CHAPTER 1

# *The Ecological Alternative*
## *Civilization, Selfhood, and Environment in the 1960s*

*What we call wildness is a civilization other than our own.*
Henry David Thoreau's *Journal*

*". . . civilization needs us."*
*"What civilization?" he says.*
*"You said it. That's why they need us."*
Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*

The United States celebrated the first Earth Day on 22 April 1970, bringing to fruition a 1969 proposal by Wisconsin senator Gaylord Nelson for a "National Teach-In on the Crisis of the Environment" at a Seattle symposium. In emulating the teach-ins of the Vietnam War protests, Earth Day looked to the New Left and associated radical movements for its program. Nelson, however, intended for this comparatively moderate curriculum to dissociate the event from the confrontational politics by which it was partially inspired.[1] The New Left in turn sought to distance itself from Earth Day and the environmentalist label attached to it. For many in the Movement, environmentalism carried associations with population control and urban-elite wilderness protection. As one student radical wrote in the January 1970 issue of *Liberation*, mainstream environmentalists, "increasingly motivated and supported by various governmental machinations," deny that "the deterioration of the natural environment all around us is . . . clearly a product of the nature of production and consumption, of cultural values and social relationships that today hold sway over industrial technological society – American or Soviet." The essay's author, Barry Weisberg, feared Earth Day especially would direct attention away from structures of domination toward individual lifestyle choices. Any successful environmentalist politics, he argued, must proceed from the New Left line that "the precondition for our survival requires the most basic transformation of the cultural, social, political and economic



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mentalities and structures which dominate the developed nations."[2] Just as the environmental movement began to achieve some kind of national shape, the strong influence it found in the New Left started to recede amidst the ambivalent motivations of Earth Day's sponsors and participants.

Still, despite the New Left's retreat (and its concurrent collapse), much of its theoretical infrastructure – especially its psychoanalytically charged "great refusal" – remained influential to environmentally minded writers. Two states over from Earth Day's home in Washington, Edward Abbey appeared in Logan, Utah, at the event's iteration to advocate for just such a rejection of the status quo. The teach-ins marked the first nationwide organization of individuals concerned about the environment, and the moment clearly delineated an audience for Abbey's writing. If *Silent Spring* provided the movement's brain, Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* (1968) offered environmentalists an often-bleeding, anti-establishment heart.[3] Like his contemporaries in the New Left, however, Abbey viewed mainstream environmental groups as impotent at best, especially in their willingness to compromise one wilderness area to save another (the fate that befell Abbey's beloved Glen Canyon). Abbey fortified his own environmentalism with radical direct action, monkeywrenching or "ecotage," the very sort of "militant action against corporate despoilers" that Weisberg also called for in his *Liberation* article.[4] Abbey's 1975 novel *The Monkeywrench Gang* even inspired the formation of the eco-saboteur network Earth First! Abbey's life during this period of unrest, however, reads more like a record of absence than a testament to leftist revolution. Two weeks after Earth Day, Abbey rafted down the Colorado River on 4 May 1970 – the day the National Guard opened fire on and killed four students at Kent State University in Ohio.[5] He was fire spotting in a remote region of the country during the 1968 Democratic National Convention riots in Chicago, and would have been unlikely to march with student radicals even if he hadn't been. Abbey's friend and fellow environmentalist Wendell Berry notes that Abbey was "hard" on "movements": "the more solemn and sacred they are, the more they tempt his ridicule." One might read his derision as a symptom of his anarchist persuasion, which often led him to articulate what he fought against more frequently than what he fought for.[6]

This predisposition, however, also informs Abbey's gleeful capacity for contradiction, his willingness to narrate incongruities underlying leftist fantasies as he experienced them, without rejecting them wholesale. Abbey's pattern of irreverence subjected to scrutiny numerous aspects of Movement politics, in the process calling into question their implications

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for environmental thinking. In *Desert Solitaire* he engages two of the New Left's most consistent characteristics: its policy of direct governance and its emphasis on a politics of authenticity. The New Left never established a coherent platform, but over the course of the 1960s Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) increasingly emphasized what its National Secretary, Gregory Calvert, referred to in a 1967 speech as "the recognition of one's own unfreedom . . . in the struggle of the oppressed." What began as a movement committed to addressing the sociopolitical dispossession of the poor and especially of Black Americans, in partnership with organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), transitioned into a campaign dedicated to voicing how its own members experienced such alienation at the level of the psyche as well as of politics. Despite the Movement's ever-shifting priorities, Herbert Marcuse's "great refusal" came to consistently assume "the significance of freedom and of human liberation . . . in a context in which both the economic system and social institutions gradually tend . . . to invade and define every aspect of citizens' lives, restricting the fundamental rights of self-realization." To liberate society's "natural system" would also be to excavate what Calvert referred to as "human potentiality" – the authentic individual.[7]

Reading Abbey in this context clarifies the extent to which SDS-adjacent environmentalists reproduced this commitment to authenticity – and along with it, the psychoanalytic narratives that underwrote the New Left's understanding of the idea. That legacy occasioned a certain subjective confusion in environmentalist writing of the period, an uncertainty as to where one should locate authenticity – in the self or in the system – that emerged alongside radical environmentalists' use of psychoanalytic thought. It also played out in narrative form in literary environmentalism by writers such as Abbey. This chapter examines both lines as they extend from the same source in New Left social thought, with particular attention to how Abbey dramatizes the contradictions that unfold at the intersection between ecology and psychoanalysis in political writing by his peers. In other words, reading Abbey alongside his political resonances illuminates the birth of appeals to ecological authenticity, as well as a literary tradition that dramatizes and undercuts them.

Abbey's own, seemingly apolitical stance serves as an interesting counterpart to the New Left treatment of every aspect of American life as political. According to his friend Jack Loeffler, Abbey had over the course of the 1960s come to believe that American culture was "lodged completely in an economically dominated paradigm" and that the American legal system functioned "to define and defend the economic system."[8] His

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nonfiction corpus chronicles nothing if not his own great refusal, especially given that he shared Marcuse's muted Marxist pedigree. Abbey's father observed an anticorporate communism that informed Abbey's own graduate thesis in philosophy, "Anarchism and the Morality of Violence," in which he interpreted social theorists such as Erich Fromm and C. Wright Mills as contemporary proto-anarchists. Writers such as Mills provided for Abbey – as they did for Marcuse and the student left – fresh vindication in his certainty that a state of freedom did indeed exist beneath layers of technocracy. Abbey was a *social* anarchist, one who attempted a "withdrawal from politics in an effort to . . . liberate natural man" and who strongly believed such liberation is possible only in a collective fight against industry and its marriage to the state. The seemingly anomalous combination of his apparently right-wing "libertarian individualism" and left-wing "emphasis on mutual aid," however divisive by today's ideological standards, aptly characterized the New Left's intertwined commitments to individual liberation and social transformation. Abbey saw little point in "being personally whole in a dismembered society."[9] For him, as well as for his counterparts, freedom – from repression and oppression – would come about in both individual and sociocultural registers.

*Desert Solitaire* accordingly frames the desert as an *alternative*, in the sense in which the New Left popularly made use of the word. As early as the *Port Huron Statement*, SDS proclaimed its "initial task in establishing alternatives," later calling for "an alternative political structure of 'American democracy'" the very same year that *Desert Solitaire* hit the shelves.[10] However, though Abbey shared the New Left's intellectual lineage and commitment to social reorganization, he remained ambivalent regarding authenticity's utility as a political value. He especially troubled the idea's relevance to environmental matters, even as radicals such as Weisberg came to increasingly articulate revolution according to ecological concepts. The nascent anarcho-Marxist social ecology proposed by Murray Bookchin especially inspired radicals to approach ecology as a conceptual tool that could restore an unspoiled, ostensibly natural sociopolitical system. This chapter advances two closely intertwined arguments related to these trends. First, I contend that, when welded to an ecological paradigm, the rhetoric of authenticity deployed by utopian liberation discourse of the 1960s ultimately collapsed distinctions between individual and ecosystem, troubling its project of self-fulfillment. The rough equivalence drawn by early social ecologists between liberated society and the free "self-determination" of nature, for example, often unintentionally engendered the sort of boundary confusion that came to inform expressions of ecological authenticity. Second, I read Abbey

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against this backdrop to suggest that, far from uncritically celebrating nature's purity, nature writers of the era crystallized this confusion as a representational tension between self and system that results from the commingling of appeals to authenticity and ecology.

Despite Abbey's anarchic commitment to direct action fueled by individual liberty, which aligned him with New Left politics in deed if not in name, Abbey flouted the New Left's "self-assured" assumption of "the existence of an undisputed referent" – a pure state of natural selfhood and governance.[11] In his writing, he especially questions the usefulness and even desirability of authenticity politics for environmentalism. In the sections that follow, I first explore some of the ways in which New Left politics and ecological thinking began to mingle, as well as how Abbey's commitment to self-fulfillment overlapped with that of his Movement contemporaries, who relied on a psychoanalytic account of the ego's liberation from repression. I then examine how he also similarly sought to articulate a "natural" form of social organization – an ecological alternative to the postindustrial state – that would enshrine a corresponding "natural" sense of self. For Abbey, however, the scope of "natural" self-identity steadily became less clear. Over the course of *Desert Solitaire*, he oscillates between what he presents as the solidity of personal identity – his uniquely belligerent attitude, pride in self-reliance, and integrity in the face of commodity culture – and a fuzzy sense of holistic identification with the ecosystem writ large. Because of its ecological orientation, this second identification strikes Abbey as more "natural" than his socially mediated persona, an observation that implies environmentalist narratives of authenticity write off the self rather than liberate it. As a result, Abbey performs an unexpected yet compelling critique of authenticity's rhetorical usefulness to early social ecologists and New Left environmentalists, and in so doing documents the first stirrings of an embattled identity politics of ecology.

## Selfhood and Civilization: The New Left and Beyond

As Abbey stepped up to the microphone to greet Logan's Earth Day assembly, Murray Bookchin addressed a similar crowd in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Bookchin's attendance concluded a decade spent proselytizing ecology's importance to New Left and counterculture leadership, partners Bookchin then found indispensable to the project he came to formulate as social ecology. The distinctive feature of the New Left lay in the stress it placed on "the *utopian* aspects of the 'American dream' as distinguished from its *economic* aspects." A properly new, homegrown

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left would potentially overcome the difficulties the old, "exogenous" left had in meshing with uniquely American individualistic sensibilities. For Bookchin, the *Port Huron Statement* was "the most authentically American expression of a new radicalism," one that retained the socialist foundation of the Old Left but whose participatory vision recommended a "potentially libertarian or anarchic" character. The "almost formless and erratic" counterculture, on the other hand, emphasized communal living, sexual emancipation, and "alternative diets," all of which "congealed into a distinct . . . outlook, but one that was far more mystical than political." Bookchin's explicit intention during the 1960s was to bring the two together, "to infuse the counterculture with political radicalism and, in turn, to infuse the New Left with the counterculture's utopianism."[12] Ecology – and what Bookchin viewed as its utter disruption of all forms of hierarchy – would be the communalistic glue that held the union of socialism and libertarianism together.

An ardent Leninist in the 1930s, Bookchin converted to anarchism as he came increasingly to believe that capitalism generated not only economic inequalities but also other asymmetrical arrangements of domination intimately bound up with environmental issues. Narrow analyses of class violence left by the wayside other institutionalized systems of oppression, such as sexism and racism, that accrue material privileges through means beyond the ownership of property and exploitation of labor. Socialism tended to reorganize into "hierarchical bodies." Sexism, racism, and class differences "do not disappear with 'democratic centralism,' a 'revolutionary leadership,' a 'worker's state,' and a 'planned economy,'" he writes, and on the contrary "function all the more effectively if centralism appears to be 'democratic'" and "leaders appear to be 'revolutionaries.'"[13] Bookchin's condemnation voices a critique frequently leveled against the New Left. Its leadership, white and male as it mostly was, contributed to a perpetuation of the injustices it claimed to dispel. Bookchin observed a "quasi-authoritarian tone, characteristic of the Stalinist Old Left," steering SDS toward a blanket anti-Americanism, focusing the New Left's predominant anti-imperialism but abandoning its inaugural, and to Bookchin indispensable, adhesion to the "libertarian elements in the American tradition." The counterculture, on the other hand, "drifted off into the New Age and a personalism that ultimately allowed them to be absorbed by the social system."[14] The New Left and counterculture fell prey to pervasive "leninization" and commercialization, respectively, reinforcing stratifications Bookchin hoped they would transcend.

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Bookchin's 1964 *Comment* article "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought" introduced his solution: a political application of ecological science based on the notion that ecology upends hierarchy and provides theoretical justification for a stateless (and therefore nonhierarchical) society, exemplified by the commune. Social ecology would place the human and its psychology "within a natural context and explore it in terms of its own natural history, so that the sharp cleavages between thought and nature, subject and object, mind and body, and the social and natural are overcome."[15] Human ingenuity or "second nature," Bookchin writes, neither fabricates nonhuman "first nature" nor papers over it – two arguments he believed respectively taken by traditional Marxism, on the one hand, and the "deep" ecology that developed in reaction to Earth Day's "shallow" commercial tendencies, on the other. As a platform, deep ecology might encompass a crowd of ecological sympathizers (including social ecologists) who share certain perspectives on the importance of biodiversity and the unsustainability of economic growth. However, as many commentators (particularly ecofeminists) have pointed out, its dominant "biocentric" theory has often tended to view *all* human activity and technology in opposition to an ostensibly balanced natural world, to the point that it has promoted "expanding one's sense of self towards a larger identification with all of nature to arrive at a denial of anthropocentrism."[16] By the 1980s, Bookchin came to actively articulate his social ecology in direct contradistinction to this position. For the social ecologist, human activity remains natural even as it mediates the natural world.

It would be impossible to overstate Bookchin's influence on the idea that radical politics might be defined in ecological terms. New Left rhetoric persisted in the granular back-to-the-land movement that established hundreds of rural communes across the country in the late 1960s and early 1970s, where communards "rediscovered . . . the perfect wholeness of their own bodies, in the doing of which, it dawned on them for the first time . . . just how ungodly fragmented and sealed off from themselves they had always lived before." The exodus drew inspiration from the freewheeling sort of anarchism epitomized by the hippie counterculture, but its own pilgrims, generally "a damned sight more serious about what they were leaving and what they were headed for," tempered their rebellion with an allegiance to self-sufficiency and sustainable technologies.[17] Bookchin's anarcho-communism rigorously theorized, and often inspired, the loose yet earnest community organization that serious communards envisioned, as well as the sensible application of advanced technologies that would make it possible. The New York Federation of Anarchists widely circulated

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the essays that would comprise Bookchin's *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1970) among student radicals in an effort to revise what they considered anarchism's regrettably pervasive and "absurd" anti-technological perspective. Turned to the needs of human individuals and communities rather than of capital, "instantaneous communication networks" and "automated technologies" would "free all humanity from onerous and deadening toil."[18]

Despite student radicals' cautious and at times even hostile reception of environmentalism, these ideas asserted themselves at the forefront of prominent New Left publications. The notion of a "post-scarcity" society proved especially influential, spurring on prominent activists such as Yippie kingpin Abbie Hoffman and periodicals such as SDS's *New Left Notes* to publicize Bookchin's corpus. By the early 1970s, Bookchin's articles had attracted a loyal discipleship of young environmentalists who found the mainstream movement's agenda too tame. A manifesto published in *Rat* declared the "libertarian, ecologically oriented society" that accompanied the sort of anarchism favored by both Bookchin and Abbey a superior method of population declension to the "social controls" proposed by mainstream environmental ideologues, precisely because it appeared to maintain the critical dual emphasis on direct democracy and individual liberty.[19]

The relationship between Abbey and Bookchin, however, was unabashedly antagonistic, despite their nominal anarchic affiliation. Bookchin joined other left-leaning critics of Earth First! in the 1980s to criticize the belligerent anti-immigration program – and thinly veiled racism – of its founder, Dave Foreman, as well as its inspiration, Abbey himself. Bookchin found Foreman's biocentric position so repellent that he called him out by name when charging deep ecology with the "same kind of ecobrutalism" that "led Hitler to fashion theories of blood and soil."[20] Foreman and Bookchin share roots in anarchism, but where Foreman's deep ecology holds humanism in general accountable for environmental catastrophe, Bookchin's social ecology places emphasis on the negative effects of specific institutional and ideological apparatuses on both human and nonhuman populations. Like Foreman, Abbey contended "with his usual cantankerous flair" that illegal immigration to the United States, especially from Latin American nations, placed undue strain on the country's natural resources. Abbey's curmudgeonly approach to the argument framed it distastefully; Bookchin's response, however, also remained in keeping with his own deleterious habit of leveling attacks against those who failed to meet his own standards of revolution, as well as overstating the extent of his opponents' (including Abbey's) alleged anti-technologism. Abbey characteristically (and unhelpfully) responded by calling Bookchin

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a "fat old lady." Bookchin in turn spent several decades attacking Abbey and the deep ecologists' fetish for wilderness, the most "quintessential human artifice." Ironically, Abbey reckoned that wilderness spatializes the very lack of hierarchy Bookchin ascribed to ecology: "if we allow the freedom of the hills and the last of the wilderness to be taken from us, then the very idea of freedom may die with it."[21]

In their different ways, Abbey and Bookchin both articulate the idea that "freedom" – what the New Left summarized as the discretionary power to self-fulfillment – is somehow intrinsic to the idea of ecology, whether spatialized as "wilderness" or not. Despite their disagreements, both writers held the social-ecological value of "self-realization" – of human individuals, nonhuman creatures, even "the biosphere itself" – in cardinal esteem.[22] "Our individuality consists not only in the uniqueness of our behavior and character structure, but also in our *right* to act in accordance with our sovereign judgment . . . to formulate our own personal needs," Bookchin wrote in 1972.[23] Bookchin's words mesh comfortably with the New Left line on self-fulfillment he found so attractive. Abbey, on the other hand, approached ecological terminology flippantly, remarking that "I still don't know what [ecology] means. Or seriously much care." He declares himself an amateur social theorist rather than a naturalist, a distinction that suggests he is primarily interested in the human experience of the processes ecology describes rather than in ecology – the science of relationships in ecosystems – itself. The self is always at the center of *Desert Solitaire*, which Abbey insists "is not primarily a book about the desert," and instead belongs "to the category of personal history rather than natural history."[24] In this respect, *Desert Solitaire* is fundamentally concerned with exhibiting Abbey according to the ideal demanded in a 1962 issue of *New University Thought*: "in his totality, in his freedom, in his originality and in his essential dignity." As Hannes Bergthaller writes, "what is at stake" for Abbey in his "effort to confront the natural world directly is not only the essence of *nature* but just as much the essence of the *self*," an impulse at least partially symptomatic of the era's distinctively libertarian brand of radicalism.[25]

Abbey's lack of politics is deceiving, given his pursuit of the self-elevation crucial to New Left thinking, as well as his admission that he felt a "guilty envy" of "those who actually act." He did participate in Vietnam War demonstrations and was involved with the antinuclear movement in the 1970s. In *Down the River* (1982) he warns his moderate readers that "environmentalism, if taken seriously, is a greater threat" to corporate power "than labor unions or Communism." Abbey's dismissal of

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the efficacy of both communism and American leftism recalls the New Left's disappointment in its forebears: its contention that "the traditional base of labor's power and social influence . . . is vanishing" and that "liberalism has adopted a neutral managerial role."[26] The fact that literary environmentalists such as Abbey, Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, and Barry Lopez all concurrently advanced an "anti-ideological" position in their writing indicates, if nothing else, their generationally specific attitude toward establishment technology and entrenched biases against the natural world on both sides of the Iron Curtain.[27] Abbey rejected communists as well as capitalists for much the same reason as his revolutionary cousins: they "believe above all in technology, the ever-expanding economy . . . the complete domination of nature and human beings." Bureaucratic management, authority, and technocracy *in general*, rather than technology itself, spelled the degradation of both the human individual and the natural world. The desert came to represent, for Abbey, a foundation on which to "restor[e] a higher civilization" organized around scattered anarchistic communes. This vision aligns him with utopian writers of the day (including Bookchin) and furnishes a "striking new vision" of the desert: "it lacks the damning artificiality of the other locales. It does not disguise itself." Abbey suggests that the desert is the *most* authentic of utopias, one that presents "a distinctively sixties future of . . . 'absolute presence.'"[28]

Abbey recasts the New Left call to establish sociopolitical alternatives in environmentalist terms, and frames the desert wilderness – its isolation from the status quo – as the most legitimate alternative to the destructive and alienating forces of industrial and postindustrial capitalist culture. That is, he trades a civilization defined by repression for a civilization defined by wilderness itself, despite these two terms' traditional opposition. As early as his first novel *Jonathan Troy* (1954), Abbey warns readers that mere escape from civilization to wilderness is not enough to solve any perceived conflict between the two. In one of *Desert Solitaire*'s more lucid passages on the idea, Abbey writes: "A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself" (192). Abbey never quite gets around to explaining what, exactly, the genuine "principle of civilization" is, but the passage's emphasis on "origins" suggests that Abbey understands wilderness as the original and proper mode of civilization. Twenty years later, Barry Lopez would likewise write in *Arctic Dreams* (1986) that "we need a more particularized understanding of the land itself – not a mere refined mathematical knowledge, but a deeper understanding of its nature, as if it were, itself, another sort of civilization we had

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to reach some agreement with." Abbey's one-time mentor Wallace Stegner also hearkened back to an older model of civilization that once existed and has since been forgotten: "I wanted to hunt up and rejoin the civilization I had been deprived of." Ours is a species, Stegner suggests, that has *repressed* its true mode of organization.[29]

The notion that "wilderness" signifies an alternative, earlier form of "civilization" appears common to a significant body of nature writing. It also recalls Herbert Marcuse's conviction that we need not live according to "repressive civilization," which informed much of the New Left's rhetoric. For Gregory Calvert, it was "no accident" that Marcuse's writings "were the most exciting . . . available." His emphasis on consciousness, self-fulfillment, and alienation both within the self and from society at large resonated with the Movement as it aimed to curb what SDS president Tom Hayden called the "psychological damage" generated by "the system's inhumanity."[30] Despite his Marxist pedigree (yet much like Bookchin), Marcuse intended for his "communistic individualism" to achieve not so much the socialization of the means of production (the traditional Marxist goal) than the repurposing of technology to support the self-realization of each individual, by each individual. Marcuse spoke of liberation in terms of pleasure and self-fulfillment, and defined "alienation" as a psychological phenomenon that the social order intensifies. "Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity," Hayden wrote in the *Port Huron Statement*.[31] The "great refusal" of the socioeconomic status quo Marcuse called for in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) emboldened the protest of those dissatisfied with the "coercive consumerism" of late capitalism, which would hold the self in bondage.

Marcuse's earlier *Eros and Civilization* (1955) supplied the underlying theoretical structure to *One-Dimensional Man*'s materialist critique. In it, Marcuse outlined a utopian society based on psychoanalytic principles, revising and combining Marxist analysis with the developmental narrative of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Freud argued that the individual sacrifices the boundless pleasure and satisfaction of infantile narcissism – a sense of ambivalent union or even oneness with the world – for the realities of ego development and the protections of organized civilization. The price of civilization is diminishment, for "the feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed." The ego, Freud wrote, is "only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed, an all-embracing – feeling which corresponds to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it,"

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which diminishes as the subject progressively enters into more complex social relations.[32] Marcuse, however, revised Freud's argument that individuals, in accepting the limitations of the civilized ego, are doomed to a repressive existence. His Marxist examination of psychoanalysis led him to conclude that the ego's "reality principle" is historically, not biologically, generated. The problem is not that people are repressed but that they are repressed too much. As Theodore Roszak observed at the time, the psychic condition arranged by what Marcuse calls "repressive civilization" is only the "prevailing" reality principle.[33] A certain amount of repression is necessary for the survival of the species, but it would play a diminished role if freed from the oppressive conditions of postindustrial society. Marcuse's revolutionary mandate was to ease that repression through intertwined attention to social and self-liberation. By changing institutions, Marcuse argued, we change the structure of the psyche. "The opposition between man and nature, subject and object, is overcome," and the individual, organized by a minimally repressed ego, experiences greater satisfaction on his or her own terms: "Being is experienced as gratification, which unites man and nature."[34] Implicit in Marcuse's thesis is a suggestion that to recover a more "natural" form of civilization would also be to access a more "natural" psychic condition. It was toward this least-repressive reality principle that New Left revolutionaries aimed their sociopolitical alternatives.

However, Marcuse's theory rests on a fundamental tension that destabilizes this authentic ego even as it deifies it. Psychoanalysis, by virtue of its emphasis on an inscrutable unconscious, undermines the apparent unity of the subject. More directly, Marcuse's celebration of unrepressed psychic origins seems to suggest that we must dissolve the ego even as we satisfy it. The argument that a less repressed ego – that is, an ego that relaxes its relationship to the unconscious – exists more naturally than an ego hogtied by civilization implies that the *most* authentic ego would be no ego at all. Where should liberation politics draw the line between oceanic states of pleasure and cosmic unity on the one hand, and self-actualizing ego-fulfillment on the other? Marcuse's own environmentalist writing worries about this very question. In a 1972 lecture, "Ecology and Revolution," he declared that nature is "a dimension *beyond* labor, a symbol of beauty, of tranquility, of a non-repressive order," and that "nature is the source and locus of the life instincts which struggle against the instincts of aggression and destruction."[35] The lecture united ecology not with the cohesion of a minimally repressed, "liberated" ego, but with the illusive, expansive holism of infancy and its *lack* of ego. Marcuse grappled with the difficulty

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of squaring ecology with the ego within his own framework. Nevertheless, his claim that psychoanalytic prehistory is more natural than an ego repressed by civilization permeated radical discourse of the 1960s.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, environmentalists of the era seized on his contention that "nature is the source" of that repressed yet expansive origin. Roszak, for one, insisted that we must "salvage" the repressed connection between ego and world "as the raw material of a new reality principle."[36] By slight contrast, in a late chapter of *Desert Solitaire* Abbey writes that "[w]e need the possibility of escape as surely as we need hope; without it the life of the cities would drive all men into crime or drugs or psychoanalysis" (149). Elsewhere, he critiques "the Viennese quacks" who would argue that defiance of authority "was in reality no more than the rebelliousness of an adolescent rejecting his father." Abbey's words participated in the decade's fashionable trash talk against institutional analysis, and suggest that wilderness retreat negates the possibility of neurosis or psychosis, or even that retreat serves as a *form* of analysis, a "walking cure" that presumably includes Abbey's own works, which he fondly referred to as "antidotes to despair."[37] Nearly thirty years later, the ecocritic Glen Love would make a remarkably similar claim in his contribution to Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's foundational *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996). Love notably gestures to *Civilization and Its Discontents* to contend that "society itself can be sick." The cure for civilization's ills, he writes, "cannot come from those afflicted by the neurosis." It must originate in nature itself.[38] Like Abbey, Love suggests that the natural world fulfills the function of an analyst. He also explicitly engages the source material that furnished the New Left with theoretical support for its dual commitment to personal authenticity and social revolution.

This example especially demonstrates how interactions between discourses of ecology and political psychoanalysis have enjoyed remarkable longevity, with only minor variation. Despite Abbey's repudiation, postwar environmental thought was entangled in a radical cultural context in which psychoanalysis experienced a surge in popularity beyond its institutional uses. Writers like Paul Shepard reasoned not that nature and civilization are divided, exactly, but that civilization's current mode papers over our *psychic* nature, repressing it. It is telling that in 1971, Shepard also challenged the disciplines of biology and psychology to jointly "confront the ecological function of the unconscious." His choice of the word "unconscious" frames ecology as part and parcel of the psychic content that the Freudian Left believed repressive civilization pushes to the margins, with results that mirror the tensions in Marcuse's own theory. In

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response to a colleague who worried that the ecosystem concept discounted the individual, Shepard mused that "individual man *has* his particular integrity," but that the "ecological thinking" we must exercise also "reveals the self ennobled and extended . . . because the beauty and complexity of nature are continuous with ourselves."[39] One byproduct of Marcuse's social theory is an uncertainty regarding where to locate "integrity." His celebration of the primary and unrepressed suggests that one must pulverize the ego even as one fulfills it. As such, the argument that a more authentic ego functions more naturally than an institutionally limited one implies that the *most* authentic ego would be no ego at all.

## The (In)Authentic Anarchist: The Self in Postwar Environmental Writing

Abbey dramatizes this very tension in ecological terms in *Desert Solitaire* as he chronicles several seasons in the Utah desert, where, ideally, "the naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate" (6). It would be a mistake to read such evocations of merger as romantic naïveté, or as affirmations of holism or "ecomysticism," as numerous critics have done. Abbey's apparent impulse to "identify with . . . his nonhuman surroundings" certainly speaks to a desire to investigate his ecological situation. *Desert Solitaire* perhaps even anticipates what Stacy Alaimo has labeled the "material memoir," whose subjects "undertake investigations . . . of their own materiality," such that "the self of the material memoir . . . is coextensive with the environment, trans-corporeal."[40] It is important to remember, however, the extent to which critical interventions such as Alaimo's rely not on the resolution but on the *maintenance* of paradox, irony, and friction. To either celebrate or scold Abbey for his romanticism or mysticism would be to "wrest with, but ultimately sideline what is arguably the most distinctive feature of Abbey's literary style, namely his penchant for . . . performative contradiction." *Desert Solitaire* has "posed difficulties" to ecocriticism because it "seeks to confront . . . directly" a paradox inherent to environmentalism, the circumscription of the environmentalist's desire "to speak on behalf of the whole" within "terms provided by society itself." Abbey warmly welcomes this paradox as environmentalism's "necessary and enabling condition."[41]

Abbey constantly pushed back against the romantic undertones of the nature writer brand he received throughout his life. His distrust of the categorization stemmed in part from his perception that it most often labels

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"a genteel, if durable, literary occupation practiced by natural historians."[42] Apparently, Abbey's boisterousness, his belligerence and take-no-prisoners attitude, even his sexism and casual racism, proved his experiences more genuine than the pastoral hypocrisies of limp-wristed romantics who return to their cities as soon as they get their fill. Nature writing's "central dynamic," Randall Roorda writes, is retreat, the writer's "movement from human society toward a state of solitude in nature." For writers of Abbey's ilk, however, retreat does not necessarily take as its object nature as a place of solitude from which one must return to the urban center, or even of parochial distance from institutional organization. For writers such as Berry, for example, retreat is "predicated on . . . a sense of community relations" between humans and nonhumans as well as among human individuals and populations.[43] Retreat, in this context, moves one out of an anthrosphere and into a biosphere – less a distinction between "nature" and "culture" or "wilderness" and "civilization" than a reconfiguration of those dualisms and the purview of each term.

Such representations of retreat, which characterize Abbey's writing as well as the work of many of his contemporaries, responded to the political climate of the day and to the idealistic promises made by both New Left thought and radical environmentalism. Abbey's intention was to examine both his place in an expanded communal sphere and the question of selfhood in general, all from a deeply personal perspective. He derived *Desert Solitaire* from his journals, sharing in a New Left commitment to personal experience that, by virtue of Abbey's combined dedication to observation and perception, expands the notion of "accuracy" by placing emphasis on "[n]ot imitation but evocation."[44] *Desert Solitaire* is not about what just anybody can see in the southeastern Utah desert. It is about what *Abbey* sees. The narrative conveys what is meaningful *to Abbey*, what is pleasurable *to Abbey*, and what is troubling *to Abbey*. He presumes to ditch universals in favor of his particular experience. This approach to nature writing adheres across countless postwar accounts of retreat, including Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), the most distinctive feature of which, Lawrence Buell argues, is the primacy it grants to the "the process of seeing, not the objects seen."[45] Abbey and Dillard do not concern themselves with conventional mimesis. Their observance of realism responds instead to the cult of experience that circulated within and beyond the Movement. Abbey esteems the verisimilitude of his desert representation not according to how accurately he portrays each grain of sand, but against its resonance with his own personality.

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The question of *Desert Solitaire*'s narrative therefore does not seem to Abbey to be a matter of fiction or nonfiction, "reality" or "artifice." Its invention instead reflects what Lopez, in his 1984 essay "Landscape and Narrative," describes as the traditional Native American valuation of story. "If the exterior landscape is limned well," Lopez writes, "the listener often feels that he has heard something pleasing and authentic."[46] That landscape might be "limned" not by excruciating scientific detail, but instead by action and reaction, a feeling and sensibility that express Abbey's particular perspective or intentions. Lopez's use of the word "authentic" lacks the essentialist tenor so pervasive in American political culture in the era of the New Left and new social movements, referring instead to the idiosyncratic way in which a writer presents, mediates, and even fabricates his or her particular emotions, sensations, and take on events. Even as Abbey sings the praises of his own personality and fulfillment, he does not necessarily affirm the idea that these values are as fundamental as some of his contemporaries believed. The raucous, littering, gun-toting rebel is "just another fictional creation."[47] His "season in the wilderness" in reality spanned many seasons in 1956 and 1957, and the rafting trip in Glen Canyon that takes up a good portion of the text's second half took place in 1959. *Desert Solitaire* is not a pure explosion of authenticity but a doubly filtered text, sifted through diary and revision, organized around a largely invented Abbey.

Despite the esteem in which Abbey holds his own sense of self, he ultimately comes to favor a creative account of identity, in contrast to the New Left-era political discourse by which he is partially inspired. "It will be objected that the book deals too much with mere appearances, with the surface of things, and fails to engage and reveal the patterns of unifying relationships which form the true underlying reality of existence," Abbey tellingly writes in his preface to *Desert Solitaire*, as if preemptively countering what he doubtless saw as a typical and tired comment on the part of critics hip to the radical mood. "For my own part I am pleased enough with surfaces – in fact they alone seem to me to be of much importance" (xiii). In light of this remark, his expressed tendency to occasionally "overlook" surfaces appears to signify less that Abbey desires to collapse himself into some material holism, as some have suggested, than his self-conscious understanding of his work as a narrative experiment on the utility of authenticity as an environmentalist virtue – one that ultimately fails. Abbey comes to understand his personality as yet another surface, a matter of style and effect rather than essence, precisely because his interest in his environment leads him to believe that essence amounts to matter,

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and an identification with matter alone would diminish the very personality that loves and aims to care for the environment in the first place. All the same, Abbey considers his presentation of himself and the landscape no less "real" for its fabrication. Abbey is Abbey *because of* his representational manipulation, and he considers such construction necessary to his sense of self-fulfillment precisely because of the ecological context in which he articulates his alternative civilization.

## The Spontaneous Society: Ecology and the Politics of Self-Liberation

In the early 1980s, Stewart Brand wrote that he intended his National Book Award-winning *Whole Earth Catalog* to "help my friends who were starting their own civilization hither and yon in the sticks" – a Jeffersonian movement of countercultural types toward an ecologically informed communalism that venerated both the individual and environment.[48] Abbey's reference in *Desert Solitaire* to the Moab desert as "my all-too-perishable republic" rhetorically participates in the back-to-the-land movement's shift toward environmentally friendly self-governance (151). He dedicates a considerable portion of *Desert Solitaire* to the decree of rules, regulations, and laws not only for wilderness habitation but also for human society in general. Elsewhere, he provides "a few tips on desert etiquette," which include, among basic survival skills, an order to monkeywrench, to "always remove and destroy survey stakes, flagging, advertising signboards." This inconsistent and frequently contradictory code nonetheless echoes the "Laws of Ecology" set forth by Barry Commoner in commandment fashion in *The Closing Circle* (1971): Everything Is Connected to Everything Else, Everything Must Go Somewhere, Nature Knows Best, There Is No Such Thing as a Free Lunch.[49]

These examples illustrate an impulse to codify what Abbey and Commoner understand as certain laws of ecology-as-society. *Desert Solitaire* is one part philosophical treatise, one part constitution, and one part declaration of independence for a new civilization, or at the very least an enclave (what one communard referred to as an "island of decency").[50] For Abbey, American civilization as we know it had reached its end. The time had come "to move on, to find another country or – in the name of Jefferson – to make another country" (185). When Abbey is accused by a park visitor of being "against civilization," he is first "flattered," but then "at the same time surprised, hurt, a little shocked." How "could I be against humanity without being against myself, whom I love . . . how could I be

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against civilization when all which I most willingly defend and venerate – including the love of wilderness – is comprehended by the term?" (274). Ultimately, Abbey determines that it is not mankind he hates but "man-centeredness," not civilization but "culture," "the way of life of any given human society considered as a whole" (275). He distrusts, that is, the particular, momentary shape of what Marcuse described as repressive civilization.

Abbey's reflection partakes in the mandates of New Left revolution. He intimates a truer, freer alternative to contemporary mechanisms, a nature that, as Weisberg puts it, "works toward harmony, cooperation and interdependence" where "advanced industrial society works toward growth, competition and independence."[51] But if Abbey more or less clearly distinguishes between civilization and culture, his definition of wilderness – the term he uses most consistently to classify the earth in its unblemished aspects – is far opaquer. On the one hand, wilderness is a complement that "completes" civilization: "We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it" (148). On the other, Abbey declares that "wilderness is a necessary part of civilization" (54). He vacillates on the question of whether wilderness is a part of civilization or exists outside of it. Lamenting the construction of a new highway through Zion National Park, he writes that the northwestern portion "has until recently been saved as almost virgin wilderness" (53). "Virgin wilderness," a longstanding rhetorical flourish on the part of settler men identifying land with woman, here seems to refer less to no human presence than to no human manufacture – no industry or major alteration. Abbey would be perfectly pleased with human presence in Zion (specifically his own). The only thing better than solitude is "society": "By society I do not mean the roar of city streets . . . or human life in general. I mean the society of a friend or friends" (110–11). Wilderness and human habitation are not mutually exclusive for Abbey, who clarifies that the destruction of wilderness fulfills "the requirements of – not man – but industry" (54). While Abbey writes at length on the dangers of industrial tourism to the natural parks, he also observes that "the chief victims of the system are the motorized tourists. They are being robbed and robbing themselves" (59). This passage perhaps surprisingly subordinates the value of the natural world to human pleasure, but it does so in a way that joins human and wilderness in common cause. Industry robs both of their natural predispositions.

Implicit in this passage is a demand for fulfillment tied to psychic wellbeing and personal freedom such that the New Left and counterculture hoped to foster through reorganized social forms. "The operation of the machine," the Berkeley free speech activist Mario Savio declared at a 1964

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rally, "makes you so sick at heart." Abbey reiterates Savio's call for leftist radicals to "put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels" and "make it stop."[52] The free human, for Abbey, is a walking, experiencing creature who does not rely on technology as mediator between self and world. Even if Abbey does not consider himself a revolutionary in the strict sense of the word, he yearns to liberate these tourists: "What can I tell them? Sealed in their metallic shells like mollusks on wheels, how can I pry the people free? The auto as tin can, the park ranger as opener" (261). In one of his many diatribes against visiting parks in cars, Abbey bombastically apostrophizes his guests: "Yes sir, yes madam, I entreat you, get out of those motorized wheelchairs, get off your foam rubber backsides, stand up straight like men! like women! like human beings! and walk – *walk* – WALK upon our sweet and blessed land!" (262). The passage illustrates Abbey's troubling nonchalance toward disabled vacationers, but it also captures the unmediated sense of self he imagines possible when freed if not from technology then from technological management.

Abbey's idea of self-determination dramatizes the vision of sovereignty foreseen by radical environmentalism's New Left-influenced vanguard, which sought to incubate "politically independent communities whose boundaries and populations will be defined by a new ecological consciousness," and "whose inhabitants will determine for themselves, within the framework of this new consciousness . . . the forms taken by their social structures."[53] Solitude and needful labor breed community. Because of their isolation, and especially because of their remove from televisions, automobiles, and other technologies, the Moabites are more courteous, interesting, and generous neighbors. The supermarket and bar's "general atmosphere is free and friendly, quite unlike the sad, sour gloom of most bars I have known, where nervous men in tight collars brood over their drinks between out-of-tune TV screens and a remorseless clock" (47). Abbey's attention to collars and clocks indicts the regimented time of industry and the increasingly postindustrial workforce of the American middle class.[54] Notably, he makes no distinction between town and country. Moab itself comprises a healthy hub of wilderness while still being a site of human activity and, to a diminished and need-based extent, production. Stripped bare of undue management, wilderness furnishes genuine civilization.

*Desert Solitaire* even begins by intimating a sort of ecologically expanded politics of authenticity. Abbey displays a strong reflex against anthropomorphizing: a commitment – sometimes upheld, sometimes forgotten – to "confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of

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existence, the elemental and fundamental . . . 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" (6). His fierce loyalty to his own sense of individuality translates into respect for individual freedom on a scale beyond the human. He presents as a moral imperative engagement with nonhuman others in such a way that renders them "devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities . . . even the categories of scientific description."[55] Animals, he writes, "wish nothing from us but the right to pursue happiness in their own manner." If Abbey does not attempt to speak for the natural world as to what it wants, he nonetheless suggests that it *does* want, in the process ascribing a certain human hunger to the nonhuman. Acutely aware of the difficulty of liberating nature without applying human attributes to its constituents, he determines nonetheless to commit to such egalitarian recognition "even if it means risking everything human in myself" (6).

To meet the (nonhuman) other on its own terms appears to potentially require Abbey's dismissal of his own sense of humanity – the very personality he holds in such high esteem. For this reason, it is primarily Abbey's interaction with nonhuman creatures that demonstrates a certain ambivalence at work in his reconciliation of civilization and wilderness. His confusion over the terms of his new society begins to reveal itself as he deliberates over the life of a rabbit. Abbey wonders whether he should "give the rabbit a sporting chance . . . or brain the little bastard where he is" (38). Eventually, Abbey announces that he's "a scientist not a sportsman and we've got an important experiment under way here, for which the rabbit has been volunteered." This directive both flies in the face of Abbey's earlier oath to abandon even "the categories of scientific description" and robs the rabbit of any authentic rabbit-agency Abbey earlier, one assumes, would have greeted it as possessing. For a moment Abbey is "shocked" after he bashes the rabbit over the head with a rock, but this sensation gives way to a feeling of "mild elation": "I try but cannot feel any sense of guilt." Abbey gains nothing from killing the rabbit – he uses neither its meat nor its pelt nor its bones – yet he immediately assumes an impression of kinship. "No longer do I feel isolated from the sparse and furtive life around me, a stranger from another world," he writes. "I have entered this one. We are kindred all of us, killer and victim, predator and prey. . . the foul worms that feed on our entrails, all of them, all of us. Long live diversity, long live the earth!" The importance of this passage lies not in what Abbey does or does not use of the rabbit's body, but in the sense of affinity he seems to gain from the spontaneous spirit in which he kills it.

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Abbey's rallying cry disarms him of the vigor with which he sparred against Bookchin, for whom spontaneity – the expression of natural predisposition – formed the cornerstone of anarchist environmentalism. "Far from inviting chaos," Bookchin writes, spontaneity "involves releasing the inner forces of a development to find their authentic order and stability." When "spontaneity in social life converges with spontaneity in nature," ecological society is born. In many ways this perspective built on the New Left's aversion to bureaucratic management, grafting onto it an open-ended, equal-parts Marxist and biological evolutionary narrative. Bookchin believes spontaneity is both the foremost expression of self – a bodily verbalization of natural impulse and individual predilection – and the prime mover of what he calls ecology's "unity-in-diversity," the wellspring of the ecosystem's "fecundity" and "evolutionary potential to create newer, still more complex life-forms and biotic interrelationships." For Bookchin, spontaneity challenges hierarchical management and is "nourished" by ecology, which reveals that balance in the natural world "is achieved by organic variation and complexity, not by homogeneity and simplification."[56]

This perspective illuminates Abbey's execution of the rabbit as the moment at which he announces his new civilization as one defined by ecological interconnectivity (though he does not stoop so low as to use Bookchin's vocabulary). Abbey writes favorably of Aldo Leopold's famous dictum to "think like a mountain" – "And feel like a river, says I."[57] One wonders what "feeling like a river" adds to Leopold's original and influential appeal to a "deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself," but at the very least the reference reinforces the fact that Abbey, in his patch of desert, replaces or overlays social mores with ecological forces – a respect not for capital or technology, but for recycled matter and energy.[58] As such, he leaves his "victim to the vultures and maggots, who will appreciate him more than I could." Abbey expresses a similarly profound connection with a snake, which he keeps in his shirt. The snake, "being a cold-blooded creature … takes his temperature from that of the immediate environment – in this case my body. We are compatible" (22). Their interrelationship – heat for the snake, companionship for Abbey – belies a preoccupation with continuity that becomes more apparent as the narrative progresses. So powerful for Abbey is the allure of this sense of continuity that even the stones in the canyons of Arches National Park take on an interpenetrative significance: "there is method at work here … each groove in the rock leads to a natural channel of some kind, each channel to a ditch and gulch and ravine, each larger waterway to a canyon bottom or

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broad wash leading in turn to the Colorado River and the sea" (11). Where does each waterway begin and end? This is a crucially unsolvable question for Abbey, and its implications reach beyond the mutability of water. Where, too, does Abbey begin and the river end?

## "Feeling Like a River": Edward Abbey's Subjective Uncertainty

Abbey originally titled the pivotal "Down the River" chapter of *Desert Solitaire* "A Last Look at Paradise." As Abbey and his companion Ralph Newcomb begin to float down the Colorado River in Glen Canyon on a leisurely expedition of twelve days and 150 miles, Abbey remarks that his initial anxieties about drifting with neither direction nor control have "vanished and I feel instead a sense of cradlelike security, of achievement and joy, a pleasure almost equivalent to that first entrance – from the outside – into the neck of the womb" (176). "Neck of the womb" presents a bizarre metaphor. It evokes first the vagina, suggesting that Abbey's pleasure is foremost sexual – he dubiously aims to screw his way to "cradlelike security" – before emphasizing the maternal. The three-word interjection, "from the outside," from beyond the canyon into it, shifts one's comprehension of the metaphor. The latter half of this sentence seems not to evoke the act of birth but to reverse its direction. Abbey maintains this contradictory imagery of severance and entrance: "Cutting the bloody cord, that's what we feel, the delirious exhilaration of independence, a rebirth backward in time and into primeval liberty" (177). This odd uterine rhetoric suggests that liberty is what happens when one is shoved back into the womb.

How one defines one's revolutionary alternative in the New Left era is an important detail, and for Abbey "paradise" apparently furnishes certain amniotic pleasures. Abbey treats wilderness as a woman to be penetrated and/or occupied, a tired patriarchal metaphor with long-standing resonance in American environmental and colonial history. His imagery updates this tradition for the politics of authenticity and marked chauvinism of New Left rhetoric, joining the revolutionary grit of his environmentalism with the era's prominent psychoanalytic narratives. The gendered landscape functions as an analogue for freedom and metaphor signifying something already known but long since repressed. "Suppose we say that wilderness invokes . . . the past and the unknown, the womb of earth from which we all emerged," he muses. "It means something lost and something still present, something remote and at the

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same time intimate, something buried in our blood and nerves, something beyond us and without limit" (189–90). Wilderness comprises a simultaneously spatial and psychic sphere. Within its boundaries it has the capacity to include *everything*.

The notion that preconscious infancy incorporates combined qualities of liberation, nature, pleasure, and above all *ubiquity* evokes the radical applications of conventional midcentury psychoanalytic wisdom such as those with which Marcuse experimented. "Feeling like a river" might after all be an oceanic feeling – what Freud describes as a "sensation of eternity," an infantile non-detection of boundaries that persists and exists "side by side with the narrower and more sharply demarcated ego-feeling of maturity, like a kind of counterpart," a "feeling as of something limitless, unbounded."[59] The "Freudian overtones" of this scene's "erotica of sensation" have inspired numerous readings of the text's "ecoaesthetics," what Tom Lynch describes as *Desert Solitaire*'s presumed ability to help us "break through the illusion that the organism that is our self is not also part of the environment in which it dwells."[60] Abbey and Glen Canyon indeed seem increasingly indistinguishable: "we're getting accustomed to sand . . . Sand becomes a part of our existence which, like breathing, we take for granted" (186). Even if, unlike oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide, sand does not literally cycle through Abbey's body and pierce his cells, defying conventional wisdom as to where self begins and atmosphere ends, it nonetheless takes on ecological significance for its sheer presence, the role it plays for Abbey in understanding not just the canyon but himself. On the Colorado, Abbey's suddenly insignificant sense of self begins to appear far less authentic than the system in which his body participates:

> In a blue dawn under the faintest of stars we break our fast, pack our gear and launch the boats again. Farther still into the visionary world of Glen Canyon, talking somewhat less than before – for what is there to say? I think we've about said it all – we communicate less in words and more in direct denotation, the glance, the pointing hand, the subtle nuances of pipe smoke, the tilt of a wilted hat brim. Configurations are beginning to fade, distinctions shading off into blended amalgams of man and man, men and water, water and rock.
>
> > "Who is Ralph Newcomb?" I say. "Who is he?"
> > "Aye," he says. "And who is who? Which is which?"
> > "Quite," I agree.
>
> We are merging, molecules getting mixed. Talk about intersubjectivity – we are both taking on the coloration of river and canyon, our skin as mahogany as the water on the shady side, our clothing coated with silt, our bare feet

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> caked with mud and tough as lizard skin, our whiskers bleached as the sand – even our eyeballs, what little you can see of them between the lids, have taken on a coral-pink, the color of the dunes. And we smell, I suppose, like catfish. (209)

The most striking aspect of this passage is its rapid fall into indistinction. Abbey gets to a moment of "blended amalgams" by transitioning through nonverbal cues before symbolic communication itself becomes unnecessary (a theme that came to dominate appeals to ecological authenticity, as the next chapter explains in more detail), replaced by sensations resembling muscle twitches within the same body. The boundary-less multi-entity depicted here appears to be a work in progress, an exercise in occupying the same body and grasping the relationship between two men in terms of a confusion as to where they – and the ecosystem of the canyon – begin and end.

Such uncertainty manifests frequently throughout *Desert Solitaire*. While in the desert wrangling with an employer and another ranch hand, Abbey searches a ravine for a wayward horse. Suddenly, he pauses: "Something breathing nearby – I was in the presence of a tree. On the slope above stood a giant old juniper with massive, twisted trunk" (164). With that dash, the line draws an association between the tree and the breathing Abbey hears. The reader's impulse, like Abbey's, is to linger and consider this respiratory marvel. On closer inspection, however, Abbey sees that "[h]anging from one of the limbs was what looked at first glance like a pair of trousers that reached to the ground. Blinking the sweat out of my eyes I looked harder and saw the trousers transform themselves into the legs of a . . . very tall horse." Even when the mystery of the phantom breath is solved, the beginning of this passage casts its source into some doubt. Abbey at first presents the horse and tree, as well as the hallucinated trousers, as indistinguishable. He appears confused as to where tree begins and horse ends. Even if no direct symbiotic relationship exists between horse and tree (or pants), the horse and the tree are bound by occupying the same environment.

Annie Dillard foregoes Abbey's womb imagery but professes to similar experiences in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Fowl substitute for horse and trousers: "I walked up to a tree, an Osage orange, and a hundred birds flew away. They simply materialized out of the tree. I saw a tree, then a whisk of color, then a tree again." These two passages illustrate moments of sensory confusion in which the authors perceive an indistinctness among entities within a shared environment. For Dillard, these moments provide

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a window into what she describes as a simultaneously ecological and spiritual transmission of both energy and matter: "The tomcat that used to wake me is dead; he was long since grist for an earthworm's casting, and is now the clear sap of a Pittsburgh sycamore, or the honeydew of aphids sucked from that sycamore's high twigs and sprayed in sticky drops on a stranger's car." Creatures – including people – that have died recycle matter by virtue of their organic composition, in a way that for Dillard renders them at once less and more than themselves.[61]

A spiritual measure of "consciousness" smooths the distressing self-destabilization at the heart of this ecological perspective. A "heightened awareness," Dillard writes, opens "the great door to the present." To attend to the processes taking place around oneself, and to the self's implication in those processes, is for Dillard a profoundly spiritual *and* pragmatic act, which allows for both ethical living on the planet and reconciliation within the self with the fragility – even illusion – of one's physical autonomy. She writes of all the creatures in the Virginia woods, "My ignoring them won't strip them of their reality, and admitting them, one by one, into my consciousness might heighten mine, might add their dim awareness to my human consciousness." The notion of consciousness functions, for Dillard, like a sort of conduit, a conception of selfhood that nonetheless welcomes the other beyond the self and imaginatively embraces its interrelation, as best it can, and is in turn enriched by it. Consciousness allows her to negotiate her interpenetration from a fixed point of selfhood, which in the process she nonetheless disrupts and revises. Tinker Creek represents this ambivalent peace as a "mediator, benevolent, impartial, subsuming my shabbiest evils and dissolving them, transforming them into live moles, and shiners, and sycamore leaves." The creek's constant movement symbolizes "the mystery of the continuous creation and all that providence implies: the uncertainty of vision, the horror of the fixed, the dissolution of the present, intricacy of beauty, the pressure of fecundity, the elusiveness of the free."[62] Dillard imbues the creek with the representational power to illustrate the boundary-shattering she perceives in matters of ecology.

Abbey shared Dillard's interest in fluvial metaphors but distrusted the spiritual angle. In a 1983 letter, he wrote to Dillard that he tried to "invoke a sense of wonder and magic in the reader without invoking the mystical, the supernatural or the transcendent." Mysticism, he wrote, irresponsibly leads its adherents to "identify their personal inner visions with universal reality." He condemned religions – *all* religions, including the then-fashionable Buddhism, Taoism, and Native American spiritualisms in

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addition to the Abrahamic faiths – for their tendency "to divorce men and women from the earth . . . by their mystical emphasis upon the general, the abstract, the invisible."[63] In this respect Abbey continued to resemble his would-be nemesis Bookchin, who also found the contemporary countercultural fashion for Eastern spiritualism unappealing. "At the risk of seeming heretical," Bookchin wrote in 1977 that the "Indian and Chinese philosophical works so much in vogue today provide no satisfactory melding of the disciplined rationalism, technical sophistication, social activism, and personalistic ethics that actually vitalize" the construction of "ecocommunities." Far more significant than Bookchin's apparent prejudice was his specific distaste for how American dissidents used Eastern spirituality to address "the widely expressed need for a sense of unity with nature" – that is, by emphasizing "the primacy this philosophy gives to 'cosmic' concerns over mundane social and individual needs."[64] Both writers' presumably heightened sense of material reality, however, did not necessarily preclude quasi-mystical accounts of "unity with nature." If anything, Abbey's fidelity to the ecosystem's complexity – coupled with his inability to precisely represent it – precipitated such accounts. Abbey's "disruption of the contained living subject via the expansion of subjectivity" might even appear to illustrate how a "process of material union was . . . central to his activism and politics," an indication that for Abbey, the authentic subject is not a self at all, but an interconnective unity – the ecosystem itself.[65]

I would like to advance a different interpretation. These scenes dramatize not Abbey's conviction but his ambivalent *mistrust* regarding the political utility of a politics of authenticity to environmentalism. It is certainly tempting to read Abbey's experience of "intersubjectivity" as a hearty embrace of the sort of "material monism" that has characterized select strains of both deep-ecological philosophy and, more recently, posthumanist criticism. But such a reading neglects his vigorous, if inconsistent, commitment to respect other creatures "as they are in themselves." Perhaps more importantly, one must consider the assumptions that animate this interpretation, which in at least one account proceeds from a conviction that "technology that disrupts or intervenes in . . . sensory experience is problematic, since it by consequence helps maintain the human alienation from the nonhuman."[66] One can't help but read traces of New Left resistance to psychic alienation – especially of the ecological variety – in the words of this critic. Technology is artificial and obscures our relationship with what is real – that is, our ecological authenticity, an apparently natural lack of subjective boundaries.

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## Social Ecology and Psychoanalytic Vocabulary

Abbey's flirtation with self-erasure – or, perhaps more accurately, self-expansion – draws on the psychoanalytically inflected radicalism of figures like Marcuse, who aimed to blend a minimal state of repression with institutional revolution, and Norman O. Brown, who advocated "a union with others and with the world around us based . . . on narcissism and erotic exuberance." For Theodore Roszak, who helped popularize the term "counterculture," the Movement "begins where Marcuse pulls up short, and where Brown, with no apologies, goes off the deep end."[67] Marcuse's more overtly political position was less ecstatically excessive than Brown's. Roszak's preference predicted the extravagant direction of his later environmentalism, which favored the questionable (and questionably accomplished) narcissistic self-expansion that Brown recommended. The extremity of Roszak's ecological commitments directly contradicted his more conventionally countercultural platform. "We live in a time when the very private experience of having a personal identity to discover, a personal destiny to fulfill, has become a subversive political force of major proportions," he writes, echoing the New Left rally. The libertarian charisma of this passage tarnishes slightly in light of the statement, a mere nine pages prior, that "the needs of the planet and the needs of the person have become one."[68] He collapses the individual's special identity into the earth's, such that personal self-fulfillment no longer seems relevant.

My point in highlighting this example is that the introduction of ecology to the structurally psychoanalytic revolutionary discourse of the time resulted in (or, more accurately, foregrounded) potential contradictions inherent to the project's emphasis on the self. Bookchin's social ecology was not immune to these theoretical complications. "The history of 'civilization,'" Bookchin writes, "has been a steady progress of estrangement from nature that has increasingly developed into outright antagonism . . . . After some ten millennia of a very ambiguous social evolution, we must reenter natural evolution again."[69] One wonders how it is possible to "reenter" nature if, as Bookchin takes great pains to explain, we never left it. He criticized this kind of deviated developmental narrative among his radical contemporaries, but nonetheless seems to have taken it quite seriously himself. The conceptual bifurcation of civilization from nature, he writes, "fragmented not only the world of nature and society but the human psyche and its biological matrix." Hierarchy "is not merely a social condition; it is also a state of consciousness" that "fosters the

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renunciation of the pleasures of life." His anarcho-communistic alternative, by contrast, would define community according to kinship, common interest, and "unalienated human relationships" that "transcend the traditional split between psyche and the social world."[70]

Bookchin might as well have reproduced the introductory chapters of *Eros and Civilization* in their entirety. Like Marcuse, Bookchin aims to "measure societal advances not in terms of the extent to which eroticism is sublimated into other activities but the extent to which it is released and given full expression." He also believes that "there can be no hope of liberating society without self-liberation in the fullest meaning of selfhood, of the ego and all its claims."[71] The indistinct meaning of the word "of" in the phrase "of the ego" presents difficulty in this passage. As for other writers, for Bookchin the terms of ecology tended to slide into an uncertain definition of unity that defied his own rhetoric of individual liberation. This slippage resulted from his engagement with psychoanalytic vocabulary, which inspired a shaky understanding of the implication, definition, and role of the ego in self-fulfillment. Does Bookchin mean liberation *for* the ego or *from* the ego? The addition of "and all its claims" suggests the latter. In this sentence, Bookchin allies "the ego" with an oppressive, *un*naturally imposed hierarchy. Lasting forms of social organization have obscured our natural psychic disposition, which, according to the narrative if not to Bookchin himself, comprises a lack of ego or self. Taken together, these foundational yet often glossed points of Bookchin's corpus suggest that there *is* a natural state of human organization, that civilization as it currently exists *does* obscure it, and that we *do* need to excavate its original mode. As for Brown and for Roszak, for Bookchin that ecological reality enshrines a natural subject that is egoless. His recourse to psychoanalytic terminology to describe ecological interplay between the human and nonhuman begins to collapse the dedication to fixed, autonomous, and authentic subjectivity he shared with the New Left.

Nonetheless, Bookchin is quick to contrast the "wholeness" of unity-in-diversity with the "archaic dross" of mysticism and its "static absolutes." "Ecological stability," he writes, "is a function not of simplicity and homogeneity but of complexity and variety." The idea of wholeness does not, for Bookchin, recommend "any 'totality' that leads to a terminal 'reconciliation' of all 'Being' in a complete identity of subject and object," or a sense of "cosmic 'oneness.'"[72] He vehemently contests other environmentalists' willingness to rhetorically entertain an identification with the ecosystem as a whole, such that the self seems whimsically to melt away.

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At a certain point, however, Bookchin begins to split hairs with his rivals. "Wholeness," he writes, is "what integrates the particularities into a unified form, what renders the unity an operable reality and a 'being' in the literal sense of the term – an order as the actualized unity of its diversity from the flowing and emergent process that yields its self-realization."[73] This mouthful raises an especially decisive question: what, in fact, *is* "the literal sense" of being? Given Bookchin's predisposition, one is tempted to interpret these words in a biological direction, as the physical situation of life and its variable position in complex organic networks. In the context of the vague psychoanalytic narrative underwriting his theory, those networks parallel not the ego but the narcissistic origin it ostensibly covers up. The passage therefore starts to appear more a liability than an asset to Bookchin's repetitive rejection of cosmic totality. The "literal sense" of being emerges as a calcified, harmonized ecosystem that obscures the individuals and communities Bookchin tries tenuously to hold at the center of his equations. Despite his best intentions, at times Bookchin appears to commit the error he warns against, of rapturously breathing the word "ecology" in such a way that it "evaporates into a mystical" – if perhaps involuntary – "sigh."[74] In constructing the edifice of social ecology on a mildly psychoanalytic foundation, a narrative of a repressed lack of boundaries he associates with evolution, Bookchin cannot help but gravitate toward a holistic appeal of the sort he means to disparage.

## The Superficial Self

Before returning to the question of the New Left's rhetorical legacy, I want to suggest that *Desert Solitaire* complicates these ideas, even as its scenes of dissolution appear to embrace an emergent, psychoanalytically charged logic of ecological authenticity. It is worth noting the final line in the long passage excerpted previously. Abbey's cursory reference to his and Newcomb's stench, and the flippant "I suppose" interjected between "we" and "catfish," signals his self-consciousness of the extent to which he imagines this exchange. The sentence expresses an admission that of course his sense of discrete selfhood – however constructed or even artificial it might seem – has not *really* dissolved. It could not have, if he later sat down to write the passage. These dissolutive moments tend to focus less on Abbey's supposedly natural identification with the ecosystem – or the metaphorical woman he enlists to represent it – than on the pride Abbey the writer takes in chronicling it. His evocation of a fetal ecosystem resonates less with the womb itself than with concurrent discourse

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situating the embryo as a "metaphor for 'man' in space, floating free." Obstetrical rhetoric, Karen Newman writes, has "allow[ed] for a double identificatory pleasure: identification with the immaculate, impenetrable human individual, and the power/knowledge of knowing the body as an object of study." Abbey's "'siting' of the womb as a space to be conquered" – which effaces the woman "as absent or peripheral" – "can only be had by one who stands outside it looking in . . . recalling a wildlife photographer tracking down a gazelle."[75] Abbey imagines himself as that very creature, observing himself in his ostensibly natural habitat. He simultaneously positions himself as an indeterminate object of study in a womblike wilderness yet lauds his own rugged autonomy – an oscillation between feminine and masculine metaphors.

Abbey is ambivalent, on the one hand recognizing his ecological interpenetration but on the other praising – often boastfully so – his situated apprehension of that fact. Recognizing that his own prized selfhood is subordinate to the ecological blender, he also accepts that he cannot totally dismiss his sense of self, and nor does he want to. It is because Abbey views himself as so ascetically disciplined that he believes himself worthy of a deeper relationship with the natural world (in which he nonetheless appears insignificant). For Abbey, a sense of selfhood is useful. Without it, he wouldn't be able to enjoy everything that makes him *him*. Nothing particularly solid or entirely concrete defines that personality, as his self-conscious self-representation in the process of writing *Desert Solitaire* illustrates. In fact, the only solid thing about him is precisely the ecological condition that paradoxically undercuts the individual he so much enjoys being.

It is for this reason that Abbey prefers "surfaces" over what is ostensibly "real." *Desert Solitaire* indeed supplies ample evidence that Abbey detects "no discernible difference between 'flesh' and 'essence,'" but Abbey does not consider this notion "radically progressive," mostly because he does not particularly want everything to "resolv[e] into a material monism."[76] Such a perspective, he suggests, is nominally progressive at best and downright reductive at worst, in that it not only equates individuals with their bodies but also suggests, however unintentionally, that we as persons have no real stake in remaining alive as long as our matter continues to circulate throughout the environment (a point I will revisit in Chapters 4 and 5). Abbey certainly believes that human deaths "make room for the living . . . . A ruthless, brutal process – but clean and beautiful" (242). If anything, his fascination demonstrates that he does, in fact, find such a system "real" – more tangible, perhaps, than the boisterous fiction of his authorly persona.

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All the same, this realization does not lead Abbey to wholly, holistically identify with his body's imbrication in countless ecological interrelationships, because "human life . . . is significant . . . And this second truth we can deny only at the cost of denying our humanity" (242).

It is as if Abbey is suggesting that, for ecological radicals most concerned with the "real" or "essential," the answer to the question *What am I at my most authentic?* will always be *Nothing*. The long river passage quoted above describes not the dissolutive ecstasy of a man merging with his environment, but the bittersweet satisfaction of an environmentalist perfectly pleased with his understanding that his sense of self is something of an artifice, though not necessarily any less real for that fact. Dissolution articulates what is perhaps Abbey's most important paradox: How to reconcile the ecosystem's primary interconnectivity with the ostensible authenticity of the libertarian subject? This quandary only becomes dangerous, he suggests, when one takes ideas like "authenticity" too seriously. The only thing appeals to authenticity bring to ecology is a sense that people as such do not matter.

For this reason, Abbey's narrative draws attention to the rhetoric surrounding ecology's frequent political applications. An ecologically motivated society premised on what is "natural" or "authentic" – the hallmark values of the New Left and its environmentalist precipitates – is one in which individual lives cease to have meaning. For Bookchin, and for many subsequent social ecologists, ecology fulfilled our "desperate" need for an ethics "that will join the ideal with the real." This kind of statement gently undermines Bookchin's otherwise pragmatist interest in human civilization as an unfinished development with no particular goal, undergoing constant negotiation for the good of more individuals. It is because Bookchin dictates a vision of anarchic universalism according to what he perceives to be repressed yet insistent ecological truths that he ultimately, though unwittingly, cultivates an appeal to ecological authenticity of the sort for which he distrusted deep ecologists. Ecological society, Bookchin writes, proceeds "naturally" from human prehistory, but its utopian universalism distinguishes it from vulgar neoprimitivism. Still, the foundational value he hoped to glean from psychoanalysis was the notion that "the protoplasm of humankind retains an abiding community with the protoplasm of nature . . . in an ontological sense."[77] Despite his otherwise careful argumentation, Bookchin sustained an irreconcilable assumption that we have strayed from a natural form of society that accompanies a natural psyche, an identification with "ontological continuity" that his account could not help but prescribe.

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In their different ways, Abbey and Bookchin capture an aspect of environmental writing that we are accustomed to overlook. Both come face-to-face with an uncomfortable conundrum: How does one reconcile a commitment to individual liberation with a rigorous consideration of ecology and the interconnections it implies? If Bookchin neglected this issue, Abbey embraced it for the ambiguous, unsolvable tension that it is. Despite Abbey's recognition that his sense of self is not nearly as cohesive or authentic as he would often like it to be, he nonetheless discovers that a sense of self is not only inescapable but also indispensable for a relationship with one's environment. Dillard, Lopez, and other nature writers would wrestle with the same existential and representational dilemmas over the course of the next two decades. The writing of nonfiction that considers the place of the self in relation to the ecosystem would appear to be an announcement of being caught between an almost gleeful sense of self-dismissal – a recognition that one's matter is continuous with one's environment – and the realization that a socially mediated and individually constructed sense of identity is necessary to effect that recognition in the first place.

The friction inherent in this encounter between individual and collective played out in committees and communities organized among the New Left and counterculture at large. The urgency of the 1960s fizzled in the early years of the next decade. Communards, who sought stability yet rejected even the limited authority necessary for social consistency, weathered the breakdown of their communes as "the gap between communal intention and personal experience widened" and "contradictions between individual freedom and social order turned into conflict."[78] Meanwhile, the New Left perished under its constant shift in ideological emphasis. Calvert's invocation of a white-collar "new working class" gave way to overt homegrown violence prompted by American imperial action in Vietnam and South America. As competing threads in New Left ideology vied for prominence, SDS and its affiliates strained under pressure and, following an especially brutal schism in 1969, collapsed altogether. Tom Hayden described the Weather Underground, one of the New Left's terminal scions, as "the natural final generation of SDS," their firebombs a representation of "not the conscience of their generation, but . . . its id."[79] At the same time that radical politics – ecological or otherwise – demanded a rollback in repression, the New Left fractured under the weight of that mandate's apotheosis.

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