

*Partnership for Earth Spirituality*  
*An Earth Seminar Background Paper*

American Women Nature Writers  
and the Transcendental Moment

by Charles E. Little

A few years ago, someone sent me a collection of short-take writings entitled *The Sacred Earth: Writers on Nature and Spirit*. In this book, 64 writers are included, ranging from Ed Abbey to E.O. Wilson, along with Leopold, Lopez, Matthiessen, Muir, and Thoreau, among others. The usual suspects. But looking over the list, I was struck by how few women were included in it. Actually, just 12, less than 20 percent of the total.

A certain amount of gender imbalance in writing of this kind might be expected, since until quite recently women writers have had fewer opportunities to be published and reviewed. But that isn't true now, and in fact more than a few nature writers of genius have been recognized since the 18th century: Martha Daniell Logan, Eliza Lucas Pinckney, Jane Colden Farquar; and in the early 19th century, Anne Grant, Lucy Hooper, and the famed Margaret Fuller. Later in that century came Susan Fenimore Cooper (daughter of the novelist), whose book *Rural Hours* is having a resurgence of popularity among literary people. Published four years before Thoreau's *Walden*, *Rural Hours* (1850) is thought to be the beginning point of a nature-memoir tradition that stretches forward to such writers as Barbara Kingsolver, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Terry Tempest Williams.

Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sarah Orne Jewett came later in the 19th century, Mary Austin in the early 20th—all before Rachel Carson, in her mid-century “sea” books, Annie Dillard, and many contemporary nature poets such as Pattiann Rogers and Mary Oliver.

What distinguishes these writers, and perhaps most women writers of imaginative literature concerning the natural scene, is that the scene is not a mere backdrop, a framework for philosophical speculation, social criticism, or religious devotion. Nature is, in fact, the *subject* of their stories, poems, and reflections, and the *origin* of their creative instincts.

In this sense, such women nature writers may be seen as a continuation of the American Transcendental Movement. Though institutionally moribund after the middle of the 19th century, the transcendental spirit has been carried into the modern era by important women nature writers who have understood, and founded their work on, its precepts. It is not insignificant that of the “big three” transcendentalists in early 19th-century America, one was a woman, Margaret Fuller, editor of *The Dial*, the transcendentalists' journal, and an acerbic, intellectual voice in the salons of Boston. Though less famous as a writer, she was no less influential than her cohorts, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David

Thoreau. Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote: “One felt an influence breathing out of her, such as we might suppose to come from Eve, when she was just made.”

Contemporary authors such as Wendell Berry and Barry Lopez cannot be excluded from modern writers reflecting transcendentalism, but many feminists maintain that women have, inherently, a greater understanding of nature and natural processes, being themselves so much a part of these processes procreatively. Moreover, the feminists also maintain, women writers have, through their assigned role as keeper of hearth and home, a clearer perception of the relationship between nature and human culture than do men, who hunt and gather without much understanding of either one. The transcendentalists sought to overcome the presumed disharmony between nature and culture, and nature and religion as well—literary objectives that are found most clearly in women writers.

Whether or not such feminist assertions may explain why women nature writers provide so many important contributions to the American literary canon, an understanding of transcendentalism can help us more fully comprehend their literary motives and significance, especially in terms of spirituality and religious experience.

Transcendentalism in New England, whose heyday ran from about 1825 to 1845, was a reaction to the conventional orthodoxies of Puritanism as it had evolved around Boston in the Calvinist Congregational and increasingly rationalist Unitarian Churches. Indeed, it was a *spiritual* idea—but one that gave priority to the individual conscience, not to religious doctrine. It held that each person’s consciousness contained the divine, and the ability to apprehend the divine, in nature, quite independently of ecclesiastical mediation.

The movement was, above all, “modern,” and wholly American, as opposed to an imitation of European ideas. As Emerson wrote, in the first paragraph of *Nature*, the book that is considered to be the transcendentalist “bible,” “Why should not we . . . enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? Embosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, . . . why should we grope among the dry bones of the past? . . . There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.”

The worship, for the idealistic Emerson, a former minister who resigned his pulpit from the “corpse-cold Unitarianism of Brattle Street and Harvard College,” was best conducted in the woods of Concord. “In the woods,” he writes, “we return to reason and faith. . . . The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me, I am part or parcel of God.” Elsewhere, he writes, “The aspect of nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship.”

These encounters with nature are “transcendental moments,” the times when the individual conscience transcends dogma and the particularities of daily existence and merges with the “Over-Soul,” as Emerson called it, in a numinous interpenetration of nature and spirit.

Today the transcendentalists are remembered mainly for their nature writing, and in terms of a morality guided by individual conscience that led them to argue for the abolition of slavery, for temperance, for women's rights, and for public education. The religious component of the movement has been largely lost. Writes Ian Frederick Finseth, a literary historian, "The light of transcendentalism today burns strong on the page and in the classroom, rather than from the pulpit."

And yet burning strong on the page is no small matter, as the many important books by women nature writers clearly reveal.

One of these is Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, first published in 1896. A good many critics see this book, about a community of strong women in a harsh natural environment, as part of a feminist strain in American literature. While not denying this, Melissa Richardson, in "A Revisitation of Transcendentalism within Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*," argues that Jewett's novel (actually a novelized memoir) goes beyond gender issues to embrace "a thickly layered philosophy [transcendentalism] in which nature, the divine, and the self are entwined. When all things are interconnected, nothing is absolute except for an individual's own transformation."

*The Country of the Pointed Firs* is most often read as a charming regional narrative about Dunnet's Landing, a remote community on the Maine coast. But as Willa Cather, a friend and admirer of Jewett, wrote of it, the "sketches are living things caught in the open, with light and freedom and air-spaces about them. They melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all, but life itself."

Thus does Cather describe a transcendental melting of perceptions into a fully integrated cosmic insight, what Emerson called being "part or parcel of God." For example, on a visit to one of the islands just off Dunnet's Landing, Jewett writes:

Through this piece of rough pasture ran a huge shape of stone like the great backbone of an enormous creature. At the end, near the woods, we could climb up on it and walk along to the highest point; there above the circle of pointed firs we could look down over all the island, and could see the ocean that circled this and a hundred other bits of island-ground, the mainland shore and all the far horizons. It gave a sudden sense of space, for nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in—that sense of liberty in space and time which great prospects always give.

While Jewett is given her due by literary historians, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* is rarely taught in high school or college English courses. And that is a pity. The book is short, scarcely more than 100 pages, and available as an inexpensive paperback (Signet Classic). For an understanding of how "intricately intertwined the natural and cultural landscape are," as one critic has put it, one can hardly do better than to read about the intertwining in Sarah Orne Jewett's book.

Coming to publication just after *Pointed Firs* was Mary Austin's famed California-desert-and-mountain memoir, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903). Often contrasted with John Muir's writing of the Sierra Nevada, Austin, like Jewett, writes of nature and culture, often indigenously in Austin's case, as being inseparable. Muir's work is, instead, more purely about nature itself, as if it existed outside the orbit of cultural meaning. Still, as contemporary nature-writer Ann Zwinger has put it, Austin and Muir are necessarily joined as "the first *truly western* nature writers."

Perhaps for this reason, in Austin's work (as well as Muir's) one senses that "the land" is fully in control of human destiny. "The land," Austin writes, "will not be lived except in its own fashion." According to literary critic Carol E. Dickson, the sublimity of western landscapes can result in a kind of "defamiliarization" that can produce a quite vivid transcendental insight. In Chapter 10 of *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin writes about the rugged, geologically growing mountains of the West in this way:

The shape of a new mountain is roughly pyramidal, running out into long shark-finned ridges that interfere and merge into other thunder-splintered sierras. You get the saw-tooth effect from a distance, but the near-by granite glitters with the terrible keen polish of old glacial ages. I say terrible; so it seems. When those glossy domes swim into the alpenglow, wet after rain, you conceive how long and imperturbable are the purposes of God.

At mid-century, our best-known nature writer came upon the literary scene with more power and energy than anyone before or since: Rachel Carson. In three books, *Under Sea Wind* (1941), *The Sea Around Us* (1951), and *The Edge of the Sea* (1955), she established herself as one of America's most prominent authors. *The Sea Around Us* was on best-seller lists for 86 weeks and was translated into 30 languages. All this before the book for which she is best known, *Silent Spring* (1962).

One might describe Carson simply as a superb science-writer. And this would not be in error. In the best-sellers, *The Sea Around Us* and *Silent Spring*, the authorial "I" is submerged. But in *The Edge of the Sea* Carson most fully comes to us as her own person, whereby the wonder of nature is expressed in intimate terms, even as the science is clearly explained.

Here, too, occur the transcendental moments. In a description of the complex ecosystems of the Florida littoral zone, she writes:

There is a common thread that links these scenes and memories—the spectacle of life in all its varied manifestations as it has appeared, evolved, and sometimes died out. Underlying the beauty of the spectacle there is meaning and significance. It is the elusiveness of that meaning that haunts us, that sends us again and again and again into the natural world where the key to the riddle is hidden. It sends us back to the edge of the sea, where the drama of life placed its first scene on earth and perhaps even its prelude; where the forces of evolution are at work today, as they have been since the appearance of what we know as life;

and where the spectacle of living creatures faced by the cosmic realities of their work is crystal clear.

A more recent nature-memoir, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), by Annie Dillard, is more overtly theological than either Jewett or Austin or Carson. But it derives from transcendentalism rather than orthodoxy. Indeed, as the critic John Gatta writes, “readers immediately sense that *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* strives to conduct a latter-day dialogue with American Transcendental naturalists such as Emerson and Thoreau.” At the same time, Gatta points out, Dillard is more inclined than either Emerson or Thoreau to take on Christianity quite directly, which may have something to do with her upbringing in a Calvinistic Presbyterian church. While she rejects the Calvinism, she perceives, says Gatta, “a surprising consonance between the visions of medieval mystics and findings of modern scientists.”

Now an American classic, *Pilgrim*, like *Walden*, was written at a young age. Both Dillard and Thoreau were in their late 20s when most of the writing was done. And so, Dillard’s memoir, like Thoreau’s, is effusive, filled with facts and wonderment. (“Never underestimate the power of a fact,” said Thoreau. “It may one day flower into a truth.”) Even more than Thoreau, Dillard’s writing turns on the numinous throughout; that’s the pivot point. She writes not only of her own transcendental moments, but urges others to seek them out.

Ezekiel excoriates false prophets as those who have “not gone up into the gaps.” The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit’s one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the cliffs in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fjords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps. If you can find them; they shift and vanish too. Stalk the gaps. Sneak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock—more than a maple—a universe. This is how you spend this afternoon, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow afternoon. *Spend* the afternoon. You can’t take it with you.

More overt yet, in terms of the Christian tradition, is the imagery in the last book of this pantheon, *Thirst*, by best-selling poet Mary Oliver. The book was published after the death of Oliver’s long-time companion, Molly Malone Cook, and for the first time in her poetry she introduces religious language, observance, and biblical events, for she finds comfort in them. This is not, however, an abjuration of nature, but an effort to join the remembered qualities of the religious faith of her childhood with a life’s work of extolling the natural scene. The first line of the first poem in the book reads, “My work is loving the world.” Of another occasion, she has written, “For me, the door to the woods is the door to the temple.”

Critic Alicia Ostriker has called Oliver as “visionary as Emerson,” and indeed, a transcendental moment is found in very nearly every poem. “When I am among the trees,” Oliver writes,

especially the willows and the honey locust,  
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,  
they give off such hints of gladness.  
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself  
in which I have goodness, and discernment,  
and never hurry through the world  
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves  
and call out, "Stay awhile."  
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,  
"and you too have come  
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled  
with light, and to shine."

It is one thing to talk to the trees. It is a transcendental moment when they talk back.

Reading these American writers, one is struck not by the uniqueness of their apprehension of nature, but how germane that apprehension is to one's ordinary experience, at least of those who spend some time out of doors and pay attention. What Emerson, Fuller, and Thoreau talked about in their meetings were those transcendental moments that are experienced while walking through a spring meadow, or ambling down a woodland path, or finding a perch on an escarpment overlooking a river, or meditating in a desert wilderness.

All of us have such moments. They come from a close observation of nature, a willingness to embrace it. Indeed, the intimate connection of the human spirit with God's creation is, one might say, the altar call of the cosmos.

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