at the same time retain a sense of self or otherness in order to record and re-create the experience?" (Scheese 124). Scheese highlights this in the gas station scene where, after acknowledging the true present moment in her embracing of her mountainous surroundings, Dillard goes on to write:

> the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. I am opaque, so much black asphalt. [...] It is ironic that the one thing that all religions recognize—our very self-consciousness—is also the one thing that divides us from our fellow creatures. (80)

Here Dillard documents her loss of the Transcendental, unifying moment as soon as she acknowledges her awareness – creating a conflict similar to that of Abbey in *Desert Solitaire*, when he seeks to transcend the boundaries between all forms of life, yet still remain individual and self-aware: "I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree [...] and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities. [...] I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual" (Abbey 7).

It is this *self*-consciousness that Dillard believes "hinder[s] the experience of the present" and "is the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies" (Dillard 82). She uses the example of losing herself in a tree, becoming closer to its true essence – where "the tree stays tree," but notes that as soon as she becomes aware of the activity "the tree vanishes" and she becomes unplugged from the true reality, the universal spirit (Dillard 82). In order to experience the present one needs what Dillard refers to as "innocence." It is through this Transcendental innocence that one can experience the true present – and it is available as a gift from the universal spirit (Dillard 83). For Dillard innocence is not "the prerogative of infants and puppies," but is rather "the spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object," "a receptiveness and total concentration" (Dillard 83). Thus what she calls "innocence" mirrors the Self-Reliant Transcendentalists' state of pure contemplation in which all external filters and influences that distort the true reality of an object fall away – leaving no gap between that part of the universal soul (whether it be a tree or a mountain) and the self. Dillard pursues this unfiltered Transcendental innocence "singlemindedly, driven by a kind of love [...] a root-flame in the heart" (Dillard 83).

Further on in the "Present" chapter, Dillard describes the true experience of the present again, this time referring to it as "the waves that explode over my head [...] it is the live water and light that bears from undisclosed sources the freshest news, renewed and renewing, world without end" (104). The latter part of this observation – in which Dillard describes the present as a "world without end" – again gestures to the Transcendentalist notions of infinitude and interconnectedness, reflecting on a kind of Emersonian Over-Soul. Dillard feels a connection to this spirit in the twelfth chapter when she immerses herself in the wilderness and describes a mystical spiritual force of the "highest good" entering her heart and rising in her:

> I rise when I receive, like grass. I didn't know, I never have known, what spirit it is that descends into my lungs and flaps near my heart like an eagle rising. I named it full-of-wonder, highest good, voices. I shut my eyes and saw a tree stump hurled by

> wind, an enormous tree stump sailing sideways across my vision, with a wide circular brim of roots and soil like a tossed top hat. (Dillard 224)

In keeping with Emerson's observation that the Over-Soul cannot be adequately defined in language, Dillard struggles to describe this universal spirit, trying on the phrases "full-of-wonder" and "highest good." In writing of a mystical divine force in Nature lifting her up like an eagle taking flight, Dillard is able to convey how the force ignites a spiritual fire in her as an individual and allows her own spirit to "rise" and unite with the universal soul. This echoes the ideas of both Emerson and Thoreau on how one's individual spirit can unite and "rise" closer to the divine through the universal spirit in Nature. For example, Emerson writes:

> [Nature] is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it. [...] throughout nature, [the] spirit is present; [... The Over-Soul] does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God. (*Nature* 37–38)

Dillard discusses this very type of Transcendental "seeing" in the second chapter of her book, aptly entitled "Seeing." After discussing cases where people blinded from birth become able to see, Dillard moves on to a special kind of vision which she seeks to acquire – being able to "see truly" (Dillard 33). This type of seeing requires succumbing to the spirit in Nature, so that one becomes both an observer and a part of the spirit itself. She conveys this notion through an image of walking "without a camera":

> [T]here is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied. The difference between the two ways of seeing is the difference between walking without a camera. When I walk with a camera I walk from shot to shot, reading the light on a calibrated meter. When I walk without a camera, my own shutter opens, and the moment's light prints on my own silver gut. When I see this second way I am above all an unscrupulous observer. [...] I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr I was flesh-flake, feather, bone. When I see this way I see truly. As Thoreau says, I return to my senses. (Dillard 33–34)

This observation, according to Margaret Loewen Reimer, echoes Emerson's Transparent Eyeball metaphor (184), where he writes: "I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me [...]. The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them. ("Nature" 6–7). But Dillard's remarks also echo Emerson's observation that: "To speak truly, few adult persons can see nature [...].

At least they have a very superficial seeing" ("Nature" 5). Both Emerson and Dillard speak of seeing the true reality of Nature without filters, and of experiencing a sense of oneness with the universal Over-Soul. Similarly, towards the end of the text, Dillard describes seeing the world as "new" through a rejuvenated spiritual lens which she has acquired through contemplation of and uniting with the soul in Nature:

> I cannot in all honesty call the world old when I've seen it new. [...] But I am thinking now of the tree with the lights in it, the cedar in the yard by the creek I saw transfigured. [...] I still now and will tomorrow steer by what happened that day, when some undeniably new spirit roared down the air, bowled me over, and turned on the lights. I stood on the grass like air, air like lightning coursed in my blood, floated my bones, swam my teeth. I've been there, seen it, been done by it. I know what happened to the cedar tree, I saw the cells in the cedar tree pulse charged like wings beating praise. (Dillard 244–45)

Although Dillard "watches the details of her natural environment with a sense of amazement and is overwhelmed with the lessons which nature can teach" (Reimer 184), and seeks to truly "see" like the Self-Reliant Transcendentalists, she nevertheless expresses doubts about the purity of this Transcendental vision. She expresses her awareness that too much light can damage the sight, that "[t]here can be too much seeing" (Reimer 184): "If we are blinded by darkness, we are also blinded by light. When too much light falls on everything, a special terror results. [...] I reel in confusion; I don't understand what I see" (Dillard 24–26). Dillard thus acknowledges that the result of visionary intuition does not always have the clarity that previous idealists seem to have promised (Reimer 184).

Nevertheless, for her all life seems interconnected by an all-encompassing soul that mirrors the Over-Soul of the Self-Reliant Transcendentalists. This divine unity of life is implied by Dillard throughout *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a notable example being the image of the goldfish she examines – identifying each red blood cell in the transparent tail through a microscope, she concludes: "I've never forgotten the sight of those cells; [...] I think of it lying in bed at night, imagining that if I concentrate enough I might be able to feel in my fingers' capillaries the small knockings and flow of those circular dots, like a string of beads through my hand" (Dillard 126). Gary McIlroy describes this "rosary of cells" as symbolic of the "common bond between Dillard and the fish, between animal life and human life in general, and between Dillard and other people" (McIllroy 115), connecting all the intricate and otherwise uniquely distinctive aspects of life.

In the "Spring" chapter of *Pilgrim* Dillard praises this teeming abundance of life, embracing the freedom and beauty of the universe in all its excesses. Even though she does

not know why the bird sings, she still finds it beautiful, and "beauty is that which is more than the useful [...] it is appropriately symbolized by the growth [...] of spring." In this season there seem to be infinite possibilities for Dillard (Webb 442):

> In Spring I am prone to wretched excess. [...] A tree stands there, accumulating deadwood, mute and rigid as an obelisk, but secretly it seethes, it splits, sucks, and stretches; it heaves up tons and hurls them out in a green, fringed fling. No person taps this free power; the dynamo in the tulip tree pumps out ever more tulip tree, and it runs on rain and air. [...] The trees especially seem to bespeak a generosity of the spirit.[...] I saw hundreds of holes in the ground everywhere I looked; all kinds of creatures were popping out of the dim earth, some for the first time, to be lighted and warmed directly by the sun. It is a fact that the men and women all over the northern hemisphere who dream up new plans for perpetual motion machines conceive their best ideas in the spring. (Dillard 108–114)

Although Dillard praises and celebrates the excesses of Nature, she also takes a critical stance on the cruel and brutal parts of existence and on the question of why, if God is in fact benevolent, suffering should exist alongside beauty. These observations to a certain degree distinguish her ideas from the idealism of Emerson and Thoreau (Webb 433).

Dillard reveals her doubts by noting that brutality and monstrosity are widely spread in a universe of such "infinite variety of forms," such as "the clotted snarls of bright algae that snare and starve the nymph" (Dillard 147). Dillard's main wonder, however, is not that cruelty and hardship exist in the world, but "that there is beauty at all" (Dillard 148). Indeed, she spends a fair portion of the text examining the cruel aspects of Nature and the excesses of creation, observing that: "The creator goes off on one wild, specific tangent after another" (Dillard 138). She takes a lingering critical look at the horror and brutality she finds abundant in the animal and insect world.

For Dillard, the world of insects is especially vicious and hard to understand. The horrific violence and endless reproduction seem to be pointless, and merely add to the mystery of existence and pose the question of whether there is a "reasonable god" (Dillard 64). Human beings seem to stand out as freaks on an earth seemingly governed by violent and barbaric acts of instinct. We are "moral creatures in an amoral world" (181). Two notable instances in the text where Dillard strongly emphasizes her disgust and awe at the brutality of the insect world is when she watches "bewildered and appalled" as a frog is drained by a giant water bug, and she observes that these horrors occur every day for all to witness – yet remain unknowable:

> He was a very small frog with wide, dull eyes. And just as I looked at him, he slowly crumpled and began to sag. The spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent.

> [...] Soon, part of his skin, formless and a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bright scum on top of the water: it was a monstrous and terrifying thing. (Dillard 7–8)

> Fish gotta swim and bird gotta fly; insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible thing after another. I never ask why of a vulture or shark, but I ask why of almost every insect I see. More than one insect—the possibility of fertile reproduction—is an assault on all human value, all hope of a reasonable god. [...] The remarkable thing about the world of insects, however, is precisely that there is no veil cast over these horrors. These are mysteries performed in broad daylight before our very eyes; we can see every detail, and yet they are still mysteries. (Dillard 64–65)

Pilgrim's tenth chapter, "Fecundity," gives an even clearer insight into the insect world. This chapter presents the patterns of behaviour in the domain of insects as "a nightmare" (Reimer 186). In this world of "mindless procreation," insects slay and devour their mates, parents kill and eat their young and vice versa (Reimer 186). Dillard suggests that the endless beauty created by God is matched by the extent of death, suffering, and waste:

> I don't know what it is about fecundity that so appals. I suppose it is the teeming evidence that birth and growth, which we value, are ubiquitous and blind, that life itself is so astonishingly cheap, that nature is as careless as it is bountiful, and that with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include our own cheap lives. (Dillard 162)

> Now I have not observed any extensive grazing of grasshoppers on any grassy shores, but obviously it must occur. Bingo, then, the grasshopper just happens to eat the encysted worm. The cyst bursts. The worm emerges in all its hideous length [...] inside the body of the grasshopper, on which it feeds. I presume that the worm must eat enough of its host to stay alive [...]. The worm perhaps bores its way out of the grasshopper's body, or perhaps is excreted. [...] Other creatures have it just about as easy. A blood fluke starts out as an egg in human feces. [...] It changes in the snail, swims out, and now needs to find a human being in the water in order to bore through his skin. [...] Evolution loves death more than it loves you or me. (Dillard 174–78)

As evidenced, Dillard's "experience of the natural world ranges from the wildly beautiful experiences which lead to ecstasy to the repulsive, terrifying sights which result in nightmares" (Reimer 185), and this conduces to a central question posed in *Pilgrim*: "How do we explain the evil in the world?" (Reimer 189). Dillard answers it through the realisation and "understanding that both horror and ecstasy are interdependent aspects of God's creation, that you can't have one without the other" (Stahlman par. 29).

The tragic and cruel exist together with the beautiful and Transcendental, and Dillard acknowledges that we need to accept both seemingly contradictory ends of existence: "I saw how freedom grew the beauties and horrors from the same live branch" (Dillard 182). From

the first page of her book Dillard conveys this notion of the beautiful as intertwined with the violent – in the story of her cat who would lie with her in bed gently kneading her chest and leaving bloody paw prints all over her: "We wake, if ever we wake at all, to mystery, rumors of death, beauty, violence" (Dillard 4). Stephen H. Webb argues that this tomcat "represents both nature and God" and also signals "that the nature [Dillard] will examine is also a part of herself" (437). Reimer points out that this "dialectical vision," this balance between the cruel and the beautiful is reflected in Dillard's very style of writing (Reimer 186), such as when she trudges through the snow and observes how "[t]he snow looks light and the sky dark [...] the dark is overhead and the light at my feet" (Dillard 45). Similarly, she imagines a counterpart to Tinker Creek (called Shadow Creek) which signifies "the dark side of creation" (Webb 443), and which "storms through limestone vaults under forests, or surfaces anywhere" (Dillard 64).

Pilgrim ends with Dillard's acknowledgement that she does not have the answers to these contradictions of dark and light, yet feels that "it is enough for her that she has been touched and purified by her encounter" and "dared to look at both sides" of creation with her "gift of acute sight" (Reimer 190). She maintains that "[t]he universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet" (275). Beauty is true and real for her, and it exists only in the balance with waste and death, both of them "got together up and down the banks, all along the intricate fringe of spirit's free incursions into time" (Dillard 271). Dillard thus demonstrates a dialectical vision in which life is a constant balance of dark and light, beauty and evil. She knows that there are those who "have prayed for their daily bread" and who "God knows loved their life," yet who still died from hunger (Dillard 270). It is in her final chapter, "Waters of Separation" (named after the water used by certain Hebrew priests in cleansing rituals, because she feels purified by the creek itself), that Dillard witnesses a natural sign confirming the endless surge of vitality – a maple key flying through the air "with animate purpose" guided by "a generous and unending breath" (Dillard 273). The key "does what it has been designed through evolution to do: spread its seed and procreate" (Scheese 130):

> And the bell under my ribcage rang a true note [...]. That breath never ceases to kindle, exuberant, abandoned; frayed splinters spatter in every direction and burgeon into flame. And now when I sway to a fitful wind, alone and listing, I will think, maple key. When I see a photograph of earth from space, the planet so startlingly painterly and hung, I will think maple key. (Dillard 273)

The helicopter-like maple seed gives her a final reassurance that "[t]here is beauty and design after all" (Scheese 130).

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek conveys some fundamental ideas of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, even though Dillard examines some of them critically, turning them "back on themselves to ask what kind of world this really is" (Reimer 183). Her view of the divine is that it is "contained in the natural world but extends beyond it as well," that God is ultimately "both immanent and transcendent" and that "she can experience direct, unmediated contact with God through nature" (Scheese 129). While Dillard draws the reader's attention to the horrors of life and probes the existence of cruelty, "it is precisely this vulnerability to the horrors of the world that leaves her open to experience the beauty and wonders of the Divine" (Stahlman par. 29) – and in this sense her seemingly darker view of creation actually accentuates her Transcendentalist approach to beauty in Nature. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* also depicts Dillard's chosen life of simplicity and self-contemplation, revealing in particular how "nature can be an effective basis for self-culture [...] and spiritual rejuvenation" (Scheese 123).

Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey both demonstrate strong elements of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, one of these being their meditative immersion in, and quiet contemplation of, Nature as source of spiritual strength and renewal. This vital component is found in a slightly different form in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, where the protagonist seeks out exciting adventures and demanding activities in the wilderness rather than calm contemplation of the mystical elements of Nature. While this may seem like a divergence from the Transcendentalist theme of engaging with Nature spiritually and subjectively appreciating the beauty in the wilderness, I will argue that Krakauer's *Into the Wild* shows not only that Christopher McCandless appreciates Nature as a source of spiritual rejuvenation, but also that he demonstrates his embrace of other important elements of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism.

3.3 Tramping for Ideals: Jon Krakauer's *Into The Wild* (1996)

In the iconic text *Into The Wild* – which remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over two years, and which has been turned into a film directed by Sean Penn (Vera 2) – Jon Krakauer recounts the story of Christopher McCandless, a university graduate who left his family and modern civilization behind to live a nomadic lifestyle "in search of ultimate freedom, a nobler life closer to nature and divorced from the extreme materialism of American society" (Vera 2). Structuring the story on McCandless's own notes and letters, and on evidence from friends, family and other tramps he encountered while on his adventure, Jon Krakauer strikes a balance "on the fine line between the role of historian and storyteller" (Vera 1). Krakauer also uses quotations from Thoreau (whom McCandless read avidly) throughout the text in order to compare the two men, who shared similar ideas and concerns regarding Self-Reliance, simplicity, and Nature.

Initially taking the form of an article that Krakauer published in *Outside* magazine in 1993, the story of Christopher McCandless generated strong reactions among readers, both positive and negative. Krakauer was encouraged to extend the article into a book-length work of creative nonfiction. Krakauer imbued McCandless's story with his own outlook (Vera 3), identifying profoundly with the ideas and concerns of the lone adventurer, and frequently drawing parallels between himself and the idealistic young man: both "seem to have felt the necessity of escaping from a complex reality, their problems, and expectations of their parents or society" (Vera 10). To enhance the tale of McCandless's idealistic escape from society, Krakauer emphasizes the sanity of the young man, and "adds another dimension by recounting tales of other modern adventurers, including himself, who have sought personal transcendence in the farthest reaches of the American wilderness" (Hanssen 192).

McCandless's journey began after he graduated from Emory University in 1990 at the age of twenty-two. He donated all his savings to charity, set the cash in his wallet on fire, and set off (without letting anyone know) to hitchhike and live self-sufficiently across America with the aim of getting to Alaska (his personal final frontier). He eventually reached and remained in the Alaskan wilderness, living in an abandoned bus along the Stampede Trail until his death. He clashed heavily with both his parents, regarding them as exemplary of society's ills – especially his father, whom Chris discovered had an entire other family (and had fathered another child with this ex-wife after Chris was born). Apart from his direct disdain for society and the civilization he witnessed around him, McCandless was also spurred to go into the wild by some of his favourite writers, such as Thoreau and Jack

London – the latter's *The Call of the Wild* specifically, which features a dog named Buck fighting for survival in Alaska (Krehan 27). Krakauer documents McCandless's movements and activities during this emancipation, including working on a Northern California farm for a man named crazy Ernie (whom McCandless eventually discovers to be a con artist); doing grain combine work for Wayne Westerberg in Carthage; kayaking down the Colorado River, South Dakota; living in homeless shelters; working at a McDonalds in Bullhead City; hopping on and off freight trains; living briefly with "rubber tramps" Jan Burres and her boyfriend Bob at an old Navy air base deemed "the Slabs" (which had become a refuge for communities of tramps and nomads); befriending and staying briefly with an elderly man, Ronald Franz, whom he met whilst hitchhiking near Salton Sea; and living in an abandoned bus in the Alaskan wilderness, hunting and exploring his surroundings. McCandless's journey, as documented and portrayed in *Into the Wild*, reveals vital evidence of his ideas and pursuit of Self-Reliance.

Once he set out, McCandless gave himself the name "Alexander Supertramp; master of his own destiny," the name and act of naming symbolizing not only his individuality but also his freedom from the conventional name bestowed upon him at birth. This effectively marked his "complete severance from his previous life" (Krakauer 23–24). By his own declaration, he was "an aesthetic voyager" who wanted to escape society in order to "kill the false being within and victoriously conclude the spiritual pilgrimage" (Krakauer 162). Robyn Zink argues that what McCandless means by "the false being within" is the conventional being that "poisonous society had created within him" prior to his liberating breakaway (Zink 24). McCandless sought to get in contact with a true self or spiritual truth within himself that had previously been stifled by the structured routines and expectations of society. He suggests that living deliberately through individualism and introspection is essential to seek out and harmonize with this truth, and that through individual endeavour one can be reborn and awakened to this true reality. This is implied in a paragraph he wrote in his journal after he had killed a moose and attempted to preserve the meat (which he failed to do). After this incident and after highlighting a passage on vegetarianism in Thoreau's *Walden,* McCandless writes:

> I am *reborn*. This is my dawn. Real life has begun. *Deliberate Living*: Conscious attention to the basics of life, and constant attention to your immediate environment and its concerns [...]. It is how one relates to a situation that has value. All *true meaning* resides in the *personal relationship* to a phenomenon, what it means to you. (McCandless, qtd. in Krakuer 167, my italics)

His emphasis on "Deliberate Living" and "attention to the basics of life" is reminiscent of Thoreau's reason for going to Walden pond: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" (Thoreau 59); McCandless, like Thoreau, wanted to face the bare truths of life with purpose and enthusiasm through individual endeavour and a plain subjectivity. His "ideals regarding realizing one's own dreams clashed with the opinions of others, namely his parents," whom he saw as ultimate symbols of the society that he detested (Thomson par. 3–5).

McCandless viewed society as a system that flattened the futures of individuals into monotony and conformity, a situation he detested as he was determined to craft a unique path for himself. McCandless himself emphasises this in a letter to Ronald Franz, in which he advises Ron to forsake his stagnant lifestyle and instead adopt a life on the road away from the predictable routines of civilized society, initiating change through individual endeavour and soaking in what the world had to offer:

> I think you should really make a radical change in your lifestyle [...]. So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism [...] nothing is more damaging to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences. (Krakauer 58)

The ultimate independence that McCandless sought was embodied for him by Alaska, "a place of freedom and adventure" (Hanssen 193).

Not wanting materialism and consumerism to hamper his spiritual journey towards the Alaskan wilderness, McCandless chose initially not to use money because he "did not like the security money gave him, preferring the freedom and simple beauty of living life on the road" (Zink 22). For him money served only to detract from the excitement and spontaneity of living as a completely free voyager, as evident in his postcard to Wayne Westerberg which reads: "Tramping is too easy with all this money. My days were more exciting when I was penniless and had to forage around for my next meal" (McCandless, qtd. in Krakauer 33). McCandless not only avoided the materialism he found so ingrained in American society, but "believed that wealth was shameful, corrupting, [and] inherently evil" (Krakauer 115). Addressing Ron Franz, McCandless suggests that new experiences provide pure, unfiltered joy for the individual who chooses to simplify his life and do things for himself: "[Y]ou must do it economy style, no motels, do your own cooking, as a general rule spend as little as possible and you will enjoy it much more immensely" (Krakauer 59). Similarly, in his personal declaration of independence (which was found in the abandoned Alaskan bus in

which he had settled along the Stampede Trail), McCandless states that he has no wish to be part of a consumerist society and instead chooses individual freedom with minimal possessions: "Two years he walks the earth. No phone, no pool, no pets, no cigarettes. Ultimate freedom. [...] No longer to be poisoned by civilization he flees, and walks alone upon the land to become lost in the wild" (Krakauer 162).

This doctrine of anti-materialism and simplicity took shape long before he set off on his adventure of liberation, and Krakauer notes that even "[d]uring his final year in Atlanta, Chris had lived off campus in a monkish room furnished with little more than a thin mattress on the floor, milk crates, and a table. He kept it as orderly and spotless as a military barracks. And he didn't even have a phone so Walt and Billie had no way of calling him" (Krakuer 22). Chris's adamant insistence on simplicity, Krakauer suggests, ties in to the desire for direct contact with life, and – in my argument – a Transcendental experience of reality and nature unhindered by the excesses and distractions of society: "At long last he was [...] emancipated from [...] a world of abstraction and security and material excess, a world in which he felt grievously cut off from the raw throb of existence" (Krakauer 22).

McCandless possessed an inner yearning that Krakauer believes was similar to Thoreau's in that his true desire was for unfiltered communion with Nature: he was attracted to "the prospect of rough congress with nature, with the cosmos itself. And thus he was drawn north, to Alaska" (Krakauer 67). For him true joy stemmed from new, raw experiences with the natural world. Addressing Mr Franz, McCandless intimates that there is a certain "light" to be found in exploring nature, and that each person can access this light if they only seek out new adventures in the world:

> I fear you will follow this same inclination in the future and thus fail to discover all the wonderful things that God has placed around us to discover [...]. You are wrong if you think Joy emanates only or principally from human relationships. It is in everything and anything we might experience. We just have to have the courage to turn against our habitual lifestyle and engage in unconventional living. My point is that you do not need me or anyone else around to bring this new kind of light in your life. It is simply waiting out there for you to grasp it, and all you have to do is reach for it. [...] I really hope that as soon as you can you will get out of Salton City, put a little camper on the back of your pickup, and start seeing some of the great work that God has done here in the American West. (Krakauer 58–59)

While McCandless here differs slightly from Thoreau and Emerson's ideas on spiritualized Nature, seeking "excitement and adventures" in Nature rather than quiet contemplation (Lepik 41), he nevertheless gestures towards the presence in Nature of a rejuvenating spiritual essence that each individual can access if s/he only takes the initiative. Krakauer himself

observes that McCandless, unlike Thoreau, did not go into the wilderness "to ponder nature" but rather "to explore the inner country of his own soul" within Nature (Krakauer 182). Despite McCandless's journals "contain[ing] few abstractions about wilderness," he does , discover, like Thoreau, that living off the land usually results in forming a "strong emotional bond with [...] that land and all that it holds" (Krakauer 183). In other words, the fact that some of McCandless's diary entries and postcards have no real Romantic musings on Nature does not mean "that McCandless failed to appreciate the beauty of the country around him," and Krakauer himself believes that the young adventurer found a deep connection with the Alaskan wilderness as he hunted and integrated himself into the back country. Krakauer justifies this argument by describing McCandless as possessing the characteristics of the nomadic Bedouin, as found in an observation by cultural ecologist Paul Shepard:

> The nomadic Bedouin does not dote on scenery [...]. His life is so profoundly in transaction with nature that there is no place for abstraction or esthetics or a "nature philosophy" which can be separated from the rest of his life [...]. Nature and his relationship to it are a deadly-serious matter, prescribed by convention, mystery, and danger. His personal leisure is aimed away from idle amusement or detached tampering with nature's processes. But built into his life is awareness of that presence, of the terrain, of the unpredictable weather, of the narrow margin by which he is sustained. (Shepard, qtd. in Krakauer 183)

In this excerpt, Krakauer suggests that there is an undeniable awareness engrained in McCandless as a Self-Reliant nomadic Bedouin, in terms of which he accepts and appreciates the presence of profound beauty and danger around him without detached deliberation, because he does not remove himself from Nature (with which he has a "deadly-serious" relationship). McCandless's existence was eventually not alongside Nature but part of it, accepting equally the exquisite grace and terrifying harshness of the Alaskan wilderness.

While McCandless initially took "his idealism one step further than Thoreau" by wanting to completely remove himself from society "rather than actively attempting to transform it" (Sullenberger par. 8–9), Krakauer stresses that before his death McCandless did come to realize that he needed to return to civilization and live a balanced existence (as opposed to permanently living out the extreme of isolation in the wild). The pivotal point, Krakauer argues, was after McCandless shot a moose and for six days attempted to preserve the meat by smoking it – a technique he had learned from South Dakota hunters. The moose was shot on June 9th (according to McCandless's diary entries), and due to his failed attempts at preserving the meat, the carcass became infested with maggots. McCandless eventually noted in his June 14th and 15th diary entries: "I now wish I had never shot the moose. One of

the greatest tragedies of my life. [...] henceforth will learn to accept my errors, however great they be" (McCandless, qtd. in Krakauer 166). There is little doubt that the moose episode was "a turning point" for McCandless (Zink 25). After this episode he made notes that Krakauer believes indicate his realization that he needed to return to society.

In particular, Karakuer draws our attention to the last book that McCandless read, Doctor Zhivago, in which he highlighted the following passage and circled the line "to take refuge in nature":

> Oh, how one wishes sometimes to escape from the meaningless dullness of human eloquence, from all those sublime phrases, to take refuge in nature, apparently so inarticulate, or in the wordlessness of long, grinding labor, of sound sleep. Of true music, or of a human understanding rendered speechless by emotion! (Pasternak, qtd. in Krakauer 188)

Krakauer notes that McCandless had then written "HAPPINESS IS ONLY REAL WHEN SHARED" next to Pasternak's line: "And so it turned out that only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness" (qtd. in Krakauer 188). Krakauer suggests that these actions prove "that McCandless's long, lonely sabbatical had changed him in some significant way," and that by acknowledging that true happiness is real when shared, he is showing that he was ready to return to society, to "abandon the life of a solitary vagabond" and "become a member of the human community" again (Krakauer 188). While McCandless would die before he ever left the Alaskan wilderness, Krakauer emphasizes that "[t]here is no question [...] that he intended to walk out" (Krakauer 168).

Using Leo Marx's ideas in *The Machine and the Garden*, Hedy Lepik argues that it was necessary for McCandless to come to this realization at the end of his Alaskan odyssey, especially if one analyses the journey according to Marx's three stages of escaping into the wild, which include: leaving behind a corrupt city and society, travelling and living in the wilderness, then returning to society and the city with "lessons learnt in the wilderness [that] can be applied to the city" (Lepik 39). McCandless was apparently content to return to civilization "with what he had learned over the time" (Lepik 39):

> Satisfied, apparently, with what he had learned during his two months of solitary life in the wild, McCandless decided to return to civilization: It was time to bring his 'final and greatest adventure' to a close and get himself back to the world of men and women, where he could chug a beer, talk philosophy, enthrall strangers with tales of what he'd done. He seemed to have moved beyond his need to assert so adamantly his autonomy, his need to separate himself from his parents. Maybe he was prepared to forgive their imperfections; maybe he was prepared to forgive some of his own. McCandless was ready to go home. (Krakauer 167)

So had he not died, McCandless would have completed the cycle suggested by Lepik. His eventual recognition of the benefits of living a life that does not completely exclude society and other people "can be viewed as parallel with [… T]ranscendentalism's view on the necessary balance of nature and society in the life of a human being" (Lepik 40).

The cause of McCandless's death is discussed in some detail in *Into the Wild*, with Krakauer guessing that he might have died after confusing wild potato seeds with wild sweet pea (which looks like wild potato but is poisonous), but later concludes that it was more likely that he died as a result of poisonous mould on the wild potato seeds (which he had been collecting and eating): "If the wild potato seeds McCandless ate were contaminated from an eruption of *R. Leguminicola*, [… i]t means [… t]he plant that poisoned him wasn't toxic per se; McCandless simply had the misfortune to eat mouldy seeds" (Krakauer 193–94). Even if McCandless wanted to return to civilization when he fell ill, he could not make his way across the flooding Teklanika river as he had abandoned his map and was unaware of a cable and aluminium basket used by hydrologists to cross the water. He assumed that the flooding river had cut him off from returning home, and "had no way of conceiving that salvation was so close at hand" (Krakauer 173).

McCandless has received a fair amount of criticism, with most disapproval suggesting he "was simply one more dreamy half-cocked greenhorn who went into the country expecting answers to all his problems and instead only found mosquitoes and a lonely death" (Krakauer 73). One critic commented: "Personally I see nothing positive at all about Christopher McCandless's lifestyle or wilderness doctrine […]. Entering the wilderness purposefully ill-prepared, and surviving a near-death experience does not make you a better human, it makes you damn lucky" (qtd. in Krakauer 72). The most harsh condemnation of McCandless was from Nick Jans, a school teacher who resided in a tiny Inupiat village north of the arctic circle. Jans wrote:

> Over the past 15 years, I've run into several McCandless types out in the country. Same story: idealistic, energetic young guys who overestimated themselves, underestimated the country, and ended up in trouble. McCandless was hardly unique […]. His ignorance, which could have been cured by a USGS quadrant and a Boy Scout manual, was what killed him. And while I feel for his parents, I have no sympathy for him. (Jans, qtd. in Krakauer 72–73)

Krakauer defends McCandless, arguing that the idealistic and motivated young man did not undertake this venture because of insecurity or psychological disorder, but rather to push and explore himself in the harsh wilderness. Rather than "some feckless slacker, adrift and

confused," Chris was a pilgrim whose "life hummed with meaning and purpose," who found meaning "beyond the comfortable path," and who unfortunately demanded too much of himself – which sadly lead to his demise (Krakauer 183).

Into the Wild portrays Christopher McCandless's journey as one of a Self-Reliant Transcendentalist who sought to embrace the reality of existence by pushing himself to live out his ideals. McCandless demonstrated profound individualism while pursuing practical self-reliance away from societal conventions and supports. He not only embodied simplicity and an avid detestation of material wealth (which he believed hindered subjective development and experience), he also wanted to live deliberately by seeking raw experiences with Nature (and the bare truths of the wilderness) in order to test and better himself. He eventually established that living isolated in the wilderness was not the key to pure joy, but rather that a balance with society is fundamental to living a fulfilling existence and finding 'true happiness' (as he highlighted in the passage from *Doctor Zhivago* quoted above).

As McCandless died before making it out of his Alaskan haven (which eventually turned into a prison of sorts), one can only speculate on what he would have said and done had he made it back to society and defended his decisions. Of course, there are others who have pursued a similar course and had their endeavours documented, but who are still alive to explain their motivations. One such figure is chronicled in Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Last American Man*: Eustace Conway, a man who is in many ways an advocate for Self-Reliant Transcendentalism in our modern age.

3.4 The Mountain Man of Turtle Island: Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Last American Man*

The idea that there is such a thing as a "True American Man" who lives psychically and spiritually close to the wilderness forms the basis of Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Last American Man*, which describes the life and ideas of modern pioneer Eustace Conway. As is to be expected with creative nonfiction, Gilbert valorizes Conway as a friend whom she greatly admires (and might possibly have romantic feelings for), and therefore veers away from a straightforward biographical documenting of his life. She paints a grand picture of Conway as an inspiring figure leading by example in a mundane, materialistic, even robotic modern world that he believes is in need of rescuing. For Gilbert, Conway is "a parable for our time" (Dizard par. 3), one of the few remaining "true American men." In the terms of this study, he is also a Self-Reliant Transcendentalist.

To explain what she means by the term "American Man," Gilbert starts by recalling how the American wilderness was tamed through the conquest and elision of the frontier and the erection of towns and cities. A vital question was subsequently posed: what would happen to young American boys, who had hitherto needed the wilderness to mature? Eustace Conway himself was raised by a mother who let him roam the woods and who taught him how to set up a camp, build fires, make rope from grass, bait a hook, find clay, and deal with wildlife. For Gilbert, Eustace Conway is one of the few remaining true American men. A true American Man is, according to Gilbert, a "wilderness-bred American" who leaves civilization and "strike[s …] out toward the hills," where "he sheds his cosmopolitan manners and became a robust and proficient man" (Gilbert 4–5). These men undergo this evolution "in the company of their one true love, nature, and they do it by themselves or with the help of a trusted male sidekick" (Gilbert 58). This type of man has "no interest in study or reflection"; but if something needed to be done, he could and would make it happen (Gilbert 5–6). This idea of the American Man is the product of "homegrown self-mythology" that can be traced in figures like Pecos Bill and Paul Bunyan, the man who breaks "wild horses through revelatory communion with the frontier" (Gilbert 6). In sum, the American Man learns from encounter with wilderness to be the lionhearted, axe-wielding, self-reliant and hard-working paragon that the myth insists he is supposed to be. Throughout *The Last American Man* Gilbert seeks to demonstrate that Eustace Conway is one of the few remaining true American men, despite his very human flaws and faults.

Eustace was orn in South Carolina in 1961. His first few years of life were spent in a suburban household next to a patch of woods, which Eustace and his siblings would frequently explore. His father (also named Eustace Conway) taught his children "how to identify plants, birds, and mammals of the American South," but Gilbert characterizes Eustace Snr throughout the text in terms of his constant bullying, criticism of and rudeness towards the younger Eustace, and the effect this has on the boy later in life. Eustace Jnr's mother also played a vital role in shaping her son, "an unrepentant tomboy, a proficient horseback rider, and a capable woodsman" (Gilbert 3). When Eustace was five years old, the family had moved to Gastonia in North Carolina (which had its own dense forest), and by the age of seventeen Eustace had had enough of his father's abuse and decided to move out and live alone in a teepee (which he had made himself) in the Gastonia mountains. There he lived off the land, hunting game and picking nettles to eat. Gilbert notes that these years spent alone and self-sufficiently were some of the happiest of Conway's life. At nineteen Eustace and his friend Frank hiked the Appalachian trail, where he met and fell in love with Donna

Henry (one of many love interests that Eustace will eventually drive away in the course of the narrative). After graduating from college, during which time he carried on living in his tepee and taught fellow students how to skin rabbits, Eustace went on to accomplish a long-distance, horse-drawn carriage ride across the country with his girlfriend at the time. After this he established his own utopia, Turtle Island Preserve, for which he had started buying land in 1987. The Preserve still serves as a wilderness conservation centre, educational nature camp, and retreat. While not many of Conway's Turtle Island apprentices have survived his severely high standards and what Gilbert calls his "whiplash effect" (206), he has nevertheless had a positive impact on a great many of those he has educated about the wilderness and what it means to truly live fruitfully.

While he is certainly Thoreauvian and Emersonian in many of his ideas and endeavours, it is important first to acknowledge an important difference between Conway and Thoreau. Gilbert notes that Eustace does not have the same sort of communion with Nature as Thoreau did because his is too impatient and compulsive a personality to sit and admire Nature calmly. Like Christopher McCandless, Eustace prefers to engage with the wilderness; he is an "energetic and determined" man (Gilbert 26). Gilbert draws on the history of American interest in Thoreau's writings, emphasising particularly the 1960s counter-culture movement in which there was increasing interest in "old romantic nineteenth-century American ideas about separating oneself from the corruptions of larger society" (Gilbert 90–91). Writers like Jack Kerouac became popular, as people sought to "rediscover ways to live in America without slogging through what Kerouac called the 'endless system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume'" (Gilbert 91), which inspired young people to look to the hills to "find their destinies." But it was Thoreau's *Walden* that was rediscovered during this period and subsequently inspired a rash of "new utopias" (Gilbert 91). Between 1965 and 1975 there were "thousands of young Americans tr[ying] their hands at idealistic communal-living experiments" – one such example being Drop City in Colorado, which was "founded by some wild poverty-loving hippie artists, who built structures out of bottle caps and tarp" and who "insisted on accepting everybody into their utopia" (Gilbert 91–92). Gilbert notes that these idealistic endeavours were mainly founded by white kids with college educations who knew nothing about practical farming, and who cannot be compared to Eustace Conway (Gilbert 93).

While modern hippies tend to believe that Eustace is one of them, and while Eustace does share some ideals with the hippies of the 1960s (like seeking to establish an ideal community, on the basis of the idea that society is capable of transforming itself), Gilbert

stresses that Conway is far from being a hippie. For one, Conway is "a shrewd, keen, and potentially ruthless operator" when it comes to money, and is surprisingly "as adept a businessman as any guy in a suit with a subscription to the *Economist*" (Gilbert 122). One of his girlfriends referred to him as "overwhelming and powerful," and "obsessed with making money, buying land" (Spratlin, qtd. in Gilbert 138). People often overlook his businessman side because they don't want it to ruin their "nice image of the buckskin, the teepee, the single shot with the antique musket, the hand-carved wooden bowl, and the wide-open and peaceful smile" (Gilbert 122). Another apparent anti-hippie characteristic (according to Gilbert) is that Conway is staunchly against drugs and sexual swingers, and holds discipline as one of the highest values – so far as to stand "accused of cherishing discipline over freedom" (Gilbert 95). Conway himself confesses to Gilbert that people often romanticize his lifestyle because they view living in the woods as some "dreamy" life where he "spends his days sipping the dew off clover blossoms," but for Eustace living in the woods means something different (Gilbert 11). As a lifestyle it can nevertheless be characterized as Self-Reliant Transcendentalism. This is evident not only in his self-reliant physical endeavours (living self-sufficiently in natural settings from the age of seventeen, establishing Turtle Island as an escape from the institutionalized bromides and hazards of modern society), but also in his essentially transcendental ideas that God is within each individual and in Nature. There is an element of continuity and unity running through Nature and all of us, a true reality that through purposeful living and Self-Reliance we can "awaken" to and recognize. For Conway, consumerist society is destructive to the spirit of the individual; his endeavours to preserve the wilderness and engage with it are for him a personal source of spiritual nourishment.

One of the happiest times of Conway's life, Gilbert observes, is when he hiked the Appalachian trail. It was on this hike with his friend Frank that Conway revealed his ideas regarding the divine individual spirit and how one can connect to the spirit in the cosmos through this inner divinity (which Gilbert also stresses is present in Nature). Gilbert observes that Frank's and Conway's beliefs overlapped, especially in terms of the idea that God is in Nature and within themselves:

> God is to be found only in nature. That, of course, is why they were out there on the trail, the better to find this godliness within themselves and the larger world. Nor were they embarrassed to talk about this godliness night after night. Or to take out their handmade Indian pipes in the evenings and smoke and pray, connected with each other through their belief that the pipe was a vehicle of prayer and smoke only the sacred representation of what they were offering up to the cosmos. (Gilbert 56)

Here Gilbert suggests that Conway finds a part of the divine within himself through communion with Nature. Conway's idea that there is a "godliness" within himself could also be a linked to an observation later in the text, in which he gestures to an innate awareness or individualistic intuitive spirit that he calls his "innate, vigilant, aggressive mindfulness," a quality that helped him develop his comfort in and awareness of the wilderness (Conway, qtd. in Gilbert 73). But Gilbert also emphasizes a spiritual unity not only between Conway and his friend, but also between him and the cosmos – a Transcendental universality. Similarly, in an earlier section in the text, Gilbert documents a motivational speech that Conway gives at a high school, in which he emphasizes to the students a similar notion of universal interconnectivity in Nature – using the symbol of the circle:

> I live [...] in nature, where everything is connected, circular. The seasons are circular. The planet is circular, and so is its passage around the sun. The course of water over the earth is circular coming down from the sky and circulating through the world to spread life and then evaporating again. [...] The life cycles of plants and animals are circular. I live outside where I can see this. The ancient people understood that our world is a circle, but we modern people have lost sight of that. (Conway, qtd. in Gilbert 18)

This emphasis on the circular aspect of Nature and the sense of unity therein reflects Emerson's ideas in his essay on circles and how all life is interconnected. This is especially evident in the following passage from the essay:

> St Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. [...] There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. [...] The natural world may be conceived as a system of concentric circles, and we now and then detect in nature slight dislocations, which apprize us that this surface on which we now stand is not fixed, but sliding. ("Circles" par. 1, 3, 21)

Conway also echoes Thoreau's famous Self-Reliant notion in *Walden* of being "awake" to true reality. At the beginning of *The Last American Man*, Conway informs Gilbert that he feels he needs to lead by individual example, to "be the vessel of change" in order "to snap his countrymen out of their sleepwalk" (Gilbert 16) – a notion that echoes the desire of both Emerson and Thoreau to "lead the way" (Dizard par. 6). Again, towards the end of *The Last American Man*, Gilbert discusses one of Conway's successful "cases" at Turtle Island, a young man named Dave Reckford, who arrives as a lost youth from an unstable family life. The advice that Conway gives him is to strive to be "awake and aware of every moment," to respect and honour the "extraordinary gift" of consciousness, and to "pay attention every day to the vital insights that mindfulness can bring" (Gilbert 258). So for Conway, being spiritually "awake" or enlightened, and deliberate in one's endeavours, is the key to

purposeful living, and "only through constant focus can you become independent" (Gilbert 259). This reflects Thoreau's ideas in *Walden* on how it is vital to "keep ourselves awake" in order to elevate our lives "by a conscious endeavour" (59), and how "God himself culminates in the present moment" so it is thus important for individuals to "drench" themselves in the pure "reality that surrounds [them]" (63). But Conway goes further in admonishing the young Reckford to avoid integrating into the regulated normalities of society. Rather than simply find a mundane career and "swallow whatever watery ideas modern society may bottle-feed you though the media," Conway advises Reckford to be independent. He describes the modern subject's subdued state of being as like a "coma," the result of civilization's having suppressed individuality and restricted the individual's engagement with the outdoors (Gilbert 258). This recalls Conway's lecture to high school students, cited above, when he enjoins the students to break away from the "box" of society and forge their own individual paths:

> [Most people in modern society] wake up every morning in the box of their bedroom because a box next to them started making beeping noises to tell them it was time to get up. [...] They leave the box where they live and get into a box with wheels and drive to work, which is just another big box broken up into little cubicle boxes [...]. Break out of the box! [...] You don't have to live like this because people tell you it's the only way. (Conway, qtd. in Gilbert 19)

Conway contrasts the oppressive box-like existence of conventional society with the circular, self-sustaining forces of Nature with which he identifies. He has distanced himself since childhood from mainstream culture, seeing modern America as "a society steadily undoing itself" because people focus on efficiency rather than learning to do things independently – to be self-reliant (Gilbert 14). Learning to do things oneself and turning to Nature for life's bare necessities is key to living a fulfilling existence and regaining our "rhythm" with our natural environment. The prevalent decline in passion for creating an individual path and experiencing direct contact with life is, according to Conway, especially evident in the youth. He finds the students whom he lectures (in the hope of changing the world) increasingly robotic and uninspired. He describes a sixth-grade class he encounters as a pitiful group of children who merely follow "an established pattern of living," who lack passion and focus monotonously on money and material goods like cellphones (Conway, qtd. in Gilbert 136). While Conway himself engages intensely with money, he does so in order to achieve Self-Reliance and freedom, that is, to sustain a nature reserve where he can live close to the earth and teach others about mindful engagement with Nature and about life in general. The core of his teaching is that we can regain our humanity through intimate contact with Nature.

As mentioned above, Conway and his friend Frank had discussed their shared belief that God and godliness is present in all life. There is an undeniable spiritual element in Conway's view of the natural world, and while he did considerable research into various religions, embracing parts of them he enjoyed, and disregarding others he did not, he found most comfort in the spirituality of Native American Indians. The notion that Eustace was primarily drawn to was "the idea that God—indeed godliness—is to be found in every living being on this planet" (Gilbert 56). The idea that God is present in everything from animals to trees and stones was something that Eustace identified with strongly – and which he also believed meant that all these forms of life are "ancient and integral" (Gilbert 56).

Conway firmly believes that living in Nature means "recogniz[ing] the central truth of existence, which is that death lives right beside us at all times, as close and as relevant as life itself, and that this reality is nothing to fear but is a sacred truth to be praised" (Gilbert 58). In other words, absolute truths are provided by the divine in the wilderness, which are to be acknowledged and used in order to live a meaningful life in harmony with nature and other beings. These sacred truths (of life as intermingled with and inseparable from death) are vital to the individual spirit, and Conway knows that being a part of the circle of life and appreciating the spirits of all living beings that are a part of it is essential to a fulfilling existence. After providing a dramatic description of Conway killing a buck, Gilbert observes: "[t]hat's what living in the woods means to Eustace Conway" (Gilbert 12) –

> Up came the buck, very much alive, whipping its rack of antlers [...]. Finally, he let go with one hand and sliced his knife completely across the buck's neck, gashing open veins, arteries, and windpipe. [...] And then he plunged his hands into the animal's neck and smeared blood all over his face, weeping and laughing and offering up an ecstatic prayer of thanksgiving to the universe for the magnificent phenomenon of this creature who had so valiantly sacrificed its life to sustain his own. (Gilbert 12)

Eustace's environmentalist and preservationist stance is arguably directly linked to these ideas. The importance of the wilderness as both a practical necessity and a life-sustaining spiritual realm is shown through Eustace's passion for protecting and respecting Nature – and part of the reason for his establishing Turtle Island Preserve. He needed land where he could live without moving his teepee about from place to place, and somewhere where he could educate others about individualism and the wilderness on his own terms. Turtle Island Preserve became his own "colossal utopian experiment" (Gilbert 95).

To answer questions posed as to why he chooses to own and preserve his own portion of wilderness, Conway gave one short speech that Gilbert notes has become "one of the most powerful segments of his public presentations" (Gilbert 83). In this speech Conway notes that

one of his favourite books as a child was called *Return to Shady Grove,* which was the tale of a group of animals whose forest is destroyed by humans. The animals travel west and find a new forest, where they live happily ever after. But this idea, Conway observes, that there is always a new forest somewhere else, has become a lie: it is simply wrong to bulldoze and keep on developing the wilderness until it is a polluted, urbanized mess. Eustace himself could relate to the idea of constantly searching for another forest or wilderness as the animals in the story do, because he had constantly to move his teepee to new land when the areas he occupied kept getting destroyed in the name of development. He eventually realized that humans cannot keep bulldozing forests for the benefit of other humans and expect there always to be forests remaining, and so took action by acquiring his own forest and being prepared to "fight to the death anyone who ever tried to destroy it" (Conway, qtd. in Gilbert 85).

After buying his first piece of land for Turtle Island on October 15, 1987, Eustace built up his preserve by securing and buying more land surrounding it, and did so by tirelessly teaching and lecturing all over the South in order to grow and fund the preserve (Gilbert 106). His first campers arrived in 1989, and Eustace taught them (among other things) to eat foods from the forest they had never tried before, to respect both Nature and themselves, to make shelters from organic materials, to learn the benefits of wild herbs and oils, and to give thanks to the spirits of the wilderness. But Gilbert observes that Eustace seems to be stressed and domineering most of the time at Turtle Island, in contrast to the calm and happy life in the woods he preaches about. In response to this observation, Eustace stresses that he is deliberately making himself available in order to educate others:

> Look, I am not the only person left in this country who tries to live a natural life in the woods, but you're never going to meet all those other guys because they aren't *available*. Well, I am available. That's the difference with me. I've always made myself available, even when it compromises the way I want to live. [...] I know I present people with an image of how I *wish* I were living. But what else can I do? I have to put on that act for the benefit of the people. (Conway, qtd. in Gilbert 266)

So, much like the pure Self-Reliant figure that Thoreau projects in *Walden* in order to inspire his readers, Conway portrays himself as "this wild guy who just came down off the mountain" in order to motivate his students and those around him to live purposeful, self-reliant lives close to Nature (Conway, qtd. in Gilbert 266). This is most certainly not to say that Conway is a liar: he undoubtedly leads a self-sufficient and spiritually aware existence in his own section of wilderness, but he is at the same time striving to change the world by

example. His lifestyle exhibits a balance between isolated immersion in Nature and involvement with society and civilization.

One notable similarity in this regard, is that Conway, like Thoreau, uses the economy of modern society to his advantage, rather than exiling himself from it completely. He works for money in order to fund his lifestyle at Turtle Island Preserve, in the way in which Thoreau did odd jobs in Concord (like growing and selling beans that he had farmed) in order to fund his own freedom, his individualistic lifestyle of moderate solitariness. Gilbert suggests that Conway maintains a balance between the private and the public, between community and isolation, and even calls him "the World's Most Public Recluse," on account of his willingness to put himself out in public to educate others, and the celebrity status that he has acquired as a "mountain man" (Gilbert 234). But Gilbert also points out that for someone "who claims to want, more than anything, isolation" in the wilderness, his haven of Turtle Island has not allowed for much private space for him, as he is too preoccupied with everyone and everything else on the preserve (Gilbert 231). When Gilbert does confront him about this issue, Conway informs her about future plans he has for a large house (which would have large walk-in closets) for himself and his future children, a house Gilbert describes as "a rustic mansion suitable to the aesthetic standards of a retired millionaire oilman" (233). While he still seems to desire to live self-sufficiently in Nature, Conway seems also to have developed an interest in incorporating elements of modern comforts and "decadent reverie" into his wilderness ethic (Gilbert 233).

While Eustace may not "actively seek [...] to be [a Transcendentalist]" – his personality, ideas, and endeavours (as documented in *The Last American Man*) can certainly be read as those of a Self-Reliant Transcendentalist (Sanders par. 10). Through his firm ideas on individualism, Self-Reliance, spiritualized Nature, and in his establishing of Turtle Island Preserve, Eustace demonstrates that he is "able to connect with himself, escape the material world and live at peace with nature" (Sanders par. 10). The initiative that Conway takes in order to preserve forests and to educate others on the importance of wilderness conservation arguably defines him as an enterprising modern environmentalist with Transcendentalist ideas. He is certainly not alone in devoting his life (or even part of his life) to wilderness education and the preservation of natural locations in this modern age, in which there is widespread and ongoing environmental destruction in the name of development and progress. He is also not alone in being outspoken and controversial in the fight for conserving wildlife and the natural areas that are so valuable to all beings on this earth; especially if one turns to

the life, ideas, and endeavours of Thoreauvian wilderness warrior Carol Ruckdeschel of Cumberland Island.

3.5 Wilderness Warrior: Will Harlan's *Untamed: The Wildest Woman in America and the Fight for Cumberland Island*

As indicated by Will Harlan's title, Carol Ruckdeschel is often seen as "the wildest woman in America." Yet a close reading of the text in which her life and endeavours are documented reveals that she is not merely a wild scientist and militant environmental activist, but also an idealistic individual who finds solace living a (mostly) solitary and purposeful life on her own terms in the wilderness of Cumberland Island. An unconventional pioneer in pursuit of living her life with individual purpose and vigour, Ruckdeschel is not "just fighting to save Cumberland Island, she's fighting for the right to simply live on her own terms" (Begos par. 6). Harlan himself describes Ruckdeschel as a "modern-day Thoreau who is even more outspoken in protecting her Waldenesque island" (Harlan xi) – a fitting comparison considering that, in Harlan's book, Ruckdeschel's ideas and activities are best understood within the context of Thoreau's (and Emerson's) Self-Reliant Transcendentalism.

Ruckdeschel had an early love for wildlife and being outdoors, and despite her parents' concern that she find a steady job in order to be financially secure, she followed her dream of living and working in the wilderness, eventually finding a home as a self-taught scientist and protector of Cumberland Island. Harlan traces Ruckdeschel's individualistic personality and interest in ecology from her childhood up to her current life on the wild island, which is a national park situated off the coast of Georgia and "one of the most biologically diverse islands in the world" (Harlan xi). When Ruckdeschel moved to the island, she found that the wildlife and delicate ecosystem needed protection from the devastation of activity driven by human greed. Along with Ruckdeschel's passionate environmental endeavours, Harlan documents her turbulent love affairs both on and off the island (with one resulting in her killing her boyfriend at the time, Louie, in self-defence). She does, however, settle down with a companion, Bob, who has just as much enthusiasm and love for wildlife and the ocean as she does. It is her love life that inadvertently brings her to Cumberland to begin with, as she first travels there to escape an emotional divorce from her second husband, a university lecturer. She selected Cumberland because it reminded her "of her childhood on the beaches of Hawaii, tracking sea turtles and tumbling in the tide" (Harlan

39). Ultimately, *Untamed* documents a passionate woman following her individual path to live Self-Reliantly on Cumberland Island where she not only studies and lives harmoniously with the wildlife around her, but also actively fights to protect it from modern harms.

While Ruckdeschel only moved to Cumberland Island in 1973, her ideas and activities as a passionate environmentalist and conservationist go back a long way. As a child, Ruckdeschel had a caring attitude towards wildlife, for instance bottle-feeding baby possums whose mother had been killed (Harlan 12), and attempting to save a raccoon from hunters. When the raccoon was eventually killed in the hunt, she decided to eat it in order to honour the animal, declaring "[y]our flesh becomes mine" (Harlan 16–17). She also developed an early interest in sea turtles – a fascination that would continue throughout her life (Harlan 101). In 1959 she enrolled at the University of Georgia, studying biology in order better to understand the intricacies of animals and the natural world; but it was in the counter-culture environment of the 1960s that Carol actively started campaigning for the protection of the wilderness.

During the 1960s in America, Ruckdeschel "was swept up in a rising tide of gender, racial, and cultural civil rights," but she notably "fought to include nature" (Harlan 42). She fought alongside Atlanta activists to get the Wilderness Act and Endangered Species Act ratified, which would ensure "permanent protections for wild creatures" (Harlan 42). When she was 29, she started working for Georgia's Natural Areas Council, and – with the help of her good friend, Governer Jimmy Carter, who "often paddled down the Chatooga" – got the river protected (Harlan 52). Due to Ruckdeschel's dedication, the river became "forever protected from dams and development" (Harlan 53). After the Chatooga accomplishment, Carol set her sights on getting her hometown river, the Chattahoochee, protected from Atlanta's "treatment plants and industrial dumps" which had already turned part of the river into a "swirling brown drainage ditch of sewage," leaving only its northern section clear and unpolluted (Harlan 53). After visiting the Atlanta part of the Chattahoochee River with Jimmy Carter, and proving to him that the river was worth protecting, Carter signed the Metropolitan River Protection Act of 1973 "which laid the groundwork for safeguarding the Chattahoochee River Corridor as a national park unit" (Harlan 56). In the summer of 1973, Ruckdeschel moved to Cumberland Island with her boyfriend at the time, John Pennington, to work for the Candler family as housekeeper and general groundsman. Ruckdeschel would have her hands full from then on – fighting to protect not only the breeding grounds of the turtles she had come to love as a child, but the entire island wilderness, from development, from families on the island, and even from the National Park Service itself.

Shortly after arriving on Cumberland, Ruckdeschel started watching sea turtles nesting on the sand, counting the eggs as they dropped (Harlan 100–101). She "was awestruck by the ancient turtles," which dated back 230 million years and which she saw as "elders emerging from the coal-dark water like shadows of the earth's past" (Harlan 101). Harlan emphasizes the mystical nature, and the importance of, sea turtles as "unexpected evolutionary star[s]" that had "survived at least three mass extinctions" and which live longer consistently than any other animal on earth. The sea turtle is thus "one of the creatures closest to immortality" (Harlan 118). Harlan even argues that sea turtles have been important historically, noting that they assisted with "the European colonisation of America: because sea turtles can live years without eating, thousands were stored alive in the holds of explorers' ships in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The turtle meat sustained them on their long voyages to the new world" (Harlan 117). Carol began dissecting dead sea turtles that washed ashore, learning more about a variety of them, from leather backs to the rare Kemp's ridley, finding evidence of human exploitation and destruction.

Harlan stresses that these ancient creatures are in danger of becoming completely extinct due not only to human activity at sea (such as shrimp trawling, beachfront development, fishing, oil spills, ocean pollution, boat propellers, and ocean acidification), but also to human activity on land – such as the illegal selling of turtles for pets, food, medicine, and collector's items (Harlan 118–19). Fishing trawlers, however, are one of the main offenders in turtle destruction. After returning from a sea turtle conference on the mainland, Ruckdeschel finds that "over a dozen turtle carcasses had washed ashore" on Cumberland, and, after careful dissection of each one, finds proof that these turtles had been trapped in shrimping trawlers:

> Fissures and rifts in the bone told tales. From the tangle of intestines she unravelled the turtle's life and death. Most of the carcasses had bloody fluid in their stomach, soggy lungs, and foam in their trachea—evidence of drowning. Sea turtles must surface for air, but when trapped in a shrimpers' trawl net they go into oxygen-deprived shock and die. (Harlan 153)

Attempting to stop shrimp boats from harming the ocean environment would prove to be no easy task for Ruckdeschel, as shrimping was a $200 million industry in south Georgia alone, and shrimp is one of the most popular foods in America, with more than "forty million pounds [...] consumed annually" (Harlan 265). Shrimping boats trawl all along the coast of south Georgia, with their large, heavy nets not only catching and trapping wildlife, but also destroying the ocean floor, causing endless damage to "coral reefs, sponges, and kelp forests" (Harlan 265–66). Harlan goes on to note that shrimping is "the most destructive activity in

the ocean, outstripping even oil drilling" (Harlan 266). Even though sea turtles were meant to be protected under the Endangered Species Act, it was rarely enforced in Georgia as it was "the world's largest commercial fishery" (Harlan 266–67). Ruckdeschel established the Sea Turtle Stranding Network in the early 1980s in order to collect a broader range of turtle death data which she then presented to the National Marine Fisheries Service, in the hope that they would put an end to trawling completely, or at the very least "create a trawl-free reserve along a portion of the coast" (Harlan 268). The NMF chose rather to widen Ruckdeschel's Sea Turtle Stranding Network until they eventually found their answer to the problem in the form of a turtle excluder device (TED) which could be put in trawling nets and would allow for turtles and other animals to be "diverted out an escape hatch" (Harlan 269). Some shrimpers (who thought that the new devices would cause them to lose profits) rebelled against these devices, and subsequently, in 1989, the Department of Commerce removed the TED laws (but stated that they had to check their nets every hour for turtles). Most shrimpers ignored this minor new rule after it was announced, but Harlan notes that TEDs are now compulsory in American waters, even though they are not mandatory worldwide (Harlan 271). Dead turtles continued to wash ashore despite the TED law, but there was an "unexpected reprieve in the turtle holocaust" in 2005, when the Southern shrimping industry collapsed, mainly due to shrimp aquaculture that required shrimp ponds rather than boats (Harlan 276–77). This was a success in that it saved thousands of sea turtles' lives, but Ruckdeschel still had other issues to fight in order to protect the turtles – like the nuclear plant that was built across from Cumberland Island – meaning that the new enemy would be "the world's mightiest military" (Harlan 217).

During the Cold War in the 1980s, a naval base for submarines carrying nuclear missiles was built on the mainland opposite Cumberland, meaning not only that "turtles would be dodging nuclear submarines on their way to nest on Cumberland," but that whales too would be affected, as the base is "located directly in the path of the world's only known right whale calving grounds" (Harlan 280). Apart from devastating the breeding grounds and paths of turtles and whales, the submarines travelling to and from the base also "blast nonstop sonar pulses at more than 235 decibels" which cause whale, turtle, and dolphin strandings, as these animals "rely on underwater sound [...] to communicate with each other" (Harlan 281). The US Navy itself confirmed that "sonar testing kills 6,000 whales and dolphins and thousands of other marine animals each year" (Harlan 281). In order to fight for the survival of Cumberland Island marine life, Ruckdeschel "venture[d] beyond the tide" and proposed that an underwater wilderness (off-limits to fishing vessels) be declared on the submerged

continental shelf where turtles spend most of their adult lives (Harlan 281). When attacked for suggesting that marine life holds more importance than submarines, Ruckdeschel argued that protecting the ocean also means uplifting the fisheries and our own health: "Our planet—and our bodies—are mostly ocean [...]. Our fate is bound to the tides" (Ruckdeschel, qtd. in Harlan 283). In the epilogue to the text Harlan mentions that "a judge ruled against twelve conservation organizations seeking to halt construction" – meaning that the navy would "open its underwater warfare range in 2014" (Harlan n.p.).

If sea turtles are lucky enough to make it through the treacherous ocean (and the obstacles humans put in the way) and on to the Cumberland beach to nest, they then have other adversaries on the sand to face, including wild hogs, which were found in abundance on the Island and were annihilating "nearly all of the island's sea turtle nests" (Harlan 121). Ruckdeschel chose to patrol and shoot feral hogs in order to cut the numbers down and thus save the turtle nesting grounds, much to the anger of one Lucy Ferguson – who believed all the hogs on the island belonged to her (Harlan 121). Lucy was a Carnegie, a famous and powerful family who had acquired their wealth through the steel industry, and who had initially come to Cumberland Island when Tom Carnegie bought twelve thousand acres there for his wife in 1882 (Harlan 72). While most Carnegie families sold to the NPS, Lucy Ferguson refused. She viewed the island as a personal paradise and even supported plans to strip-mine the island (Harlan 82). She turned her Greyfield mansion into a bed and breakfast and clashed with Ruckdeschel on how the island should be protected – but the two would eventually get on, finding common ground especially in their love for the natural world (Harlan 122).

The feral hogs on the island, however, were becoming a problem for the nesting sea turtles, and even though Ruckdeschel had complained to the National Park Service for thirty years, her concerns went ignored (Harlan 276). The National Park Service had initially attempted to reduce the number of hogs through yearly hunts, but this was not enough, so Rukdeschel decided to do her own hunting on the island, which she came to realise was also futile (Harlan 275). It was only after Ruckdeschel, with the help of an attorney, threatened them with a lawsuit that the Park Service eventually started hiring hog hunters in 2001, which resulted in "the numbers of hog-raided nests dropp[ing] to nearly zero" (Harlan 276). Ruckdeschel was not, however, only preoccupied with sea turtles, but also worked (and still works) for the overall wilderness and environment of Cumberland Island. Hers is, as Harlan puts it, "a voice crying out for the wilderness" (178).

The National Park Service planned developments "to accommodate one million tourists annually" on Cumberland Island – which opened to the public in 1979 (Harlan 146). Ruckdeschel knew she would have to get the island designated as a wilderness because the "Park Service had become more focused on visitation revenues than preserving wild places," and the bringing of more tourists would only result in "overcrowded beaches, noisy vehicle tours, bulldozed dunes, cluttered concession stands, and garbage-strewn boardwalks" (Harlan 179). In the terms of the Wilderness Act of 1964, wilderness is an "undeveloped land retaining its primeval character [...] an area where earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man" (Harlan 184). By designating Cumberland a wilderness, the island would be "pure nature, where the human imprint [would be] minimalized" (Harlan 184). So visitors to the park would be allowed, but no logging, vehicles, mining, development, or even chainsaws would be permitted (Harlan 184). While the National Park Service was meant to be protecting the environment, Harlan notes that they can be "just as dangerous as developers" as they focus on bringing the experience of nature to their customers rather than conserving it (Harlan 195). The tourist resort that the NPS proposed would entail beachfront development, hotels, and paved roads, concession stands, and tour buses, and Ruckdeschel knew that she had to "give nature a voice in the fight" – so she launched a campaign in the hope of getting the northern half of the island designated a wilderness (Harlan 195–96). Eventually the Park announced that it "would maintain a limit of three hundred visitors per day" and that there would be no further building of accommodations, and no vehicle tours (Harlan 202). The Wilderness bill, however, had yet to be passed in congress, so Ruckdeschel wrote a letter to the Washington Post about the meaning and importance of wilderness (Harlan 203). President Carter read the editorial and agreed with Ruckdeschel's emphasis on the importance of wilderness – resulting in the bill moving forward and eventually being "grudgingly signed [...] into law in 1982" by Ronald Reagan (Harlan 204). So Ruckdeschel and her supporters "had permanently protected the entire northern half of Cumberland Island," and not long after this success, the United Nations "designated the island a Global Biosphere Reserve" (Harlan 204).

One of the Carnegies (known as Gogo) would challenge Ruckdeschel on various conservation issues on the island. These included her wanting to preserve her family's heritage on Cumberland at the expense of the wilderness. She argued that Cumberland did not "qualify as wilderness" and wanted to turn the Carnegie Plum Orchard house (that was north of the wilderness boundary) into an artistic retreat that would attract visitors, but the house "was surrounded by federally designated wilderness" and Ruckdeschel managed to get

the plans quashed after notifying the press and environmental groups (Harlan 222–23). Gogo also capitalized on Greyfield Inn and turned it into "a bustling tourist attraction" after John F. Kennedy was married on the island, and even argued that her family should be allowed to drive wherever they pleased on the island (Harlan 253). She used her influence in congress to continue her Greyfield tours through the fragile Cumberland wilderness (Harlan 253). Harlan observes that the Carnegies continue to ignore the laws, and for the last ten years have "lobbied to extend their lifetime rights on the island forever" (Harlan 255).

Ruckdeschel's strong environmental activism on the island did not make her popular amongst other residents, with Gogo Carnegie's cousin calling Carol "an eccentric whack job who [...] weaseled her way onto the island" (Prochazka, qtd. in Harlan 226). Even one of Ruckdeschel's friends criticized her, calling her "an isolated environmental extremist who has cut herself off with her militant, radical stance on wilderness" (Candler, qtd. in Harlan 226). Ruckdeschel, however, continues with her activism and indeed her biological work – even turning her garage into a museum and research facility, displaying alligator and turtle carcasses along with other specimens of marine life, which attracts scientists from around the world (Harlan 233–34). Harlan compares her to other famous female environmentalists and wilderness "female misfits" such as Jane Goodall, Dian Fossey, Daphne Sheldrick, Birutė Galdikas, Eugenie Clark, P. Dee Boersma, Eriqueta Velarde, Wangari Matthai, and Julia Butterly Hill. But he notes that while these women are pioneers, none of them have "lived with the subjects they study as long as Carol Ruckdeschel, who has spent forty-one years immersed in turtle research on her wild island" (Harlan 242).

Ruckdeschel's conservationist efforts as a wilderness warrior span decades on Cumberland Island, and her determination to protect the fragile ecosystem at Cumberland Island has resulted in a variety of successes, but also in some failures. Harlan suggests that instead of living with Nature, humans have evolved to view themselves as controllers of it and have subsequently distanced themselves from the wilderness (Harlan 185). He implies that for Ruckdeschel, Nature is a life-sustaining source that needs to be protected and engaged with carefully. Humans are a part of the environment – Ruckdeschel even observes that when she looks at humans she sees animals (Harlan 110) – and we need to acknowledge the importance of other lives on earth instead of destructively domineering and unsettling the balances of the natural world. This idea mirrors Thoreau's concern for the environment, and Harlan even aligns the two as environmentalists, observing how "Thoreau was among the first to advocate for protecting America's vanishing wildlands" (Harlan 188). He even goes on to quote a section of *The Maine Woods* that seems to mirror Ruckdeschel's

environmentalist philosophy. He quotes Thoreau asserting that there should be "national preserves where no villages need to be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be civilized off the face of the earth'" (Thoreau, qtd. in Harlan 188). Ruckdeschel's concern for the wilderness, like Thoreau's, arguably extends beyond a need to conserve Nature as a physical, biological life source, but as a spiritual one too.

In Jimmy Carter's words, Ruckdeschel has a "deeply personal" relationship with Nature, one which extends beyond the scientific (Carter, qtd. Harlan 53), into a recognizably Transcendental space. She found that organized religion, especially the stories about the Holy Ghost and Jesus rising from the dead, "didn't mesh with the natural world she knew" (Harlan 13). The only religion she abides by is that of Nature: asked by a religious young hiker what church she belongs to, she replies: "I worship in the cathedral of nature" (Ruckdeschel, qtd. in Harlan165). When the young man persists and asks "what do you believe in?" she answers: "Truth" (Ruckdeschel, qtd. in Harlan165). By asserting that Nature and truth are her religion, she aligns herself with the ideas of Emerson in his "Nature" essay, particularly the idea that God (as divine truth) is present in Nature. In one particular passage, he observes that the woods are "the plantations of God" where one can "return to [...] faith" ("Nature" 6). Ruckdeschel suggests that the wilderness offers "truth," itself a form of divinity. Similarly, in her letter to the *Washington Post*, in which she defends the Cumberland wildlife, she implies that in Nature we find an unfiltered truth, a bare reality: "Wilderness [...] is a chance to [...] assume a new role with quite different values, to re-create ourselves. Wilderness is a touchstone of reality" (203). The idea that Nature is a "touchstone of reality" echoes Emerson's definition of the spiritual Over-Soul (which is to be found in Nature as well) as "that overpowering reality" that is "the only prophet of that which must be" ("The Over-Soul" 126).

When Ruckdeschel swims in the ocean after being cleared of murdering her boyfriend, Harland characterizes it as her harmonizing with the spirit (or the Over-Soul) within the sea. While wading in the ocean she notices bioluminescent plankton light up the water around her, and she decides from there that she will stand up for wildlife on the island and carry the plankton's glow in her heart for inspiration in future campaigns: "The underwater light show flashed around her. She vowed to carry the light inside her, like warm coals in her chest, to illuminate the dark days ahead" (Harlan 178). In this scene, Harlan suggests that there is a connection between humanity and Nature, embodied in Ruckdeschel's absorbing within herself the plankton's spiritual glow (symbolized by the organism's actual

bioluminescent light). The glow can be understood as representing the universal essence of the Over-Soul that is found in all living beings and Nature – so that in harmonizing with this spirit, she is able to find strength and clarity.

Ruckdeschel also acknowledges her own place within the grander spiritual unity of all life. Humans, she maintains, have an innate longing for, and connection to, Nature, and she demonstrates this in an argument with the NPS director William Whalen (who wants to develop Cumberland for tourist purposes). She defends her campaign against development on the island by telling him that "we hunger for something deeper. We long for contact with raw wildness, where we can see our connection to the bigger picture" (Ruckdeschel, qtd. inHarlan 201). According to this argument, in the natural world we find our place in the grander scheme of Nature which includes and unifies everything from the light to the dark (Harlan 183). In her interactions with the wildlife that she protects and studies, Ruckdeschel finds that she comes closer to the universal spirit which interconnects all life: "[W]hen I am waist-deep in a gator hole or elbow-deep in turtle guts, all I can say is: I feel a deep, visceral connection to the Source" (Ruckdeschel, qtd. in Harlan 299). Harlan also suggests that Ruckdeschel acknowledges her own connection to all life: "Each breath connected her to the first algae and the last dinosaur. [...] She belonged to it all, from the stars to the soil. She wasn't nothing. She was everything" (Harlan 15). Her connection to the world and her idea that there is a powerful divine force permeating all life, is perhaps most clearly demonstrated at the end of the text when, shortly after the death of her partner Bob, she comes across a dead armadillo on the side of the road. She notices that a female armadillo is conducting what seems to be a burial ritual around her dead partner, arranging twigs around the corpse and covering it in leaves. In that moment Ruckdeschel became alert to the fact that her mourning was mirrored in this female armadillo (Harlan 295), and that this armadillo funeral signified "[t]hat there was a current flowing through all of life, an undertow of awe that swept her away" (Harlan 299–301). In finding a connection to an indescribable divine force through engagement with these creatures, Ruckdeschel seemingly aligns her philosophy with one of Emerson's key Transcendentalist ideas – that the universal ether of life, the Over-Soul, is present in Nature and connects all life: "We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. [...] The soul circumscribes all things" (Emerson, "The Over-Soul" 127–28).

Our connection to the wilderness (and the spirit therein) is threatened by the complexities and mechanical barriers of urbanized life. Ruckdeschel believes that city life and the mundane modern drive for financial gain "cut our connection to the wild," and that

urban cities have become prisons for individuals who live cut off from Nature "incarcerated [...] in picket-fenced pens that [leave ...] us depressed and disconnected" (Harlan 45). But while Harlan suggests that Ruckdeschel believes modern cities have become human zoos in which there is a seeming lack of purpose (Harlan 45), he emphasizes that she does not "think we should abandon civilization and become hunter-gatherers," but rather that there should be "a border life that combine[s] the vitality of wilderness with the technological growth of modern society" (Harlan 110). Similar to Thoreau's idea that a Self-Reliant individual needs to balance civilization and society with Nature and solitude, Ruckdeschel maintains that "the ideal human being straddled the frontier between wild and civilized, an amalgam of the best of both worlds" (Harlan 110).

There seems to be little that scares Ruckdeschel when it comes to the wilderness, and Harlan states that the only thing that truly frightens her is the idea of "not living fully" (Harlan 299). In order to live purposefully and extract all she can from life, Carol chooses to live a simple, Self-Reliant life on Cumberland Island (Harlan 188). Her aim is to "live on her own terms in an honest and original relationship with the natural world" (Harlan 138), and Harlan himself even links Ruckdeschel with Henry David Thoreau – highlighting especially how both set out on their respective quests in order to live purposefully and "suck out all the marrow from life" (Thoreau, qtd. in Harlan 188).

Living on the north end of Cumberland Island in her self-built cabin surrounded by wilderness, Ruckdeschel is "comfortable with [her] solitude" (Harlan 12). She had rebuilt her cabin using driftwood, and while building it she lived off animals that had been killed by cars (something she had done in the past and would continue to do), and hunted feral hogs for meat (Harlan 145). When it came to supplies, she mainly collected objects that had washed ashore and put them to use (as the grocery store was on the mainland). Even her cabin was mostly furnished with "scavenged tables, benches, and rocking chairs," and she feeds herself with vegetables grown in her garden (Harlan xv). She lives completely off the land in what Harlan calls a simple "bare-bones life in the woods" (Harlan xvi), with no unnecessary material excesses to weigh her down. She was always aware that she needed to simplify her life and live frugally in order to pursue her dream – and that was exactly what she did. To achieve her goal of living close to Nature and spending her days outdoors, she would need to be Self-Reliant rather than dependent: "I knew I had to structure my life around not wanting much, so that I wouldn't require resources to support myself financially. [...] I would have to find the resources inside myself" (Ruckdeschel, qtd. in Harlan 21). By living in the wilderness where she studies and exists in harmony with the ecology around her,

Ruckdeschel demonstrates a strong sense of self-awareness and self-sufficiency, and also her unwavering determination to, as Thoreau put it, "advance [...] confidently in the direction of [one's] dreams, and endeavour [...] to live the life which [one ...] has imagined" (*Walden* 209).

Untamed can be read as the portrayal of a modern Transcendentalist figure within an environmentalist context. Carol Ruckdeschel is content on Cumberland Island, living self-sufficiently and coexisting with fellow animals in "the only home she had ever known" (Harlan 178). Her determined environmentalism indicates her love for the wilderness as both an ecological wonderland and as a spiritual realm of ultimate truth, inclusivity and Transcendental unity. Her ideas and ventures are in step with those of the Self-Reliant Transcendentalists, most notably in respect of the idea that spiritual truth (the divine) is present in Nature; that all living things (including the wilderness) are connected spiritually and united by an indefinable universal soul; that a balance of civilization and wilderness is required for an ideal form of existence (but also that one should be content with solitary contemplation of Nature); and that it is important to cultivate the self and pursue one's individual path, regardless of conventional standards and opinions.

Conclusion

Durable Ideals: The Relevance of Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Henry David Thoreau's Self-Reliant Ideas in Contemporary American Society

It is clear that the Romantic figures documented in these five modern American nonfiction texts are aware of and live out the core Self-Reliant Transcendentalist ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. *Desert Solitaire*, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Into the Wild*, *The Last American Man*, and *Untamed* are proof that these ideas have persisted not only into the latter half of the twentieth century but into the twenty-first century as well. The men and women documented in these texts have all endeavoured to live similarly to Thoreau at Walden Pond, and they have been written about in such a way as to emphasize the qualities that identify them with Transcendentalism. In this respect the texts resemble Thoreau's *Walden*, where the author sought to promote himself as a Transcendentalist figure and inspire his readers to live a life of Self-Reliant vigour. As discussed in Chapter Two, the texts belong to the genre of creative nonfiction, in which (auto)biography is creatively managed in order to convey subjective truth, tell a story in a compelling manner, and enhance certain qualities or events to highlight their importance to the individual.

The Self-Reliant ideas and endeavours of these modern and contemporary individuals seem to be just as, if not more, relevant than those of Thoreau and Emerson in the mid-nineteenth century. The writings of these thinkers speak directly to a range of social and environmental issues in contemporary America, including the conservation of nature.

While conservation efforts had been underway in America from the early twentieth century, they were temporarily side-tracked by World War I. After the war the country was faced with "massive environmental calamities such as flooding and the Dust Bowl, as well as by the Great Depression" (Dunlap and Mertig 210). In response, there was another wave of conservationism under the Franklin Roosevelt administration, but again, a world war intervened, closely followed by the onset of the Cold War (Dunlap and Mertig 210). Thereafter, in the post-war economic prosperity of the 1950s, America experienced a surge in production and consumption – and environmental destruction. Ethan McCoy argues that *Walden* became particularly relevant in the face of this increased consumerism, mass production and materialism. America's "values of freethinking [and] thoughtful individuality" were being stifled "by price tags and department store catalogues" (McCoy 47). Thoreau's doctrine of simplicity and anti-materialism offered an obvious corrective, and

there were writers throughout the 1950s who sought to remind the public of Thoreau's ideas (McCoy 49). For example, in a 1954 article entitled "Witnessing Walden," the reader was "implored [...] to not only remember Thoreau when pondering the challenges of modern life, but to also embrace and apply his lessons" (McCoy 49). Another article observed that "*Walden* was so relevant to post-war American society that its messages comprised 'news of no less importance than I will read this evening in the paper'" (North, qtd. in McCoy 48).

The 1960s saw a "rapid increase in environmental awareness" (Dunlap and Mertig 215), as well as the rise of the counter-culture movement, which involved a younger generation of Americans rebuking the conventions of the1950s in America (McCoy 52). This movement involved itself in "protest[ing] the Vietnam war, demands for racial equality and women's rights, support for sexual liberation, and experimentation with drugs and new forms of self-expression that challenged rigid post-war conformity" (McCoy 52). The hippie movement is often viewed as synonymous with the counter-culture movement, but it actually began later in the decade and "revolved around renegotiating a relationship with nature that, contrary to the norms of mainstream suburban life, included finding peace and harmony with every part of the natural world – from the flowers, to the squirrels, to fellow human beings" (McCoy 52). Robert Gottlieb argues that the rise of environmentalism during this period is linked to reaction against the Cold War and its stimulation of "the nuclear industry, whose severe environmental impacts have included the contamination of local communities where nuclear facilities (from mines to generators) have been located" (391).

McCoy maintains that the aspect of Thoreau's thought most relevant to this movement is probably his emphasis on non-conformity and individualism in the face of harmful societal norms and institutions which seek to render everyone the same (52). But Thoreau's emphasis on the importance of the natural world for the physical and spiritual health of humans also spoke urgently to this period of heightened "lack of concern for the environment." Thoreau discerned that humans were "inextricably linked to the world in which [they] lived, and that any attempt to divorce oneself from nature was an exercise of foolishness" (Brooks par. 8). There was a variety of articles and essays published in the 1960s referring to Thoreau and Walden Pond: for instance, in an article about teaching *Walden* in schools titled "*Walden*: Neglected American Classic," Leo Bressler observed that Thoreau's individualism resonated with, and inspired, the hippie counter-culture that sought to defy materialism and societal norms, attacking "regimented American culture, in which people are pathetically engrossed in wearing the same clothes, living in the same kind of houses, joining the same organizations, driving the same cars as their neighbors" (Bressler,

qtd. in McCoy 52). A similar 1967 article claimed that the "hippie philosoph[y] borrows heavily from Henry David Thoreau" and referred to hippies seeking to establish their own utopias as attempting "to live the Waldenesque good life on the bare essentials" (Jones, qtd. in McCoy 53). This counter-culture movement "reclaimed Thoreau and his grand work for themselves in the 1960s," finding particular inspiration in his emphasis on "how individuals could break free from the conformity of their own time and reclaim their individual spirituality" (McCoy 53). The counter-culture movements during this period spurred on environmental activism, and many of the senior twenty-first century environmental activists "came from the militant campuses" of the 1960s in America (Shabecoff 4). Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* was published at the height of the counter-culture movement in 1968 – the period where environmental activism was truly taking shape. As previously discussed, some of his ideas and observations on modern materialism seem to be typical of the hippie mentality of this period, and while his environmentalism began long before this decade, it is plain to see how the wave of environmental awareness and activism during the period might have further stimulated his militant environmentalist sensibility.

The energy crisis of the 1970s would again call for Thoreau's ideas – this time in the cause of conserving energy. In 1973 OPEC (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), whose member nations were mainly in the Middle East, led a ban against exports to America, resulting in a drastic increase in gas prices and a "severely limited energy supply in the United States" (McCoy 55). During this period a Boston Globe article called on Americans to embrace Thoreau's idea of simplicity and conservation in a time when "Americans [were] struggling to power their automobiles and industry" (McCoy 55). When president Jimmy Carter was in office during this period – which Dunlap and Mertig call "the pro-environmental Carter administration" period (212) – he declared that the energy crisis was about more than oil and petrol, but about "the very heart and soul and spirit of our nation," and suggested that Americans ought to champion individualism, drive and perseverance in order to understand that "piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose" (Carter, qtd. in McCoy 57). While Carter did not reference Thoreau directly, his advice can be aligned with Thoreau's ideas, especially the "call to challenge the necessity of luxuries in order to find fulfilment, focusing attention instead on living a spiritually and morally gratifying life of hard work and determination" (McCoy 57).

The success of the first official Earth Day (in which over 20 million people participated) indicates that the 1970s truly was the decade in which environmental awareness

reached a new level (Dunlap and Mertig 216). It was during this decade that public concern for the environment "became a flood that could not be contained," and on the first Earth day on 22 April 1970, "[m]illions of Americans took to the streets and campuses to demonstrate their deep concern and to demand that environmental problems be addressed" (Shabecoff 4). Because of public pressure during the 1960s regarding the environment, President Richard Nixon (who was himself no environmentalist) decided to pay attention to "the political zeitgeist" and thus created the Environmental Protection Agency – an agency which sought to "reduce pollution by corporations and municipalities" (Shabecoff 4). This was followed by a variety of environmental acts such as the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and the Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments of 1972 (Shabecoff 4). A number of popular environmental groups were formed during the 1970s in America as well, such as Green Peace and Friends of the Earth – supporting the observation that this decade was "the golden age of environmentalism in the United States" (Shabecoff 5).

The golden age of environmentalism would come to a halt in the 1980s after Ronald Regan became president and reduced industry regulations and government interventions in environmental issues, due to his belief that "government had become an unacceptably heavy burden to market capitalism" (Shabecoff 5). It was in this decade that the subject of Gilbert's *Last American Man*, Eustace Conway (who had always had an environmentalist sensibility) started buying land for his Turtle Island reserve – which he could protect from the destruction and pollution he was witnessing in other wild areas around America. Wilhelm Cortez describes this decade, that threatened the environmentalist progress made in the previous two decades, as a period of "extreme environmental destruction and extreme reactions" (Cortez par. 15). In this context it is understandable that Conway (who was born in the 1961) might have found an increasing need to establish his own natural environment, a space that he could defend and conserve without the threat of government development and industrial pollution. Environmentalist groups would respond to Reagan's new policies with new tactics that involved "aggressive media and public outreach strategies," which eventually resulted in President George H. W. Bush accepting "the system of tradable air pollution permits proposed by the Environmental Defense Fund" into the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 (Shabecoff 6). Bush's successor was Bill Clinton, whose "administration led to a more combative environmental movement" until after the September 11th attacks and the subsequent War on Terror, during which the environmentalist movement and the progress that had been made after the Cold War was again set back (Gottlieb 28).

Attention to environmental issues and rampant materialism have continued side-by-side into the twenty-first century, as evidenced by a variety of recent concerns, such as with fracking and America's hyper-consumerist culture. Hydraulic fracking is the "shooting [of] a mixture of mostly water and sand under high pressure against a rock formation until it fractures. The sand fills the fracture, forcing crude oil out of the rock formation" (Egan par. 8). This drilling for shale oil, while it has increased America's oil production and boosted the economy (Goldenberg par. 5), has also had a devastating environmental impact. Fracking produces carbon dioxide and thus contributes to climate change through greenhouse gases (Bozzo par. 8). It also has a variety of other environmental consequences including earthquakes and water pollution, which are analysed in the 2010 documentary film "Gasland" (Egan par. 9). Fracking is merely one of the many environmental concerns in America today, some of which are documented in Will Harlan's *Untamed* – in which Carol Ruckdeschel fights to defend Cumberland Island's environment from modern threats such as nuclear submarines, the tourism industry, selfish wealthy families, and over-fishing (to name but a few) – which all seem to become more difficult to manage as natural areas are increasingly "developed."

This blatant disregard for the environment is a consequence of the quest for international political and economic power, the latter enabling the consumerism at the heart of American culture. In a 2012 article, Amitai Etzioni argues that America's public has an "obsession with acquisition that has become the organizing principle of American life" (par. 5). He calls consumerism (which he believes is the satisfying of anything beyond the basic human needs) a "social disease" (par. 5), which has resulted in the life satisfaction of Americans remaining the same since World War II despite the fact that "per capita income has tripled" (par. 10). When examining the shopping lists of working middle-class Americans in the twenty-first century, Etzioni stresses that it becomes clear that most people "spend good parts of their income on status goods such as brand-name clothing, the 'right' kind of car, and other assorted items that they don't really need" (par. 11).

Ruckdeschel, Abbey and Conway can be seen as contemporary eco-warriors, individuals who have fought and/or continue to fight for environmental causes since the rise of environmental consciousness in America. In Dillard's case, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* should be seen as pioneering the growing ecological awareness characteristic of the present moment in the West. McCandless's case in *Into the Wild* seems to be slightly different, as he did not appear to have a strong environmentalist sensibility or inclination. But his ideals are clearly a reaction against what he saw as an increasingly consumerist and greedy society in America –

a trend that, if anything, has intensified since the 1990s (the decade in which McCandless set off on his nomadic adventures). It would thus seem that Thoreau's ideas on Nature and individualism are increasingly relevant to a society characterized by unfettered consumerism and ecological melt-down. McCoy suggests that Thoreau's *Walden* may even assist in better understanding climate change, since researchers studying the flora at Walden Pond are using Thoreau's writings about the pond "as a point of comparison to see how the ecosystems there have changed in accordance with the changes in the localized climate over the past 150 years" (McCoy 58).

The individuals documented in the five nonfiction texts (and their seemingly Self-Reliant approach to Nature) seem to reflect the interest in and concern for Nature expressed in the rise of environmentalism and the discourses of ecology in America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even though Thoreau's writings date back over 150 years to when he was "sitting in his tiny cabin at Walden Pond [...] mourning the loss of the wilderness and the debilitating effect of industrialism on the human spirit" (Shabecoff 2), his writings and ideas, especially in *Walden*, have served (and still serve) to "remind Americans of [T]ranscendentalism, individualism, and the connection between spirit, self, and nature" (McCoy 58). Emerson's initial Transcendentalist ideas have also been relevant to American social politics in the past two centuries. His idea of Self-Reliance in particular has been appropriated not only by mainstream national identity politics, but also by far-right wing misconstrued notions of American freedom.

John Izaguirre observes how the works of Emerson, particularly his essay "Self-Reliance," have "epitomized the emerging idea of the American dream and solidified many prominent American ideals first characterized in the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*" (19). His themes of intuition, individualism and self-cultivation "allowed for American literature to reject the European literary aesthetic by asserting that inspiration and intelligence developed from individuals and their experiences rather than from any longstanding national customs or traditions" (Izaguirre 19). Emerson's ideas have been assimilated into the capitalist identity of the American way of life, which fetishizes private ownership and individual endeavour, repudiating anything based on the socialist principle of collectivism. In his article "Emerson and the Dream of America," Richard Geldard points out that those who link Emerson's ideas with the far-right, egocentric philosophies of thinkers such as Ayn Rand, have in fact misunderstood Emerson's writings completely (Geldard "Emerson" par. 2).

Emerson's Self-Reliant ideas do not imply "a license to pursue your dreams at the expense of others or to accept what some conceived to be Darwin's evolutionary notion of survival of the fittest'" (Geldard "Emerson" par. 2), but rather mean a "spiritual principle of self-trust, the realization that we possess in our nature the strength and capacity for finding our true path in life and even for discovering the very ground of our being. And what is true for us as individuals is also true for the nation" (Geldard "Emerson" par. 4). Geldard suggests that this true principle of Emersonian Self-Reliance should be used for the benefit of American society, especially when it comes to electing people to leadership positions. Rather than respect those who preach selfishness and individual success at the expense of others, one should take heed of Emerson's true American creed that every person has the power to uncover their individual path and pursue it on an equal playing field (Geldard "Emerson" par. 7). Individuals can thus strive to achieve and embody the authentic American Dream – a dream defined by "values and principles rooted in individualism, self-actualization, and self-reliance, where people are able to fulfil their own destiny, be self-reliant, and believe in the promise that through hard work and perseverance life can be different and better" (Izaguirre 1). The concept of the American Dream can be traced right back to the 1776 Declaration of Independence, "which proclaimed people were entitled to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' pursuits that ended with people achieving some level of fulfilment through hard work, tenacity, and perseverance" (Izaguirre 1). This dream is "meant for every citizen, with a level playing field which support[s] a genuine understanding of equality of opportunity" (Geldard, "Emerson" par. 7) – which suggests that Emerson's ideas, when understood correctly, embody the true American dream. These ideas remain absolutely relevant in the context of the rise of Tea Party conservatism and crass extremists like Donald Trump, who preach intolerance and nativism, and who seemingly fit the title of a "post-fascist" leader (Finchelstein and Piccato par. 11 and 15).

Emerson and Thoreau's ideas are clearly applicable to modern American issues such as overconsumption, capitalist conformity, environmental destruction, and the promotion of warped American nationalism. While the five texts analysed in this paper document notable individuals associated with Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, there are many individuals alive today not documented in successful biographies, whose ideas or endeavours might be compared with those of Emerson and Thoreau. I shall close by citing three examples of individuals who have been written about in articles or who have made headlines in the last decade – all three of whom have endeavoured to live a life that conflicts with the expectations of modern American society and can be compared to Thoreau's time at Walden Pond.

Emma Orbach, an Oxford graduate, has been living off the land in west Wales since 1993, where she stays with around twenty "like-minded people" who all strive to "live outside of the confines of what passes as society" (Redfern par. 1). Like Thoreau, Orbach built her own hut and lives a self-sufficient life without electricity or running water (Allen par. 4). She originally moved to live off the land away from society after "having a strong calling to live in closer proximity to the nature spirits she perceived around her" (Allen par. 4), a notion not too far removed from Emerson's idea of humans' innate connection to Nature. Orbach does not, however, completely isolate herself from society, but travels into the nearby village to visit her children or give tours of the area to visitors – what she calls a mere "sociability thing" (Orbach quoted in Allen par. 7). Due to the fact that Orbach's little community had never obtained planning permission, she at one stage faced the problem of the government's insisting that the area be destroyed (Redfern par. 3). Orbach eventually won her right to remain there as long as she and her companions "could demonstrate that they were improving the biodiversity of the area and conserving the surrounding woodland" (Redfern par. 5).

In April, 2013, police arrested a man named Christopher Knight for stealing from a summer camp in Maine (Barnaby par. 5). It was discovered that Knight (who would become known as the North Pond Hermit) had been living in Maine Woods for 27 years, quietly stealing supplies from surrounding residences in order to survive (Barnaby par. 1). To avoid being caught he covered his footprints and never built fires, and had "gone the last three decades without medical assistance" (Barnaby par. 8). Knight had a happy childhood and did well in school, and his reasoning for going into the woods is simple: "everyone [is] searching for contentment – and to him, this meant the serenity of the woods" (Barnaby par. 12). Knight, however, also believes that people romanticize his life in the woods: as he says, "people want me to be this warm and fuzzy person [... a]ll filled with friendly hermit wisdom. Just spouting off fortune-cookie lines from my hermit home" (Knight, qtd. in Holyoke par. 6). Not everyone agrees with Knight's chosen lifestyle, with Mallory Ortberg stating that he did not truly live self-sufficiently because he "depended upon the labor and possessions of others to meet [... his] every physical need" (par. 21). One man who also chose to spend most of his time in the wilderness (yet who does not steal to sustain himself) is 62 year-old Mick Dodge whose life is now the subject of the television series "The Legend of Mick Dodge" on the National Geographic Channel (Spector par. 4).

Dodge is a former marine who "left the modern world and ventured in to the Hoh rain forest in western Washington state" where he has "been building his life [...] sleeping among

the trees and moss and living off the land" (Spector par. 1). Like Thoreau he does not completely isolate himself from society, even going so far as to state: "I land my soles in the three terrains, the walls of the city, through the open fenced lands up into the gated wild and back again, seeking middle earth" (Dodge, qtd. in Spector par. 15). He eats everything from insects to pizza, and even runs the "Earth Gym" where he trains people to work out using the natural environment rather than mechanical gym equipment (Spector par. 2). His philosophies on living a meaningful, individualistic life seem to resonate with those of Emerson and the notion of coming closer to the universal Over-Soul through spiritual communion with Nature: "I often find that when I get a bit weak, run down. That a good dance with the spirit of fire, pulls me back into the 'rapture'" (Dodge, qtd. in Spector par. 16).

While some aspects of these individuals' ideas or endeavours may seem to be redolent of Self-Reliant Transcendentalism, their stories have not been documented in notable literature like the five creative nonfiction texts that have been examined in this study. The popularity of (auto)biographical and similar nonfiction literature in America could be linked, according to Jill Ker Conway, to people "want[ing] to know how the world looks from inside another person's experience," and finding satisfaction in "being allowed inside the experience of another person who really lived and who tells about experiences which did in fact occur" (Conway par. 11–12). Conway observes that for the reader there is a subsequent disappearance of "the lost suspension of disbelief [...] and the reader is able to try on the experience of another, just as one would try on a dress or a suit of clothes, to see what the image in the mirror then looks like" (par.12). Americans in particular might enjoy reading stories about actual fellow American people who have set out and accomplished their dreams and who are living (or attempting to live) out ideals that might be considered unorthodox by society. The idea of setting out to live a solitary existence away from modern American society might also resonate with Americans longing to escape the increasing commercialization and urbanization of their country, perhaps feeling that the wilderness is the last true space of America. For Americans in a country revered as the "home of the free," these individuals might also reflect the self-reliant, individualistic freedom championed by those who hold these qualities to be the primary foundation of an independent American identity.

As has become clear, Emerson and Thoreau's Self-Reliant Transcendentalist ideas are still prominent in and appropriate to modern Western society. More than that, they continue to hold out hope for a new and better way for human beings to be on this earth, in relation to each other and to the natural environment they have treated so thoughtlessly for so long.

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