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John Muir and the Poetics of Natural Conversion

In America, the literature of nature abounds in religious energy, and no naturalist was more energetic than John Muir. That his biographer, Stephen Fox, could characterize the conservation movement as “a religious protest against modernity” is due in large part to Muir’s influence on generations of activists, writers, and thinkers (359). Pre-eminent among his works is the radiant account of his first summer in the Sierra, a spiritual autobiography that embodies his mature beliefs about how human beings can achieve and sustain a healthy relationship to the earth.

I believe that we can understand the appeal, and the importance of *My First Summer in the Sierra* by reading it as a conversion story. It participates in a literary and religious archetype, established by Saint Paul and perfected by Saint Augustine, that has deeply influenced Western culture. Muir’s story shows significant parallels with theirs, but it also differs in important respects because his is a “natural” conversion, that is, a turning to a religion of nature rather than to an established orthodoxy. As Fox has argued, Muir’s doctrine has very little to do with recognizable forms of Christianity (50-53). Rather, it is a type of natural theology that grew out of his extensive wilderness travels, scientific observations, readings in the Romantics and the Transcendentalists, and reactions against his father’s dogmatic Calvinism. Nevertheless, Muir’s natural religion is deeply rooted in scriptural and ecclesiastical tradition, and his account takes full advantage of the rhetorical possibilities introduced by his saintly predecessors. Before turning to his text, therefore, I would like to review some of their contributions to the development of conversion narrative, particularly as they relate to plot (that is, the experience and its interpretation) and to the presentation of self.

1. The Conversion of Paul

In classical times, the personality was considered to be determined from birth. Therefore, according to Heraclitus, "A man's character is his fate." But Christian psychology takes a dynamic, evolutionary view of the personality, for to be saved, Jesus said, we must be born again (Auerbach, *Dante* 1-23). The Gospels are full of stories of people converted by Jesus, most notably Matthew and the other Apostles, and deep, personal transformation is at the core of the most memorable passages and parables. In the early church, new members were required to stand up before the congregation and tell the story of their own conversion as a public act of faith. Such stories were known as confessions.

Paul's is surely the most important conversion in scripture, and it provided a model for all subsequent confessions. The story is told several times in the book of Acts, first by the narrator and then on various occasions by Paul himself. It forms the nucleus for several famous sermons and the keystone of his memorable speeches before the Roman tribunals in which he defended himself against the accusations of the Jews. In all versions, the story is reduced to its simplest and most dramatic elements: Paul begins as a Pharisee, a Jewish aristocrat fanatically persecuting a heretical sect; on his way to Damascus to carry on his violent business, he is suddenly blinded by a dazzling light; he hears a divine voice admonishing him for his persecutions and directing him to a Christian house; he goes there and is received into the community of his former enemies; thereafter, he becomes a Christian evangelist.

Although the account in Acts 8-9 focuses only on the climactic events, Paul's conversion is not a classical drama observing unity of place and time. It is really a process rather than an event. Paul's vision makes no sense without the context of his early life as a persecutor, his subsequent career as a preacher, or the promise of his eventual reception into heaven. However, the scriptural accounts supply little information about any of these. Like the story of Abraham and Isaac, and other mythic narratives of the Old Testament, they are "fraught with background," (Auerbach, *Mimesis* 8-23), requiring the listeners to invoke their own cultural understanding, personal history, and religious hopes as part of the interpretive process. As in the Old Testament accounts, the audience is invited to imagine what sort of man Paul must have been, what sort of God would choose such a man for his prophet, and why such a man would risk status, security, and every social advantage for the hazards of apostolic life. This process of imaginative engagement concretizes and personalizes the abstract doctrines presented elsewhere in the sermon. But the reduction of the narrative to the story's basic elements also universalizes Paul's experi-

ence so that each listener can apply it to his or her own life. Paul's aim is to focus attention away from his particular situation and toward the saving revelations of Christ. He uses the personal only as an arrow pointing away from the ego, toward universal truths. Rhetorically, these are clever techniques for engaging a hostile or skeptical audience.

Structurally, Paul's conversion story resembles the parabolic design of a simple tale, yet with an interesting twist. Instead of a rising action, climax, and falling action, the climax is followed by a new rising action that culminates outside the narrative itself, with Paul's anticipated reception into heaven. This modified parabolic structure supports the rhetorical strategies outlined above. One must imagine the ending to Paul's story, yet to do so one must entertain the doctrine he is presenting. To become a storyteller, even in this most private and germinal way, is to enter Paul's world and take the first step on the path that leads to conversion.

Thematically, Paul's conversion experience turns upon a mind-arresting event that forces a reinterpretation of the world and of the self in relation to it. Both literally and symbolically, the key event is his blindness. Trained as an expert interpreter of religious texts, he has failed to see that the prophecies of the Old Testament apply to Jesus of Nazareth. Now this revelation becomes the basis for his new life as an apostle. The literal blindness caused by his vision has healed him of his original, figurative blindness with respect to the true sense of the scriptures and enabled him to see the true purpose of his life, the sufferings he must endure as an apostle, and the heavenly reward that awaits him. Blindness, in short, is insight. This paradoxical treatment of the key symbol points to paradox itself as the core of the conversion experience. What was abhorred is now embraced; what was hated is now sought out; the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone of the temple.

However, just as vision is only one of the senses, so Paul's conversion transforms only part of his being. He does not abandon his religious vocation; he merely changes allegiance. And he retains many of his personal and professional qualities such as energy, eloquence, extreme dedication, and devotion to exegesis and theology. He is in many respects the same person, a fact underscored by his markedly minor shift in name ("Saul" to "Paul" is less drastic than, say, "Simon" to "Peter"). The behavior and the motives may change, but the "self" remains intact on a deeper level. Thus, it makes sense to say that Paul's soul has been "saved," not destroyed or reconstituted or made into something different. And thus it is, too, that after conversion his life goes on. The life before and the life after conversion are part of the same story.

2. The Confessions of Augustine

When Augustine began to compose his *Confessions*, the Pauline model

was almost four hundred years old, yet Augustine boldly adapted it to his own purposes and, in so doing, inaugurated the genre of western autobiography. While his story resembles Paul's in many respects—the central theme of interpretation, the embracing of what was abhorred, the persistence of key personality traits—his treatment is vastly different and his text correspondingly larger and more complex. It is worth examining these differences, for they shed light on the literary choices Muir made in constructing his own spiritual autobiography.

Whereas the conversion stories in scripture are terse and dramatic, Augustine's is rich with detail. His conversion is also a process, but a process of character development that culminates in a moment of vision. He describes how he began seeking a faith early in life. He was exposed to Christian teachings by his mother, but he rejected the scriptures because he believed them inferior to the Greek and Latin classics. Meanwhile, he excelled in school and became a professor of rhetoric, teaching would-be lawyers how to use language to win cases and make money. He wrote books, gained promotions, and came to Rome. He took a mistress and enjoyed a full measure of worldly success. Yet his soul was still restless, and he embraced one sect after another in hopes of finding peace. Increasingly troubled by the tension between his professional achievements and his spiritual failures, he felt his will pulling him in two directions, as if it were divided against itself. He met extraordinary Christians in Rome and Milan who exemplified the rewards of a chaste life and revealed to him the possibility of a spiritual interpretation of scripture. For a long period he wrestled with indecision, knowing he should become a Christian but unable to take the leap. Finally, at the point of highest tension, when the two sides of his will were locked in a stalemate, he heard a voice in the garden saying, "Take it and read it, take it and read it." He seized the scriptures and read the first passage he saw; it spoke to one of his dilemmas (sexual addiction), and he was converted. He gave up his professorship and his mistress to become a churchman and theologian.

Many features of the Pauline model persist in this story. Conversion occurs when the protagonist feels personally addressed by a divine voice that directs him toward a reinterpretation of the world and the self. Essential aspects of character and personality are preserved: Augustine remains intensely interested in theological questions, keeps restlessly seeking answers, and goes on writing with undiminished energy. The theme of blindness is prominent: Augustine, too, is unable to see the spiritual sense of the scriptures and is oblivious to the fact that God is watching providentially over his life. The modified parabolic plot structure is retained: Augustine's story goes on after the moment of conversion, with a new rising action, depicted in Books IX-XIII, that points toward a life of struggle followed by a heavenly reward.

Unlike Paul's account, however, Augustine's is fraught with exposition. It dwells with obsessive particularity upon the details of his past as they have contributed to his spiritual evolution. With Paul, conversion comes as a stunning blow; with Augustine, it is more like the dropping of a ripe fruit. With Paul, the voice comes as a single, divine command. With Augustine, the message comes in two parts, the gentle voice and the scriptural text. The voice makes Augustine receptive to the text but does not direct the interpretation; that is supplied by Augustine himself, out of the tortured context of his own life. The scripture acts as a catalyst to complete the transformative process. Augustine's key discovery is that scripture applies to him and that the answers to all his questions can be found by interpretation guided by this faith. Significantly, his conversion experience does not supply these answers; they must still be discovered by an arduous process of reflection and analysis, which he depicts in the final books of the *Confessions*.

Augustine's rhetorical situation also differs markedly from that of Paul. Not only is he writing long after his conversion, but, as the title makes clear, he is also addressing an audience of believers. His purpose is to inform and inspire, to strengthen his readers' faith. Moreover, he already has standing with his audience; he writes from a position of expertise and authority that does not have to be earned by the text itself. Rhetorically, his task is to hold and deepen the interest that readers have already granted. Yet he faces a curious dilemma. To keep the reader engaged, he must create a believable picture of his younger self, and, for the conversion to be credible, the younger self must be a sympathetic character. Yet too much sympathy would undercut the new beliefs that the story is trying to promote.

Augustine's solution is characteristically elegant. He frames the work as an extended prayer, addressed to God and couched in the second person. The conversion story, told in the first person, is embedded in the prayer. In effect, the reader overhears Augustine communing with God, and everything he says appears candid, private, highly believable. But more important, the tale-within-a-prayer both tells the conversion story and enacts the beliefs to which it has led. The second-person prayer, interlarded with scriptural allusions, exemplifies the confessional stance that Augustine must adopt to heal his soul. As a "recovering addict," whose will was enslaved to sex, fame, intellect, and the power of rhetoric, Augustine realizes that his only hope is to dedicate his talents and achievements to God. As an opening of the mind and a surrender of one's will to a higher power, prayer is antidotal, but it must be ongoing. It is a life's work. And writing one's confession is an act of bearing witness to this entire process. It is, one might say, a final act, demonstrating the reality and authenticity of the conversion.

3. The Self in Conversation with Nature

St. Paul established the paradigm of Christian conversion as a moment of vision in which the protagonist feels personally addressed by a divine voice that changes his view of world and self, reversing previously held values while leaving the personality intact. The Pauline accounts also approach a mythic concentration, employing a parabolic plot structure and leaving the narrative fraught with background in order to engage the audience. St. Augustine's contributions included the concept of conversion as the pivotal moment in a lifelong developmental process, and the construction of an elaborate rhetorical frame that allows the text to simultaneously enact the conversion and embody the new beliefs. Muir knew Paul through the scriptures, which he was forced to memorize as a child. It is not known whether he read Augustine, although there are many sources, including the English Romantic poets, from whom he might have absorbed Augustinian tropes and solutions. In any case, *My First Summer* achieves a new synthesis of the possibilities for spiritual autobiography first explored by these saints.

Like Augustine, Muir wrote his confession late in life, when he was already well-known. In 1911 he was over seventy years old and had been promoting and defending wilderness for more than thirty years. His title, beginning as it does with a first person pronoun, suggests a memoir by someone the reader is expected to know and care about. His dedication, "To the Sierra Club," also suggests an audience of the faithful. The book is written for readers that already know and share its author's point of view, and this fact is announced even before we get to the text.

Muir presents his work as a diary. It is organized chronologically, with mere dates as chapter subheads. The text is sprinkled with incomplete sentences, suggesting a simple transcription of field notes. Each day is a mosaic of small stories told in the past tense, within a present tense frame. The overall structure is episodic and loosely jointed, and the plot (the progressive conversion) is so deeply embedded that it does not emerge into the reader's consciousness without reflection. The narrative seems to have little suspense and no undue complication. Aside from the landscape, Muir is really the only character. These rhetorical strategies create an impression of candor, immediacy, and authenticity: we seem to be reading an unedited, private journal that records a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." As with Augustine, Muir is not so much heard as overheard, and, since readers are eavesdroppers by nature, such a position is quite seductive. But it is only a delicious fiction. We know that Muir carefully edited his journals, as did Thoreau and Darwin (Cohen 350-52). The use of the journal format is as disingenuous as Wordsworth's choice of the title "Lines, Written a Few Miles above Tintern

Abbey” to describe a complex psychological poem in perfect iambic pentameter.

Muir’s artifice is apparent in his selection of events and the creation of his narrative persona. We know from Muir’s biographers that his conversion actually took place over a period of about two years, beginning with the accident at the carriage factory that left him temporarily blind and concluding with the journey described in *My First Summer*. At the beginning, he could have been considered a nineteenth century American success story: he was mechanically gifted, upwardly mobile, hardworking, and conventionally religious. The accident ejected him from this life, and he entered a period of wandering, at the end of which he discovered a true home in Yosemite and a new career as a prophetic naturalist.

Significantly, the text of *My First Summer* omits the first part of this history in favor of the culminating journey into the mountains. Moreover, unlike the accounts of Paul and Augustine, it has no definite climax. Instead, it proceeds by a series of small revelations that add up to a changed view of self and world. This process is carefully marked in the text. On the very first page, Muir depicts himself as restless and unsettled, worrying about his bread supply, “so troublesome to wanderers,” and dreaming of “sauntering” among the mountains at his leisure (3). The latter term, from Thoreau’s “Walking,” suggests that Muir sees this period of his life as a kind of alert and active waiting, a “walking meditation,” where his mind is becoming open and receptive to an as yet unimagined new life. What we, as readers, do not know at this point is anything at all about the life Muir has left behind. Yet the theme of conversion is announced almost at once. On the morning of the third day, he gains his first open view: Horseshoe Bend of the Merced River appears to him “a glorious wilderness that seemed to be calling with a thousand soulful voices” (13). His response is couched in the terms Jesus used when calling his disciples: “Gazing awestricken, I might have left everything for it” (14). And the next day, reaching the second bench of the range, he exults, “We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems . . . a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal. . . . How glorious a conversion, so complete and wholesome it is, scarce memory enough of old bondage days left as a standpoint to view it from!” (16).

These images suggest that Muir’s conversion is both physiological and spiritual. The climb makes him healthier and stronger, but it also makes him feel immortal by virtue of his participation in nature. It alters his view of self-in-world from alienation and imprisonment to freedom and communion. This passage also expresses a changed view of the world itself, establishing a spiritual geography that will govern the rest of Muir’s

narrative. The wilderness is glorious, holy, and redemptive, while civilization is unhealthy, nerve-wracking, and restrictive. Why Muir should have such a radical view is not apparent from the text. Yet the careful use of the word "bondage," one of many scriptural allusions, suggests that Muir construes his wilderness wandering as the search for a promised land. This summer journey bears a huge psychic burden. It is no mere vacation, but a quest for the purpose of his life.

As Muir goes farther and higher, this purpose becomes more and more clear. He begins to feel personally addressed:

I see snowy peaks about the headwaters of the Merced above Yosemite. . . . How consuming strong the invitation they extend!
(16)

Every morning, arising from the death of sleep, the happy plants and all our fellow animal creatures great and small, and even the rocks, seemed to be shouting, "Awake, awake, rejoice, rejoice, come love us and join in our song. Come! Come!" (67)

. . . a glory day of admission into a new realm of wonders as if Nature had wooingly whispered, "Come higher." (149)

Rhetorically, these passages are abstract and interpretive, summing up or characterizing a whole class of small, intimate, previous encounters with the creatures and landscapes of the Sierra. Each time Muir sounds this refrain, he conveys to the reader a sense that he has climbed one step higher on his path to enlightenment. As the narrative proceeds, his tone shifts from tentative and conditional to resoundingly certain. For instance, when Yosemite first comes into view, Muir calls it "a grand page of mountain manuscript that I would gladly give my life to be able to read" (102). Yet by the end of the summer he can say with confidence, "I'll surely be back, however, surely I'll be back. No other place has ever so overwhelmingly attracted me as this hospitable, Godful wilderness" (241).

Muir's vivid descriptions of meeting the landscapes and creatures of the Sierra contrast strikingly with his total reticence concerning his past. Like Paul's, his conversion story is fraught with background. It is left to us to infer, from hints in the text, just what Muir is being converted from. He does not dwell on the evils of civilization; they are present by contrast and implication, and the text invites us to choose our own allegiance. By presenting himself at the outset simply as a wanderer, Muir also universalizes his experience, encouraging us to identify with him as just one more young person searching for his niche in life. Yet, paralleling his growing excitement and sense of purpose is a half-conscious, progressive awareness on our part of what his background must have been like for

him to respond so strongly and devoutly to the call of the wild. The dazzling light of Muir's enthusiasm creates, behind the text before us, a shadowy image of the world of civilization and the younger self that he is rejecting. The combination of reticence and exuberance forcibly engages us, as readers, with the psychic dilemma of the self in its process of conversion.

The presentation of self is the key choice for any writer of confessional autobiography, for the persona of the narrator must demonstrate the efficacy of the conversion itself in order for the text to fulfill its purpose. Muir and Augustine each adopt a persona appropriate to their theology. In Augustine's case, the persona is that of a restlessly seeking, anxious, intense, and gifted intellectual with immense powers of concentration. He may have glimpsed the truth, but he has not ceased from exploration, and, as he pursues the intricate theological journey of Books X-XIII, he runs the risk of slipping back into his old dependency on the intellect. His account reveals an ongoing struggle to maintain the surrender of his will; it makes for theological high drama. Conversion does not lead to rest and relaxation, but to greater and more disciplined efforts. Growth is painful; strait is the gate and narrow the way that leads to eternal life.

To read Muir, however, one would think he had never had a doubt in his life. Although he presents himself variously as a wanderer, naturalist, interpreter, celebrant, and preacher, he is always full of enthusiasm. Even the most hair-raising episodes, such as his perilous climb over the lip of Yosemite Falls, cannot bring down his mood. Although he describes himself as shaken and overwrought, dreaming of the cliff giving way, his tone remains upbeat and energetic: he tells, rather than shows, his fear, thereby inviting us to discount it. Muir's relentless enthusiasm is striking, engaging, and challenging: his tone is that of an angel in paradise, pouring forth praises forever. His narrator exemplifies the converted state and sets up an ideal toward which the fallen reader can strive. We know from his letters to Mrs. Carr that Muir agonized about his choice to live in the mountains (Cohen, 81-82), yet none of this agony comes through in his text. As did Thoreau with the Walden journals, Muir has edited his own past to depict an ideal self living in joyous conversation with nature.

Muir's image of the converted self differs from Augustine's by virtue of the scriptural subtext each uses to interpret the conversion experience. For Augustine, the subtext is that of Jesus healing sinners: salvation comes by grace, through the loving regard of a God who takes a personal interest in the diseased and stumbling Augustine. For Muir, the subtext is the Exodus: salvation comes by escape from the slavery of civilization and discovery of the promised land of the wilderness. Late in the narrative, when he leaves Professor Butler in the Valley, Muir exults, "I scrambled home through the Indian Canon gate, rejoicing, pitying the poor Pro-

fessor and General, bound by clocks, almanacs, orders, duties, etc., and compelled to dwell with lowland care and dust and din, where Nature is covered and her voice smothered, while the poor, insignificant wanderer enjoys the freedom and glory of God's wilderness" (186-87). Passages like these suggest that Muir's natural theology is one of liberation rather than redemption. His is a creation-centered spirituality assuming the goodness of all things natural, wild, and free. No savior is necessary: all we have to do is lift up our eyes unto the hills. In this natural religion there is no original sin and no overwhelming burden of guilt. No world-transforming sacrifice is required. In this sense, Muir's new faith is profoundly un-Christian.

Despite this change in theology, however, Muir's character remains intact on a deeper level. He comes to the mountains in a mode of rejection, as a kind of hobo naturalist, a wanderer and saunterer alienated from industrial civilization. By the end of the story he has found a home and a new vocation. As with Paul and Augustine, his conversion involves a reversal of values: natural religion replaces Scotch Calvinism, and nature study, seen as a profitless hobby by his father, becomes the center of his career. But, like his saintly predecessors, Muir has certainly not become less careerist: many of his religious images are not theological but ecclesiastical ("choir," "congregation," "preaching," "hymns"), suggesting a preoccupation with the social and institutional forms of religious life. Muir sees himself less as a saint than as a pastor. In giving up life in the factory for life in the temple of nature, he has sacrificed neither energy nor ambition. He has simply exchanged one form of upward mobility for another. Yet his new calling, that of wilderness prophet and apostle, allows him to rise above the conflict between nature and civilization that drove him into the mountains at the beginning. The act of writing his spiritual autobiography both enacts the conversion process and reconciles the self to its past and its future, creating a myth in which both nature and human society have a place. Muir's writing, therefore, is a gesture not only of witness, but of atonement.

3. Rhetorical Conversions

It is through the writing itself—through words on the page—that we enter into Muir's reality as he moves from the bondage of profane civilization to the freedom of sacred wilderness and the final transcendence of natural apostleship. Muir's text accomplishes its complex task, in part, through the marked transformation of key "epistemic metaphors," that is, metaphors expressing a world-view, and I shall discuss three: the personification of beings in nature, the identification of wilderness as paradise, and the symbol of nature as a book. Each of these is a common notion border-

ing on cliché, yet Muir reverses the usual interpretations. The discovery of these reversals (by the narrator as protagonist) is a key feature of the conversion experience. And, taken together, the new interpretations form the basis for Muir's natural theology.

Personification of animals and plants is the most common vice of the sentimental nature writer, or "nature faker," as John Burroughs would say. When David Brower edited *My First Summer* for the Sierra Club Exhibit Format series, he resolutely removed personifications, apologizing in his introduction for Muir's "pathetic fallacy" (Brower 15). On first glance, it is easy to misinterpret Muir in this way: his nineteenth-century style sounds baroque to a modern ear, and his religious intensity seems antiquated in an age of science and existentialism. However, Muir's personifications embody the ethical dimension of his natural theology, and to remove them is to miss a good deal of the point.

In sentimental nature writing, personification arises from the projection of human feelings. Animals are just people dressed up in furry clothes. As in fables, they are reduced to caricature for the sake of making a point. Because personification diminishes rather than enhances their essential otherness, it makes an authentic relation impossible. It is an act of cognitive aggression, prompted by fear and sustained by ignorance. In such writing, one learns nothing about animals; indeed, the text conspires to prevent learning. And because it represents itself as expert, eyewitness testimony, it can easily defraud casual readers, who may come away feeling comforted because their own anthropocentrism has been subtly confirmed.

In Muir's writing, however, the personifications cannot be said to arise from projection. In the first place, they are always earned. His descriptive passages often begin with detailed observations, couched in remarkably precise and evocative terms, and culminate in personifications that, given the context, appear as moments of epiphany. Consider the famous description of Nevada Fall:

The Nevada is white from its first appearance as it leaps out into the freedom of the air. At the head it presents a twisted appearance, by an overfolding of the current from striking on the side of its channel just before the first free outbound leap is made. About two-thirds of the way down, the hurrying throng of comet-shaped masses glance on an inclined part of the face of the precipice and are beaten into yet whiter foam, greatly expanded, and sent bounding outward, making an indescribably glorious show, especially when the afternoon sunshine is pouring into it. In this fall—one of the most wonderful in the world—the water does not seem to be under the dominion of ordinary laws, but rather as if it were a living creature, full of the strength of the mountains and their huge, wild joy. (188)

This description begins on a neutral and objective note, as if the narrator were merely recording his first impressions, taking the scene in without judging or analyzing what he sees. Although mild personifications appear almost at once (“leaps,” “hurrying through”), they are not restricted to human beings in a literal sense. The passage balances vivid, poetic metaphors (“outbounding leap,” “comet-shaped masses”) with abstract, categorical terms, such as one might find in a scientific report (“twisted appearance,” “overfolding of the current,” “inclined part of the face of the precipice”). When the overt personification finally appears, in the last sentence, it is solidly grounded in a context of concrete, objective detail, which makes it seem like an authentic epiphany rather than a bit of gratuitous moralizing. Muir appears as a meticulous observer who is led to his visionary moment by humble devotion to the object. Like the Thoreuvian saunterer, he seems to have no hidden agenda, and his spiritual reward comes to him by grace. His is a naturalist’s eye elevated by love to prophetic clarity, realizing Emerson’s proverb that “the invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.” However, the idea of freedom, which is repeated twice, links this particular moment to one of the story’s key themes, to the personality of its narrator, and to the mythic subtext of the Exodus. Therefore, while it is grounded in a concrete and momentary observation, the passage epitomizes both the overall conversion process and the text’s principal means of enacting it. After many such episodes, the reader is prepared to entertain Muir’s new faith that all things are related and the whole world spiritually conscious.

In Muir’s writing, personification is the highest form of flattery. His animals, plant people, and glowing landscapes are not “cute,” but arrestingly, vividly present, pursuing their ultimate concerns with an energy and dignity that put human beings to shame. Muir praises Sierra creatures for their cleanliness, intelligence, thrift, industry, vitality, and general joy in life. In contrast, the human visitors and inhabitants appear dirty, ignorant, wasteful, lethargic, fearful, and unhappy. Muir’s shepherd companion Billy, who sleeps in a pile of rotten duff, wears pants coated with mutton grease, panics at the sight of a bear, and shows no interest in the beauty of Yosemite, is a caricature of degradation. Visitors to Yosemite surprise Muir by their indifference to its grandeur, “as if their eyes were bandaged and their ears stopped . . . wholly unconscious” (190). Yet the tiny water ouzel leads “a romantic life . . . on the most beautiful portions of the streams,” where “every breath the little poet draws is part of a song, for all the air about the rapids and falls is beaten into music” (67).

Ironically, while humans always suffer in these comparisons, the terms on which they suffer are those of their own culture. Animals appear to be better people than we are. For Muir, as for Wendell Berry a century later, the ecological crisis is indeed a crisis of character. His personifica-

tions add up to a moral critique of a society that has failed to honor its own ideals. To entertain such a reversal of perceptions is to call one's own economic, political, and moral stance into question. It is an invitation to be born again.

If human beings are fallen, so is the world they inhabit. Muir's second rhetorical conversion transmutes the orthodox view of wilderness and paradise as moral and geographical opposites mediated by redemptive civilization. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, wilderness was created by the Fall, which not only threw humans out of paradise, but transformed nature from a harmonious, sustaining environment into a hostile waste that could be made productive only through labor. To the Puritan settlers, wilderness was associated with God's curse; transforming the land through settlement and agriculture offered a visible sign of redemptive human activity, a way to undo the effects of the Fall. This moral geography persisted into the westward movement of the nineteenth century.

For Muir, however, it is not wilderness but civilization that is corrupt, and he depicts Yosemite as an earthly paradise where the divinely appointed gardener is Nature herself. For instance, when he finds abundant lilies growing in the meadows above Crane Flat, he exclaims, "One might reasonably look for a wall of fire to fence such gardens!" (95). And later, returning to camp after following a bear, he remembers the animal as a "rugged boulder of energy in groves and gardens fair as Eden" (141). Beyond these overt references are systematic and sustained parallels to the earthly paradise as depicted in scripture, poetry, and art.¹ Like them, Muir's Sierra is characterized by beauty, immortality, abundance, spiritual virtue, and the tangible presence of God:

Another glorious Sierra day in which one seems to be dissolved and absorbed and sent pulsing onward we know now where. . . .This is true freedom, a good practical sort of immortality. (39)

...new life, new beauty, unfolding, unrolling in glorious exuberant extravagance...(32)

Yonder stands the South Dome...clothed with living light, no sense of dead stone about it, all spiritualized, neither heavy looking nor light, steadfast in serene strength like a god. (129)

This quick inevitable interest attaching to everything seems marvelous until the hand of God becomes visible. (157)

Significantly, no human intervention is needed to regain the paradisaical condition and undo the effects of the Fall: all we have to do is to let go of our warped and destructive values and give ourselves over to the gracious

influence of the mountains. Such a view resonates with Emerson's call in *Nature* for a scientific eye combined with the holiest affections, and with Thoreau's challenge in *Walden* to return to our senses. But Muir's position is not merely a warmed-over Transcendentalism. Even Emerson was a disciple of progress, whereas Muir finds civilization destructive and Satanic. The "feverish years" of sluice mining have profaned the landscape: streams of living water are "tamed . . . to work in mines like slaves . . . imprisoned in iron pipes to strike and wash away hills and miles of the skin of the mountain's face" (55). Muir notes scornfully that people have named the steep gullies of Mt. Hoffman "devil's slides, though they lie far above the region usually haunted by the devil" (153). In sum, civilization has degraded both the landscape and human consciousness. There is nothing redemptive about it. For Muir, "progress" means turning away from it altogether and preserving as much wilderness as possible.

Muir's changed view of wilderness and paradise also implies a turning away from Biblical ideas of humanity's place in the creation. The book of Genesis offers two creation stories, and depending on which one you emphasize, you can see humans either as overlords mandated to "replenish the earth and subdue it and have dominion" (Genesis 1:28) or as stewards set down in the midst of the garden expressly "to till it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15). The former emphasis has led to sustained attacks on Judeo-Christian tradition as the source of our ecological woes, with Lynn White's being the most famous critique (White 1203-07). Opponents of White, like René Dubos, frequently invoke the doctrine of stewardship as having equal weight in both scripture and theological tradition (Dubos 70-72). But Muir rejects *any* privileged role for humans. Creation has no need for an overlord or a steward: it does just fine by itself. Human beings can participate in the divine festival of nature—as fellow celebrants, as interpreters, as missionaries to their brothers and sisters—but they are not meant to assume control or even to be the center of attention. Muir's work presents humility as the fruit of a wilderness life, thus clearing the way for an ecological, communitarian ethic (Fox 52-53).

Muir's third rhetorical conversion transforms the archetypal symbol of the Book of Nature, a powerful conception that governed natural science from the early Middle Ages until the triumph of Darwinism.² Like Augustine, Muir is converted by a text, but whereas for Augustine it is the Gospel, for Muir the text is nature itself. The image of nature as a book was current in Muir's time, having been introduced into popular thinking by Emerson and Agassiz. For both these writers, nature was a system of signs pointing to higher, spiritual truths: the phenomenal world of experience was a code signifying an unseen world of eternal reality. The idea of nature as a sacred allegory informs Emerson's Transcendentalist

philosophy, first articulated in *Nature* (1835), which John Muir read and absorbed during his Sierra excursions. Emerson borrowed the idea from the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and the English naturalist John Ray, but we can trace it back through medieval theologians like Bonaventure and Augustine all the way to St. Paul's assertion in Romans 1:20 that the visible things of creation signify the invisible things of God.³

In this rich iconographic tradition, the Book of Nature has three important aspects: it is secret (that is, its meaning is not apparent to the uninitiated), it has a moral or doctrinal message, and it has remained fixed since the Creation. Emerson and Thoreau used the image of hieroglyphics to capture these essential qualities, and early references in Muir's text show that he takes their work as a point of departure.⁴ For instance, even while still in the foothills, he can speak of pine trees as "definite symbols, divine hieroglyphics written with sunbeam" (21). However, Muir soon begins developing his own sense of nature as text.

In the first place, Muir's nature does not keep back its "secrets," but openly displays its lessons and sermons to the wandering amateur naturalist. Indeed, the various plant people, animal evangelists, and beckoning landscapes seem eager to extend themselves toward the appreciative traveler: the Book of Nature is a public document lavishly displayed. In the second place, its content is not so much doctrinal or theological as aesthetic and inspirational: it works less to convey an array of facts than to invite a mode of relation. And finally, Muir treats the Book of Nature as a work in progress, emphasizing the act of writing as well as the artifact produced.

There is a creative tension throughout *My First Summer* between the sublime monumentality of the mountains and the dynamic processes of biological growth, weather, and geological transformation. As a naturalist, Muir is constantly shifting from a momentary, "snapshot" comprehension of plants, animals, or scenery to a historical or evolutionary view that sees them as configurations of energy, patterns of flow like standing waves. Thus, while he can appreciate the scenery at Horseshoe Bend as sculpture ("as striking in its main lines as in its richness of detail" [14]), he is reminded by the crimson display of evening clouds that Nature is characterized by "inexhaustible abundance amid what seems enormous waste...no particle of [Nature's] material is wasted or worn out. It is eternally flowing from use to use, beauty to yet higher beauty" (242). The Sierra is no static manuscript, but a living document that is continually being rewritten, erased, and overwritten like a palimpsest through the actions of glaciers, sunlight, wind, rain, and stream water (Cohen 106). To interpret such a text is therefore to describe a process rather than to decode a message, and the process is one of divine artistry. In *My First Summer* God is depicted variously as a sculptor, poet, or landscape

architect: “This quick, inevitable interest attaching to everything seems marvelous until the hand of God becomes visible...Nature as poet, an enthusiastic workingman, becomes more and more visible the farther and higher we go” (157-58). As a vast “mountain manuscript,” the Sierra archives the traces of this ongoing creative process: it presents itself, not as allegory, but as sacred history.

Although Muir’s *Book of Nature* contains no hidden, doctrinal message in the manner of medieval natural histories, it is not without significance for human beings. In the first place, it reveals God as actively present in the world, not as some deistic clockmaker on permanent vacation. Moreover, it reveals the world as fundamentally good: it is not fallen—indeed, it is still being made (“Creation just beginning, the morning stars ‘still singing together and all the sons of God shouting for joy’ ” [213]). Therefore, we have an opportunity to regain an Edenic condition of grace by putting ourselves in harmony with the earth and its dynamic processes of life and growth. Muir’s God is a god of love who pours spirit and life into the world with prodigious energy, eager that all creatures should flourish and grow. He is no Calvinist curmudgeon, treating the human race as a child to be whipped daily. For Muir, as for Blake, exuberance is beauty. One must look very hard to find in his works any mention of sin. If there is evil in Muir’s vision of things, it arises through ignorance, an acquired condition brought on by too much civilized living. The remedy is to be born anew through baptism in the wilderness.

Two years before Muir was born, Emerson had written that “The problem of restoring to the world original and natural beauty is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or blank that we see when we look at nature is in our own eye” (55). *My First Summer in the Sierra* tells the story of an Emersonian redemption but with a twist, for here it is the world that restores the soul. Muir’s natural conversion changes his axis of vision so that it coincides with the axis of things, thereby distancing him from his contemporaries. But while it makes him an outcast, it also gives him the inspiration for a new and compelling way to speak about nature. His spiritual autobiography, participating as it does in the rich literary tradition established by his saintly precursors, not only bears witness to his own transformation, but also strives to enact it in the mind of the reader. His rhetorical conversions are really gestures of prophecy.

John Muir did not invent the confessional nature essay, but he was its most diligent practitioner in the early days of American conservation. Although his style has not been imitated, his spiritual outlook, his formal adaptations of the Augustinian model, and many elements of his natural theology (particularly those consonant with an ecological paradigm) have

influenced generations of nature writers and, through them, the shape of environmental thinking today. Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez have all given us vivid accounts of natural conversion that follow the spirit, if not the letter, of Muir's. The abundant richness of contemporary nature writing testifies to the vitality of Muir's literary vision. In the world of letters, as in nature, it is still the morning of creation.

Notes

¹For synoptic discussions of edenic iconography, see A. B. Giamatti (13-15) or Mircea Eliade (59-72).

²For other discussions of Muir's use of this trope, see Cohen (104-111) and also Paul D. Sheats (42-53).

³For synoptic discussions of the Book of Nature tradition, see E. R. Curtius (319-26) and Clarence J. Glacken (161-253).

⁴For an excellent survey of the hieroglyphic trope in classic American literature, see John T. Irwin (8-40). Emerson's conception of the book of nature draws heavily upon the Swedenborgian notion of "correspondences" between the phenomenal and spiritual worlds: the mind that is attuned to nature's essential spirituality can read the text. Emerson's romanticism is thus fundamentally democratic. See Sherman Paul.

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