

379
N81
No. 7520

UNEARTHING THE SPIRITUAL MESSAGE
IN EDWARD ABBEY'S
DESERT SOLITAIRE

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Pamela Jacobs, B.S.

Denton, Texas

August 1998

Jacobs, Pamela, Unearthing the Spiritual Message in Edward Abbey's Desert Solitaire. Master of Arts (English), August 1998, 50 pp., references, 27 titles.

Unearthing Edward Abbey's spiritual philosophy is not an easy task. One must sift through Abbey's humor, sort through Cactus Ed's flamboyant character, look under the veneer of this character, and beyond Abbey's overt objective of convincing readers to defy the destruction of wilderness, and only then does the spiritual philosophy of Abbey become visible. To understand his perception of spirituality, one must define what constitutes a mystic and determine what American theological philosophies mystics tend to adopt. Once these are defined, one can apply those principles to Abbey's Desert Solitaire, and determine that Abbey is a nature mystic who adheres to the ecocentric-based immanence theology. This theology is contrary to the Judeo-Christian based emanation theology which supports anthropocentrism and resourceism.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Edward Abbey's works are not known for their spiritual content; however, Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness is an exploration into the mystical experience and the expression of this experience. The reader must dig deep within the text to find the spiritual core in Desert Solitaire. James I. McClintock agrees when he says that the range and depth of Abbey's spiritual nature and resiliency are not always apparent to the reader. "[T]he playfulness and humor that pervade his work, setting him apart from others who write about nature and accounting for his wide popularity, divert attention from spiritual themes" (66). This playfulness and humor also set Abbey apart from those who typically write about spiritual themes and mystical experiences. For example, one is hard-pressed to find any humor within the solemn, romantic writings of Saint Teresa about her mystic experiences with God.

Abbey's playfulness within Desert Solitaire, a non-fiction work, manifests in Abbey's crotchety narrator whose life significantly parallels Abbey's life. Because this duplicitous narrator is Abbey's namesake, it becomes difficult to separate the two. Abbey creates this veneer over himself in this non-fiction work to make his narrator more interesting, and to further bury his spiritual message under another layer within Desert

Solitaire. Ann Ronald, in her critical survey of Abbey, states “that Abbey, the author, crafts the intangible environment, and the Abbey, the narrator, explores it” (65). This is true when analyzing the character of the narrator, as Abbey confirms in an interview with James Hepworth. Abbey refers to himself in the third person in the following. “The real Edward Abbey--whoever the hell that is--is a real shy, timid fellow, but the character I create . . . is perhaps a person I would like to be: bold, brash, daring. I created this character, and I gave him my name” (42). However, the reader finds that on matters of non-character importance, such as philosophy and theology, the author puts his opinions into the mouth of the narrator. For clarity’s sake, I adopt the standardized manner in identifying the difference between the author and narrator by using two different names. “Edward Abbey,” or just “Abbey,” refers to the author, and “Cactus Ed” refers to the narrator. Ronald’s statement revised to include the above two points goes like this: Abbey crafts the intangible environment, Cactus Ed explores it, and Abbey provides the theological and philosophical opinions for Cactus Ed.

In addition to the veneer Abbey creates to bury his spiritual message, the spiritual message is also cloaked by Abbey’s prevailing objective throughout the book to convince the reader to object emotionally and morally to the destruction of wilderness. This persuasive message is so overt it is easy to dismiss the “why” behind the argument, which is Abbey’s mystical experience within wilderness and the spiritual knowledge he receives from it.

The following study of Edward Abbey's spiritualism begins in Chapter 1 with a discussion of what mysticism is and how persons come to experience it. William James' 1902 lecture in Edinburgh on the topic of mysticism serves to help outline the parameters of the mystical experience and provide a workable definition from which to prove that Edward Abbey is a mystic. Evelyn Underhill's book, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness also offers understanding into the mystic experience as well as separates the mystical experience into two belief systems, the Judeo-Christian theology-based emanation theory, and the ecocentric, pantheist-based immanence theory. The distinction between the emanation and immanence theories is important because it provides the analytical tools to identify Abbey's theological belief system which is based in the immanence theory.

Abbey's mystic experiences, his argument in favor of the immanence theory, and the resulting reason for protecting wilderness are covertly revealed in Chapter 14 of Desert Solitaire entitled "Down The River." All twenty chapters of Desert Solitaire are, in typical Abbey style, individual essays. These essays are compiled into one book with the anecdotes of the narrator being the common theme tying the essays together.

Chapter 2 is the analysis of the "Down The River" essay. I also chose this essay because Edward Abbey held the Glen Canyon and the Colorado River that cuts through it dear to his heart. I use the past tense to describe Glen Canyon because after Edward Abbey's trip down the river, as described in the essay "Down The River," the Glen

Canyon Dam was completed and the Colorado River dammed, flooding the canyon lands and burying forever Abbey's slice of paradise. Edward Abbey's anguish over the destruction of this canyon is his underlying motivation for this textual exploration of expressing his mystic experience and his persuasion of the reader to understand it. Once the reader is convinced that Abbey's paradise should not be destroyed, Abbey hopes the reader will support his beliefs and defy the destruction of his sacred wilderness, the vehicle for his mystic experience. This appears to be a simple request. Yet, upon study of the immanence and emanation theories of mysticism, Abbey is, in fact, asking the reader to weigh the pros and cons of the Judeo-Christian emanation belief system and the anthropocentric resourcism that accompanies it, and to contemplate his ecocentric, immanence theory.

While Abbey makes his argument for the immanence theory in "Down The River," he realizes the difficulty in expressing the ineffable. Because of this, Abbey is snared into using Judeo-Christian based nomenclature as he tries to explain the immanence theory in non-Christian terms. Realizing Judeo-Christian nomenclature pervades all American discussions of the spiritual dimension, he chooses to use it as a reference point from which the reader can begin to understand his perspective. From this reference point, Abbey replaces the definitions of the Christian terms with his own perceptions of spiritual truth.

Halfway through the “Down The River” essay, having met the hefty challenge of creating new definitions for understanding immanence, thus creating the theological foundation for understanding his mystic experiences, Abbey abandons the aggressive argument for immanence. He is now free to fully immerse his characters into the mystical experience. Abbey hopes the reader will vicariously feel his spiritual experience and feel the loss of such an experience. Since Abbey is not a theologian but rather a writer, this is his ultimate goal.

Abbey’s skill in using humor to cloak the range and depth of his spiritual nature, his creation of a cantankerous narrator, and his quest for mystic exploration and its expression in Desert Solitaire make an interesting adventure not only for the reader, but also for the critic who attempts to extract the essentials of Abbey’s spiritualism.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCTION

I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and the fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-human world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock.

(Desert 6)

Edward Abbey sets forth the above objective for Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness early in the first chapter. Abbey states that Desert Solitaire will be an

exploration into the “bare bones of existence.” This exploration will be devoid of all culture, all things human, including the “humanly ascribed qualities” upon the non-human world. Abbey hopes that with all humanity stripped away from the self, the soul will permeate consciousness, and create a “hard and brutal” mystic encounter for him. This encounter entails the merging of himself with nature, yet he must remain individual and separate. This is the paradox he is referring to when he writes, “Paradox and bedrock”, for how can anyone merge with bedrock and yet remain intact physically as an individual? Desert Solitaire chronicles this exploration into the paradox, describes the mystical experience, and in doing so provides a workable paradigm for readers to view the process of achieving the mystic state through nature. This is no small undertaking considering that the first mark of a mystical experience is, according to William James, ineffability (371).

In his 1902 lecture at Edinburgh, William James attempts to clarify mysticism by offering four identifying marks of the mystical experience; ineffability, noetic quality, transience, and passivity (371-72). The mark of ineffability means that the mystic state of the mind defies expression. No one can experience the state indirectly (371). It cannot be “imparted or transferred to others” (371). No one can make clear to another who has never felt the state or feeling (371).

The next identifying mark, noetic quality, means that the mystic state also includes a state of insight into the knowledge of truth (371). It is an illumination, an epiphany that is full of significance which carries with it a sense of authority (371). A

consciousness of the illumination must be present (399). James notes that a state can be mystic with just these identifying two marks; however, transiency and passivity are typically part of the mystic state. The state cannot be sustained for long. A state lasting a half and hour or an hour is extremely rare (372). It can be remembered, but the intensity fades. Contemplation on these memories offers further development and understanding consequently giving the mystic a feeling of inner richness (372).

While the mystic may facilitate the state by fixing the attention or by going through certain physical habits, once the state is set, the will of the person seems to be in abeyance (372). James says the passivity is the result of being in the presence of a superior power, or having been “grasped” by it (372). He also says a prevailing feeling of optimism is always present during the state, and often a residue of this positive feeling can remain upon the person (407).

James describes the mystic state as a sense of reconciliation (379). “It is as if the opposites of the world, whose contradictoriness and conflict make all our difficulties and troubles, were melted into unity” (379). In the mystic state many have a feeling of déjà vu, a variety of dreamy feelings, feelings of extreme exhilaration, and a sudden realization of the immediate presence of God (374-84).

Using James’ four identifying marks of the mystical experience, one may put Abbey’s encounters with nature to the mystic test. Regarding the first identifying mark, ineffability, Abbey’s non-fiction works provide many examples of Abbey struggling to

articulate the desert landscape. While this appears merely an exercise in description, Abbey actually tries to describe that which he obtains from the desert. James says, "Certain aspects of nature seem to have a peculiar power of awakening such mystical moods" (385). These "certain aspects of nature" have the peculiar power to awaken Edward Abbey's mystical moods and he finds these aspects of the desert difficult to explain.

Despite the best efforts of a small army of writers, painters, photographers, scientists, explorers, Indians, cowboys, and wilderness guides, the landscape of the Colorado Plateau lies still beyond the reach of reasonable words. Or an unreasonable representation. This is a landscape that has to be seen to be believed, and even then, confronted directly by the senses, it strains credulity.

Comprehensible, yes. . . . And yet . . . there remains something in the soul of the place, the spirit of the whole, that cannot be fully assimilated by the human imagination. . . . Words like "soul" and "spirit" make vague substitutes for a hard effort toward understanding. But I can offer no better. The land here is like a great book or a great symphony. . . . (Journey 86)

Abbey's description of the plateau is comprehensible to him, yet it lies "beyond the reach of reasonable words." It is as though for Abbey the "certain aspects of nature" James speaks of are parlayed into the mystic state.

Continuing with the mystic test, the next identifying mark is noetic quality, that state of insight or illumination into the knowledge of truth. Abbey's statement above about the ineffability of the desert also reveals a state of insight when he explains that "[w]ords like 'soul' and 'spirit' make vague substitutes for a hard effort toward understanding." Abbey has experienced the insight and has put forth a hard effort toward understanding it. In another example Abbey states, "For myself, all my life a prospector. For a blinding light illuminating everything" (Journey 65). This shows that Abbey is searching for the knowledge of the truth of everything, the epiphany of epiphanies, suggesting that he won't stop his quest until all the knowledge of truth has been completely exposed to him. He knows, however, that his prospecting for the totality of knowledge may be a life long search, and the possibility of never finding it exists (Journey 65). This prospecting Abbey committed himself to intimates the presence of the third identifying mark, the transience of the mystic state. If the mystic state lasted long enough to grasp more than just an insight or illumination into the knowledge of truth, there would be no need to spend a lifetime prospecting for it.

Better examples of the transiency of Abbey's mystic states are found in passages in which he is trying to describe the mystic experiences. While Abbey doesn't blatantly

say the state is transient, one can deduce that the state is ephemeral by the length of the description. In the following passage notice how Abbey describes Cactus Ed slipping in and out of the state.

There was nothing that had to be done. . . . I went native and dreamed away days on the shore of the pool under the waterfall, wandered naked as Adam under the cottonwoods, inspecting my cactus gardens. The days became wild, strange, ambiguous. . . . There was a serpent . . . slipping among the stones or pausing to mesmerize me with his suggestive tongue and cloudy haunted primeval eyes. . . I slipped by degrees into lunacy, me and the moon, and lost to a certain extent the power to distinguish between what was and what was not myself; looking at my hand I would see a leaf trembling on a branch. A *green* leaf. I thought of Debussy, of Keats and Blake and Andrew Marvell. I remembered . . . all those lost and never remembered. Who would return? To be lost again? I went for walk. I went for walks. I went for walks. . . .

(Desert 225-26)

This excerpt is long; however, most of the lines are either leading up to the point at which Cactus Ed merges and becomes one with his god in the form of a leaf, or follow the transient moment when he is contemplating the experience, and contemplating other writers' and artists' methods of communicating their mystic states.

The mystic moment lasts for only two sentences. The final identifying mark, passivity can be found within these two. Cactus Ed doesn't say he feels as if he is in the presence of a superior power, but rather he has "lost to certain extent the power to distinguish" between himself and nature. This loss of his power suggests he is in an open state, that he has been "grasped" by the superior power that James speaks of when describing passivity. The end of the excerpt suggests that Cactus Ed continues his search for more transient moments "to be lost again" by taking walk after walk. It is becoming clear that by walking in the wildness of desert, Cactus Ed is able to facilitate the onset of these states. It is important to remember that Abbey creates the environment, Cactus Ed explores it, and Abbey provides the theological opinions.

According to James' identifying marks of a mystic state, Edward Abbey clearly has experienced it, and has expressed quite eloquently the ineffability of it. Like William James, Evelyn Underhill in her book, Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness, defines the characteristics of a mystic and the mystic state. "Mysticism," says Underhill, "in its pure form, is the science . . . of union with the Absolute, and nothing else, and . . . the mystic is the person who attains

to this union” (72). Underhill’s following description of the mystic state echoes James’ identifying marks and also supports the view that Edward Abbey was a mystic.

The mystics find the basis of their method not in logic but in life: in the existence of a discoverable “real,” a spark of true being, within the seeking subject, which can, in that ineffable experience which they call the “act of union,” fuse itself with and thus apprehend the reality of the sought Object. In theological language, their theory of knowledge is that the spirit of man, itself essentially divine, is capable of immediate communion with God, the One Reality.

(23-24)

In philosophical language, this communion is with that “‘only Reality,’ that immaterial and final Being, . . . the Absolute” (Mysticism 4). In Abbey’s language the word “mystery” is a better one-word description than “God.” “‘God’--a word for not thinking. ‘Mystery’ is better because it suggest questions, not answers” (Confessions 254). In Abbey’s Road, Abbey reveals more of his feelings concerning the religious perception of God. “Always of one name. People who go around muttering about God make me nervous” (xx).

According to Underhill, the words of Genesis are the nomenclature of the Judeo-Christian system, “or some colourable imitation of it. . . . [A]ll the great mystics of the

West . . . adopt its nomenclature, explain their adventures by the help of its creed, identify their Absolute with the Christian God” (106-07). Abbey would like to avoid denominational nomenclature because it often restricts the message to the creed of its own system. But Abbey soon finds out that one cannot communicate new concepts without launching from some common springboard of thought or language.

Selection of some word or words to describe this “act of union” often reveals the theological beliefs of the person experiencing the act. Mystics typically choose either of two theological theories when describing mystical union. These two theories are “root ideas for the maker of mystical diagrams” (Underhill 96). With the aim of every mystic being the union with God, “it is obvious that the vital question in his philosophy must be the place which this God, the Absolute of his quest, occupies in the scheme” (96). Underhill says the two forms both theologians and mystics have been accustomed to conceiving the “Divine Reality” lie in the “emanation-theory” and the “immanence-theory” of the transcendental world (96).

The theory of emanation states “[t]he Absolute Godhead is conceived as removed by a vast distance from the material world of sense,” in other words, this theory postulates the complete separation of the human and the divine” (Underhill 97-98). The typical symbolism to represent this separation is of the human, who is on earth, and God, who is high, and far away in the heavens. Thus, the temperament of the human is one of being below, or humility, because it is so far from perfect and the quality of God as being

above, in absolute perfection. From God, perfection, union, and pure love emanate. Humans can attain these states if they go through graduated levels to perfect and purify themselves (97). After going through levels, humans spiritually ascend closer to the emanation from God in heaven, and the more levels of purity they achieve, the more pure their union. To the mystic who believes in the emanation theory, “the mystical adventure is essentially a ‘going forth’ from his normal self and his normal universe” toward God (Underhill 97-99).

Judeo-Christian theology totally finds its basis in the emanation theory. The hierarchal separation of heaven and earth is stated in Genesis. “And God said, ‘Let there be a firmament’ . . . And God called the firmament Heaven. . . . And God said, ‘Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.’” Then, “God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas” (Genesis 1.6-10). The earth and heaven are separate, with earth under heaven. The spatial metaphor of up and down corresponds with the “above and under” metaphor. For instance, “He has a *lofty* position,” She is “at the ‘*bottom*’ of the social hierarchy,” “She has *high* standards,” and finally, “He *fell* into the *abyss* of depravity” (Lakoff 14-17). This metaphor supports the correlation that heaven is perfection, and earth is the antithesis of perfection, i.e., impurity or imperfection.

The theory of emanation includes one more important point. On the sixth day, when God made animals and man, God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our

likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth . . .” (Genesis 1.26). The graduated hierarchical system states that nature is under man. Thus, the emanation theory states God in heaven is the uppermost and perfect, humans are imperfect, yet able to obtain a union with God, but nature is below humans and is on earth solely for human usage. This hierarchical system is based on the presence of life, and on the creatures’ mental and physical development; thus, the bottom of this hierarchy would be the single-celled protozoa. All other non-living things are inconsequential. The emanation theory with its graduated levels and human’s value over nature is anthropocentric because humans are singled out for improvement and the ability to execute a divine plan. Therefore, this theory also supports the perception of the earth as merely a resource for humans to consume.

On the opposite side of this theological spectrum from emanation is immanence. Underhill contrasts immanence from emanation by saying, “[t]he Absolute Whom all seek does not hold Himself aloof from an imperfect material universe, but dwells within the flux of things: stands as it were at the very threshold of consciousness and knocks, awaiting the self’s slow discovery of her treasures” (Underhill 99). There is no intermediary between God and human. More aptly said, “[t]he world is not projected from the Absolute, but immersed in God” (100). “According to the doctrine of Immanence this universe is free, self-creative” (101). “The divine action floods it: no part is more removed from the Godhead than any other part” (101). For those who

accept this perception, “earth is literally ‘crammed with heaven’” (99). If earth is crammed with heaven then the mystic experience takes place everywhere. It can occur in downtown Dallas or in one’s backyard, but for Abbey, only the desert evokes his mystic states. For Abbey, these states firmly root themselves in the ecocentric perspective.

The following likenesses of Underhill’s characteristics of the immanence theory to Abbey’s spiritual philosophy reveal his affiliation with the immanence theory. Underhill notes that for these persons, “the quest of the Absolute is no long journey, but a realization of something which is implicit in the self and in the universe: and opening of the eyes of the soul upon the Reality in which it bathed” (99). In this long passage Abbey relates this realization implicitly as Cactus Ed describes an inanimate rock formation.

If Delicate Arch has any significance it lies, I will
venture, in the power of the odd and unexpected to startle
the senses and surprise the mind out of their ruts of habit,
to compel us into a reawakened awareness of the
wonderful--that which is full of wonder.

A weird, lovely, fantastic object out of nature like
Delicate Arch has the curious ability to remind us--like rock
and sunlight and wind and wilderness--that *out there* is a
different world, older and greater and deeper by far than

ours. . . . For a little while we are again able to see, as the child sees, a world of marvels. . . . [F]or if this ring of stone is marvelous then all which shaped it is marvelous, and our journey here on earth, able to see and touch and hear in the midst of tangible and mysterious things-in-themselves, is the most strange and daring of all adventures. (Desert 41-2)

Abbey has described above how this realization permeates his consciousness after his mind is startled out of its ruts. Abbey's adventuresome spirit questing for the mysterious, his need to be compelled into a "reawakened awareness of the wonderful," and the exhilaration he obtains from the "marvelous" are all, according to Underhill, characteristics mystically inclined persons share (130). Perhaps what is most fascinating to Abbey is that in the "midst of tangible and mysterious things-in-themselves" he finds his mystic, or numinous experience, after the hierophany. The hierophany, according to Linda Graber in her book Wilderness As Sacred Space, means "something sacred shows itself to us," and the numinous experience occurs when "a person makes contact with sacred power" (2-3).

When Abbey describes the stone as marvelous and all that made it into a ring as marvelous, he is saying that the wind and the water and the sun are all marvelous and because of this they all hold equal value. While Abbey expresses ecocentric ideas above, this sentence captures the totality of the term, "[e]ach stone, each plant, each grain of

sand exists in and for itself with a clarity that is undimmed by any suggestion of different realm” (Desert 155).

Underhill’s final characteristic of the immanence theory is that earth is “crammed with heaven” (99). The following statement confirms Abbey also holds this belief. “I know where I belong. Heaven is home. Utopia is here. Nirvana is now” (Abbey’s 129). The likeness of Abbey’s statements to Underhill’s identifying marks of immanence confirms his spiritual philosophy is based in the immanence theory.¹

The immanence theory, as described by Abbey, is ecocentrically based as opposed to the anthropocentrism of the emanation theory. Ecocentrism, according to ecologist George Sessions, “is a rejection of anthropocentrism in all its forms” (18). Ecocentrism includes the “idea that all the wild species of the planet have an equal right, along with humans, to exist and flourish largely without interference by humans in their natural habitats; in this respect no species is privileged” (Sessions 18). Ecocentrism expands beyond the biological plant and animal kingdoms to include the inorganic components of the ecosystem. Sessions’ use of the term, “natural habitats,” suggests the inclusion of inorganic components in an ecosystem. Ecocentricism means every part of the whole is of equal importance including the air, water, rocks, soil, and all species that live within it. Ecocentrism is not compatible with the human-centered, anthropocentric emanation point of view because, in the emanation theory, only humans’ needs are considered important instead of the needs of all species. Philosopher Max Oelschlaeger,

in his book, The Idea of Wilderness, explicitly defines anthropocentrism.

“Anthropocentrists see the human species as the most significant fact of existence, and accordingly evaluate all else from a human standpoint” (293). In light of these conflicting issues concerning ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, the respective immanence and emanation beliefs systems will always remain at odds.

Typically, Judeo-Christian mystics--who find the absolute in God, a god removed from them--have their belief system based in the emanation theory and accept the notion that humans are in “dominion” over all the earth. This dominion theory supports “resourcism” which also lies in complete conflict with ecocentrism (Idea 287).

Resourcism is defined by those who hold these beliefs regarding the environment; “[t]he value of wild nature is construed strictly in economic terms,” and “resourcism is bereft of any archaic sense of wilderness as the Mother Earth,” and it “mirrors Judeo-Christian traditions, especially in its anthropocentric outlook” (Idea 287). With its sole economic interests in nature, resourcism develops, uses and destroys that which is the nature mystic’s source of union. In other words, resourcism, with its total focus on the economic value of all nature, commonly called natural resources, does not consider the validity of a nature mystics’ need for unspoiled wilderness despite the fact the immanence theory is as valid as the emanation theory. This eschewal is the pith of Abbey’s anger. Jack Loeffler, a rafting buddy of Abbey, tells of this anger, “[a]s Ed would withdraw from wilderness solitude profoundly refreshed in spirit, his anger at

human encroachment grew” (48). Through his writing, “he himself became a vehicle and launched a relentless attack against those who would inordinately prosper at the expense of nature (48). Abbey agrees with Loeffler: “[I write t]o oppose injustice, defy the powerful, and speak for the voiceless” (Slungullion xiv). “Voiceless” refers to wilderness.

Scott Slovic says in his book, Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing, that Abbey believes it is the moral obligation of writers to be the conscience of their society and to try and make the world a better place no matter how futile that effort might be (99). However, Slovic incorrectly states, “[i]t is difficult, if not impossible, to distill a coherent moral argument from Desert Solitaire, an argument which could translate into new attitudes and new behavior” (99). Abbey’s moral argument in Desert Solitaire is to oppose resourceism, to preserve and protect wilderness so it may exist for all to explore, because only through exploration can the power within nature that evokes mystic moods be discovered. While Abbey’s message to think and live as an ecocentrist may not be a “new” attitude or a “new” behavior, the attitude he suggests is uncommon in America and because of this, the destruction of wilderness continues at an exponential rate toward complete annihilation. The reality of living in a world without wilderness is new, and the reality of it occurring soon is imminent.

Abbey has a keen awareness of this conflict between the two theologies, the Judeo-Christian emanation theory and the ecocentric immanence theory, and he experiments with the tone of his writing to communicate for voiceless nature. In the

following he uses an antagonistic, acerbic tone to the opposition. For example, “Christian theology: nothing so grotesque could possibly be true” (Voice 3). “Orthodoxy is a relaxation of the mind accompanied by a stiffening of the heart” (Voice 8). Abbey’s readers are either put off by his “antireligious witticisms” or consider the witticisms as part of his playfulness and don’t take him seriously (McClintock 66). Abbey’s tone is more tempered when he attacks the ecological circumstances from a straight political point of view.

[Writing] is not a cheerful field of work. The opposition is severe, well-funded, and becoming more brutal each year. After years of indifference, the managers of the corporate sector and their hired scribes (. . . *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Fortune*, *Wall Street Journal*, et al.) have finally awakened to the fact that environmentalism, if taken seriously, is a greater threat to the Perpetual Power & Growth Machine than labor unions or Communism. (Down 6)

But in Desert Solitaire, Abbey uses an entirely different tone to defend voiceless nature. He goes for theological jugular vein in pure logic-based rhetorical form. Instead of putting the reader on guard with an adversarial tone, Abbey writes with an impassioned tone in Desert Solitaire which is designed to put the reader at ease. This impassioned tone is especially prevalent in “Down The River” as Abbey appeals to the readers to set their

theological beliefs aside and accompany him in his spiritual quest in his Eden. He hopes that by revealing his innermost sanctum, he'll let the immanence of the sacred power in nature speak for itself, and awaken the mystical moods within his readers (Graber 59).

CHAPTER III

GLEN CANYON'S SACRED POWER

The essay, "Down the River," is Abbey's most passionate expression of his sacred encounters. It is also a brilliant attempt to persuade the reader to accept his immanence perspective and reveal the fundamental problem with the emanation perspective, anthropocentrism, which leads to economic "progress" or resourcism. Abbey's literary task in "Down the River" is to express the ineffable in such a way that the reader vicariously feels his mystical experience and understands how the mystical union takes place. Abbey literally hopes his reader will be convinced to the point of action to stop the destruction of his cathedrals, whether that means converting from an emanations theology to the ecocentric-oriented immanence theology, or just empathizing with the immanence point of view to support its validity when making economic decisions about the environment.

As noted in the introduction, not only did I choose the essay "Down The River" because it expresses his ecocentric, mystic states, but also because Abbey held the Glen Canyon and the Colorado River that ran through it dear to his heart. Edward Abbey rafted down the river in June 1959 before it was drowned by the new Glen Canyon Dam (Confessions 148). Jack Loeffler, a rafting companion of the author, says this about

Abbey and Glen Canyon: “If ever there was a symbol of absolute evil in Ed’s mind it was the Glen Canyon Dam that plugs up the mighty Colorado River” (47). Abbey’s anguish over the canyon’s demise motivated him to write the “Down The River” essay included in Desert Solitaire.

Abbey writes “Down the River” in the form of a burial eulogy in which he celebrates the life and history within the two thousand feet canyon walls. Glen Canyon while alive was “an Eden, a portion of the earth’s original paradise” (174). The crime committed in the drowning of this Eden, in his estimation, is like burying the Chartres Cathedral or Taj Mahal in mud, with one exception: Glen Canyon was a living thing, and irreplaceable (174). In using these examples of the sacred to compare to Glen Canyon, Abbey is invoking a spiritual frame of reference for the reader. He continues the spiritual referencing when he calls the damming of the river the “damnation” of Glen Canyon (Beyond 96).

The storyline in “Down the River” essay mirrors Abbey’s 1959 trip down the Colorado River through Glen Canyon. Cactus Ed and his buddy, Ralph Newcomb, raft down the river before the construction of the new dam is completed. They name this rafting trip the “Abbey-Newcomb Expedition” (182). They take Major John Wesley Powell’s guide book with them. In 1869, Powell was the first American to make a systematic exploration of the Colorado River and record it in a book. Abbey and Newcomb would be among the last humans to do the same. Abbey’s searing irony is

evidenced through his recurrent comments about the near future of Glen Canyon. The new lake on top of the drowned land will be called Lake Powell where the skiers are instructed to boat clockwise to keep the traffic controlled, and, therefore, safe. Abbey admits it will keep the engineers in the Reclamation Bureau off the street; however, the land and ecosystems alive in that stretch of river will be permanently eliminated. The naming of the artificial lake was to be a tribute to Major Powell; however, Abbey feels it is a dishonor to the memory, spirit and vision of Powell (173). He notes it is now often referred to as "Lake Foul" (Peterson 22).

Cactus Ed and Newcomb begin their journey with this impending death in mind, but soon they relax, Cactus Ed's anxieties vanish, and now he feels 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). Cactus Ed notices the "absence of confusion and clamor" (183), enjoys the "delirium of bliss" (185), and later he pulls out a harmonica and plays the "Sunday-morning songs out of boyhood" (Abbey's italics)

What a friend we have in Jesus...Leaning, leaning,

leaning on the everlasting arms.... (diatonics for the soul)

and:

We shall gather by the river,

The beautiful the beautiful-ah riv-er...

We shall gather by the river

That flows (from?) the throne of the Lord... (185)

Abbey is invoking a reference point for the reader. These recurring religious thoughts help to define the importance of nature in his spiritual foundation. The religious thoughts also convey to the reader that this trip will be a spiritual journey. No determination of what type of spiritual journey this will be is present until the parenthetical “from?” in the last line of the song. The sly desert coyote, Abbey, is questioning the emanation theory whereby all is divine that flows “from” God; yet he covered his tracks, for the question, mark could also just mean Cactus Ed couldn’t remember whether “from” was the right word in the song.

The Abbey-Newcomb Expedition continues drifting after a night of watching shooting stars and sleeping on the bare earth. The reader is comfortably lying in Abbey’s hands at this point, and the hypnotic, comforting tone continues.

They drift in a kind of waking dream, gliding beneath the great curving cliffs with their tapestries of water stains, the golden alcoves, the hanging gardens, the seeps, and the springs where no man will ever drink, the royal arches in high relief and the amphitheatres shaped like seashells. A sculptured landscape mostly bare of vegetation--earth in the nude.

We try walls for echo values--

HELLO. . . .

Hello. . . .

hello. . . .

--and the sounds that come back to us, far off and fading are so strange and lovely, transmuted by distance, that fall into silence, enchanted. (187)

In the first line above, the idea of drifting in a waking dream resembles the dream-like state James identifies as part of the mystic state (374-84). Abbey is seducing the reader into this state like a snake charmer playing a wooden flute and seducing a cobra out of its basket. The cadence in the delivery of this passage is quiet and calming. In this dreamy state, perhaps the readers of the emanation persuasion may come out of their defenses, humans in the nude. "HELLO. . . ." Abbey calls to the readers as if to say, is anybody in there? The cadence continues through the echo and falls off slowly just like the echo, and into the quiet joy of enchantment. The quiet and calming delivery continues, and the reader continues to watch the sights.

Cactus Ed views the side canyons by as they drift by. "We pass too many of these marvelous canyons, to my everlasting regret, for most of them will never again be wholly accessible to human eyes or feet." Their marvels to remain unknown, "to be drowned beneath the dead water of the coming reservoir" (187). Upon the reminder of

the canyon's fate, Cactus Ed and Newcomb wallow in idyllic fantasies of blowing up of the reservoir (187). Then they realize that while they are in futile daydreams the little men with all their technology are working busily to complete the dam. Their feelings of bliss turn into contempt and anger. Abbey repeats this technique of drifting the characters and the readers into bliss only to be interrupted by the slap of "progress." After the interruption, Abbey resumes redefining words with the ecocentric concepts of the immanence theory.

Back on the river, Cactus Ed contemplates "*Wilderness*. The word itself is music." Cactus Ed outlines the "government officialdom" definition of wilderness which is "not less than 5000 contiguous acres of roadless area." Cactus Ed decides the definition isn't sufficient and adds to it "the womb of earth from which we all emerged" (189). He decides the love of wilderness is "an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need--if only we had the eyes to see" (190). Abbey has created his own nomenclature by adding to the definition of wilderness. He also disguises the immanence theory and calls it the love of wilderness. This is a very subtle, effective persuasion technique. He educates the reader on the numinous and wraps it in the homey, warm fuzzy unconditional love of mother. The final phrase almost pleads for the readers either to open their eyes or to open someone else's eyes and senses. Underhill uses these exact words when describing the characteristics of the theory of immanence. She says the quest

for the Absolute is “a realization of something which is implicit in the self and in the universe: and [only requires the] opening of the eyes of the soul upon the Reality in which it bathed” (99). In addition, Abbey reveals that paradise is in wilderness. It is not in heaven above the earth.

Abbey then redefines original sin from the perspective of the immanence theory. “Original sin, the true original sin, is the blind destruction for the sake of greed of this natural paradise which lies all around us--if only we were worthy of it” (190). Cactus Ed’s Eve in his original sin myth are the first pioneers who destroyed the earth and called it civilization (190). In replacing the Judeo-Christian doctrine with the immanence philosophy, he is teaching the reader and surreptitiously challenging the emanation theory.

Abbey continues his work on the religious nomenclature,

Now when I write of paradise I mean *Paradise*, not the banal Heaven of the Saints. When I write ‘paradise’ I mean not only apple trees and golden women but also scorpions and tarantulas and flies . . . sandstorms, volcanos and earthquakes, bacteria and bear . . . and yes--disease and death and the rotting of the flesh.

Paradise is not a garden of bliss and changeless perfection where . . . the angels and cherubim and seraphim

rotate in endless idiotic circles, like clockwork, about an
 equally inane and ludicrous--however roseate--Unmoved
 Mover. (Play safe; worship only in clockwise direction;
 let's all have fun together.) (190)

Abbey explains the bare bones of ecocentricism to the reader. There is no sugar coating in his immanence nomenclature regarding his numinous experience. He wants no misunderstanding on the part of the reader when differentiating his viewpoint from the Judeo-Christian perception. And if the point hadn't been made clearly enough, Abbey calls the "angels and cherubim" of paradise archaic and merely a "painted fantasy" the "Church Fathers tried to palm off on us" (190). Pleased with modern society's recent indifference to the fantasy, he believes it should vanish into "oblivion," and the paradise he praises is "the here and now, the actual, tangible, dogmatically real earth on which we stand..." (190). Calling cherubim, angels, and the garden of bliss inane and ludicrous most certainly pulls some emanation-theory supporters out their mental ruts and perhaps into an adversarial stance. But Abbey takes this sentence to the ridiculous level suggesting heaven's creatures rotate in "idiotic circles, like clockwork." In case the readers are too shocked to get his joke, he refers to his previous sarcastic statement about the rules of boating on Lake Powell. The clever wit softens Abbey's disparaging comments about heaven, and it reinforces the connection between resourceism in the name of progress with the emanation definition of paradise. Again, he emphasizes, heaven is on earth.

As if Abbey realizes he is pounding on the pulpit a little too hard, he softens his sermon by bringing credibility to it. He maintains the followers of the immanence theory are in the company of great men. “John Muir, H. D. Thoreau, John James Audubon,” the painter George Catlin, and his favorite, Major J. Wesley Powell, all support the same belief system (191). Adding credibility to his sermon is designed to take the reader off the defensive.

Using reverse psychology on his readers, Abbey then outlines how difficult it is to be an immanence follower, thus suggesting that many readers may not be up to the challenge. He identifies the difficulties. To follow this path into the sacred land is not without privation and hardship. He quotes Powell who says that to be able to see the expanse of a canyon “you have to toil from month to month through its labyrinths” (192). He concludes the sermon by stating that wilderness is a necessity like water and air, and if industrial man continues to believe he has dominion over nature and is fruitful and multiplying, he will destroy his origins, betray the principle of civilization itself, and will eventually feel the “agony of final loss” (192). At this near mid-point in the essay, Abbey, having defined the parameters of the immanence theory abandons the persuasive argument and begins to let nature speak for itself for the last half of the essay.

He abruptly changes the rhythm from the preceding sermon:

Down the river. Our boats turn slowing in the drift, we see
through a break in the canyon walls, a part of the Henry
mountains retreating. . . . (192)

He now immerses his characters and readers completely into the river trip. Once the reader is lulled into the comfort and calmness again, the reader can vicariously experience the mood and is perhaps open to perceive the mystical feelings of unity that Cactus Ed expresses. Comfortable, the readers are prepared now appropriately for Abbey's final persuasive technique, the abrupt ending of the essay in which they will feel the "agony of final loss."

As the Abbey-Newcomb expedition continues, Cactus Ed informs the reader how the ecosystem which he and Newcomb are exploring works. The topographical description begins with the forest-covered mountains and slopes to plateaus, down lateral canyons which bear junipers and other shrubs, then into the arid sandy desert where yuccas and cacti exist, until one nears the river. Cactus Ed and Ralph meander through the magnificent canyon on the river below until the sun sets and they turn in (194-197).

Abbey splats colorful humor within this wilderness exposition like loose, vibrant watercolor on a full brush. When the Abbey-Newcomb Expedition runs short on rations after breakfast, the doomed river provides an abundance of catfish. Cactus Ed sees Newcomb helping himself with a fishing line. "You got a license, bud?" Cactus Ed demands of Newcomb. Newcomb defiantly extends a rigid middle finger to Cactus Ed

(198). Newcomb quickly snags a big catfish as Cactus Ed begins hiking into the lush canyon. Cactus Ed hears the thumping of Newcomb beating the catfish to death, and thinks “God provides” (199).

Like a skilled painter, Abbey’s humor is not without premeditation. The wit, satire, irony, and sarcasm in Desert Solitaire are like colors on his palette, waiting for Abbey’s use when he needs to make a message more palatable (Slovic 103), endear himself to the reader, throw a punch at an institution, or provide a much needed relief after intellectual and emotional intensity within the text. Just as a painter knows exactly where color belongs, so too does Abbey know where to place his humor. The ironic sarcasm in Cactus Ed’s question to Newcomb lightens the mood. It is ironic that Ralph, if caught by a park ranger (which Cactus Ed is), would need to have a license to fish in a river that soon will not exist. The sarcasm is a layer below; Cactus Ed is intimating to Ralph that they both know the river is condemned. The intended recipient of the anger is the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. The subsequent phrase, “God provides,” quickly sums up the event. Abbey doesn’t belabor readers with redefining words, and this comment allows ambiguous interpretation from both camps of mystics. Abbey and Cactus Ed have something more important on the agenda, the union with the Real.

Cactus Ed begins his hike to explore the canyon walls taking the reader along to vicariously experience his encounter with the mysterious essence. The reader hears the whisper of running water, the touch of sand on bare feet, and the clear song of a wren in

the tranquil rhythm of nature. Cactus Ed finds a dripping spring. Water seeps from a fissure two hundred feet above. He eyes its path down the canyon wall where it leaves in its path the “delicate greenery of moss, fern, columbine and monkeyflower.” Below the water’s path reaches an overhang in which Cactus Ed says it “falls free through the air in misty, wavy spray down to the canyon floor where I stand, as in a fine show, filling my canteen and soaking myself and drinking all at the same time” (199-200). “There are enough cathedrals and temples and altars here for a Hindu pantheon of divinities” says Cactus Ed. “Each time I look up one of the secretive little side canyons I half expect to see not only the cottonwood tree rising over its tiny spring--the leafy god, the desert’s liquid eye--but also a rainbow-colored corona of blazing light, pure spirit, pure being, pure disembodied intelligence, *about to speak my name*” (200). Cactus Ed is experiencing a hierophany, in which something sacred shows itself to him (Graber 3). He is also experiencing the numinous, in which he has made contact with the sacred (Graber 3). The cottonwood tree, the leafy god, is a reference to an anecdote Abbey tells earlier in Desert Solitaire while exposing the fierce indifference of the desert where dripping streams are much harder to come by than in the canyons by the Colorado River. Understanding that cottonwoods signify water brings the necessary depth to his ethereal experience.

Long enough in the desert a man like other animals
can learn to smell water. Can learn, at least, the smell of
things associated with water--the unique and heartening

odor of the cottonwood tree, for example, which in the canyonlands is the tree of life. . . . It signifies water . . . which may or may not be on the surface, visible and available. If you . . . try to dig for this water during the heat of the day the effort may cost you more in sweat than you will find to drink. . . . Better to wait for nightfall when the cottonwoods . . . release some of the water which they have absorbed during the day, perhaps a potable trickle to rise to the surface of the sand. If the water still does not appear you may then wish to attempt dig for it. Or you might do better by marching farther up the canyon. . . . On the other hand you could possibly find no water at all, anywhere. The desert is a land of surprises, some of them terrible surprises. Terrible as derived from terror. (131-32)

Lack of water is an ever-present fear while in the desert, and Cactus Ed has pushed the survival envelope while walking through it. Abbey conveys the threatening nature of desert to provoke a healthy helping of fear of the unpredictability of nature's power. The reality is that nature's power is indifferent to whoever or whatever stands in its way. As Abbey notes, his fear is an essential emotion not only for survival, but it is also an essential quality in experiencing "brutal mysticism."

Scott Slovic suggests Abbey presents predictable and commonplace features in the desert “such as the general lack of water, and the occasional, sudden, deadly, and nourishing return of water in the form of deluges and flash floods” hyperbolically, “sometimes nightmarishly, so that they become defamiliarized, alien” (Slovic 93-4). Slovic correctly suggests Abbey uses a “shock of the real” (Abbey’s words) to pull the reader out of complacency; however, the fear Abbey describes is not exaggerated (93). The indifference of nature’s power remains so whether merging with it or dying of thirst from it. To borrow an Abbey redefining technique, this is the fear of Abbey’s God. Through this fear, nature mystics realize the irrelevance of their humanity, their insignificance in the grand picture of this earth, their nothingness. Linda Graber puts it this way; the mystic “must fully grasp man’s insignificance in comparison to nature, which is the manifestation of sacred power. . . . Wilderness is void of all comforting human presence,” leaving the mystic “exposed to nature’s raw energy” (12). The forces of nature sometimes strike with sufficient violence to reduce one to elemental fear. Fear is analogous to creature-feeling, and can be savored by the “mystic as a prerequisite for awe and wonder” (Graber 12).

It is this humility Cactus Ed has learned in the desert that allows him to grasp the numinousness of the Glen Canyon walls where he stands filling up his canteen in the “misty, wavy spray” coming from two hundred feet above (199-200). Humility allows the “rainbow-colored corona of blazing light, pure spirit, pure being, pure disembodied

intelligence,” to manifest its sacredness to Cactus Ed (200). As the Abbey-Newcomb Expedition continues, each spiritual, nature-fulfilled experience portends the future. In a sensual pause, Cactus Ed hears the hoot of an owl, and “a predawn wind comes sifting and sighing through the cottonwood trees; the sound of their dry, papery leaves is like the...whispering ghosts in an ancient, sacrosanct, condemned cathedral” (204). Abbey’s juxtaposition of opposites is the technique Slovic wrote of when he referred to the shock of the real (93). Through this technique, the readers experience the numinous with Cactus Ed, only to feel the shock of reality. This haunting reminder occurs more often as the trip nears the end. They try not to think about it, “for if we did we’d be eating our hearts, chewing our entrails, consuming ourselves in the fury of helpless rage. Of helpless *outrage*” (210). This is the most vivid example in his non-fiction works of Abbey’s despair. With such gloom saturating the mood, Abbey sees the need to lighten it.

While Cactus Ed and Newcomb stop to investigate more side canyons down the river, Cactus Ed accidentally starts a brush fire on shore. A gust of wind carries the flame into “a dried-tangle of willow thicket” and the fire spreads explosively out of control. Out of the tangle comes Cactus Ed. He sees Ralph waiting. “He is all ready to cast off when I appear, about ten feet in front of the onrushing sheet of fire, running. I push the boats off and roll in; we paddle away as hard as we can from the fiery shore. . . . With generous tact Ralph . . .” doesn’t even ask for an explanation.

“Hot in there,” I say, though Ralph has asked no question.

“So I noticed.”

“Had an accident.”

“Is that right?”

Shakily I tamp my pipe and fumble through the pockets of my shirt. All is gone.

“Here,” he says. “Have a match.” (212-13)

The witty and satirical exchange between Ralph and Cactus Ed jolts the readers’ attention back into the text, as well as reminds that nature’s forces can not so easily be curtailed by mere humans. Slovic is right when he suggests Abbey often creates a conflict between the humor and the “moral strata of the text” to make the us more “alert to things” such as ourselves and the environment (103-13). Cactus Ed’s self-deprecating dialogue also endears him to the reader and brings the reader closer to his humanity.

Cactus Ed sets out on foot to find and see Rainbow Bridge. He has seen this stone bridge in books, and he makes it an imperative to find it. After a few hours of hiking up the walls of the canyon, he stops for a rest in the shade under an overhanging ledge. He hears nothing but the deep dead stillness of the canyon. “No wind or breeze, no birds, no running water, no sound but the stir of my own breathing” (216). Alone in this silence, Abbey, for a moment, understands

the dread which many feel in the presence of primeval
 desert, the unconscious fear which compels them to tame,
 alter or destroy what they cannot understand, to reduce the
 wild and prehuman to human dimensions. Anything rather
 than confront directly the antehuman, that *other world*
 which frightens not through danger or hostility but
 something far worse--its implacable indifference. (216)

In pure Aristotelian rhetorical fashion, Abbey acknowledges his opposition's perception, tells them he is acknowledging their point of view, and validates it. Abbey tells the proponents of the emanation theory that he feels their fear toward the "implacable indifference" of wilderness.

But Cactus Ed can't be bothered too long with the philosophical and theological at this time. He must get to the renowned Rainbow Bridge that he has waited the whole trip to see. He "tramps on through the winding gorge, through the harsh bitter silence" in search of Rainbow Bridge, which he soon finds. Once there, he feels guilty that Ralph isn't there to see it. Ralph's bum leg doesn't allow him to hike. In deference to the Abbey-Newcomb Expedition, Cactus Ed logs Ralph and himself into the visitor's book. Cactus Ed is ready to return back down to the river when he sees a faint trail to take him up to the rim of the canyon. Of course he takes it.

Cactus Ed makes it to the top. He is in the open now, “out of the underworld. From up here Rainbow Bridge, a thousand feet below is only a curving ridge of sandstone of no undue importance Of more interest is the view to the north, east and west, revealing the general lay of the land through which we have voyaged in our little boats” (218). He sees a storm boiling over the desert; it is so far he can’t hear the thunder. The awe of the expanse all around subsides, and he attempts to make some logical philosophic account of it.

Turning Plato and Hegel on their heads I sometimes choose to think, no doubt perversely, that man is a dream, thought an illusion, and only rock is real. Rock and sun.

Under the desert sun, in that dogmatic clarity, the fables of theology and the myths of classical philosophy dissolve like mist. The air is clean, the rock cuts cruelly into flesh; shatter the rock and the odor of flint rises to your nostrils, bitter and sharp. Whirlwinds dance across the salt flats, a pillar of dust by day; the thornbush breaks into flame at night. What does it mean? It means nothing. It is as it is and has no need for meaning. The desert lies beneath and soars beyond any possible human qualification. Therefore, sublime. (Desert 219)

The logical philosophic account evaporates as he senses the hierophany, and then experiences the numinous. As noted earlier in this paper, in the first chapter of Desert Solitaire, Abbey claims his goal for the book is to find hard and brutal mysticism, yet to survive as an individual, and separate. "Paradox and Bedrock" (6). He realizes it is philosophically impossible for a person to merge with the bedrock of the desert, and remain individual and separate. But he has spiritually attained this and has, in effect, resolved that paradox. This final exposition just before the ending of "Down the River" suggests Abbey is still struggling to resolve the paradox in expressing the ineffable. This is evident as Cactus Ed concludes saying the "desert lies beneath and soars beyond any human qualification. Therefore, sublime." There is, however, a philosophical epiphany, and that in itself is another paradox. Cactus Ed comes to realize that the mystic's paradoxical experience from the bedrock is more important than the philosophic and theologic musings on the paradox. The final chapter, entitled "Bedrock and Paradox", in which Abbey has reversed the order of two words supports this conclusion (Bryant 6).

Cactus Ed descends the long trail back to the river to the campfire and companionship and a midnight supper (219). The next morning the Abbey-Newcomb Expedition packs up their gear, and takes a last lingering look at the scene they know they will never see again as they see it now, the Colorado River.

Both decide to capture a lasting image of the sublime; Ralph takes a photograph, and Cactus Ed writes a brief survey before they push off on the river. By afternoon they

round a bend in the river where they see the sign posted for their benefit by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. "YOU ARE APPROACHING GLEN CANYON DAM SITE ALL BOATS MUST LEAVE . . . ABSOLUTELY NO BOATS ALLOWED IN CONSTRUCTION ZONE VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED" (220).

This sign ends the "Down the River" essay, and succeeds in invoking a paradoxical "shock of the real." This time the real is not the sudden awareness of the awe of the sublime Cactus Ed often describes; rather it is the shock of reality that the source of one's numinous experience, one's sacred space, will soon be destroyed (Graber 1).

Abbey has succeeded in evoking from the reader the "agony of final loss" as he set out to do at the half-way point in the "Down The River" essay. After Abbey finished his sermon, he took the readers by the hand and let them sit in on the rafting trip. The readers have experienced, albeit vicariously, Cactus Ed's hierophany and a consequent numinous state. Abbey also succeeded in showing the reader what steps one must go through to achieve the mystic state within nature: get out in nature, open the senses to nature, leave all preconceived notions behind, and acknowledge one's own humble position within an ecocentric environment.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Finding Edward Abbey's spiritual philosophy is like unearthing an archeological site. One must sift carefully through the rocks, sand, and water only to find a faint clue. Likewise, one must sift through Abbey's humor, sort through Cactus Ed's flamboyant character, look under the veneer of this character, and beyond Abbey's overt objective of convincing readers to defy the destruction of wilderness, and only then does the spiritual philosophy of Abbey become visible. In order to understand his perception of spirituality, one must jump in his backpack and accompany him on the adventures of Cactus Ed. Abbey generously affords everyone the opportunity to be guided by his persuasive hands.

Abbey's technique of straight rationality in Desert Solitaire is very successful. Once he acknowledges his audience as receptive, intelligent persons like himself instead of as thick headed, brutal "managers of the corporate sector and their hired scribes," Abbey is able to significantly soften the tone of Desert Solitaire. Endearing himself to the audience allows Abbey to show his more passionate, spiritual side. He is not an author who typically writes about the sacred and spiritual, so when Abbey reveals his personal side by passionately expressing the mystic experience, the audience responds by lowering

their defenses. In doing so, the readers have the opportunity to be a member of Cactus Ed's adventures in the desert and canyonlands, and vicariously learn about nature mysticism.

Abbey skillfully uses the technique of replacing the Judeo-Christian nomenclature with his own definitions to create a basis for understanding, from which he teaches this principle of the ecocentric-based immanence theory. In doing so, Abbey is able to shift the reader's attention into seeing a new theological paradigm.

But does Abbey succeed in changing his readers' theology from the emanation theory to the ecocentric immanence theory? This is hard to judge without studying a cross-section of his reading audience. What can be proved, however, is that Abbey, in following classic Aristotelian rhetoric, persuaded a reader to open his eyes and look for the sacred in wilderness. Terrell Dixon, an English professor, tells the story of a class in which Desert Solitaire was being studied. As the class discussed the book, Dixon couldn't help but notice one increasingly agitated student at the back of the room. When they met after class, however, the source of his dissatisfaction was surprising to Dixon (38).

This student spent the last six months living in Arches

National Monument, reading and re-reading Desert Solitaire.

What disturbed him so profoundly was not Abbey's

environmentalism but our discussion of the book as if it

were “just literature,” rather than a religious text with all the unassailable power of received truth. (38)

Not only was Edward Abbey successful in endearing himself to this reader, he successfully communicated the ineffable numinous experience, revealed how to obtain this state in nature, and persuaded this person to go out and test the immanence theory for himself. Abbey’s persuasion was so effective in privileging the ecocentric immanence theology as equal to Judeo-Christian theology that this student felt slighted the book was not regarded as a religious text and placed rightfully next to the Holy Bible. Dixon notes that after this experience with Desert Solitaire, the professor had a new, “profound sympathy” for all colleagues who teach the “The Bible as Literature” courses (38).

As for Abbey’s personal and professional wish to be regarded as a “fine writer, a literary man” (Loeffler 43), the student said it all when he was offended that Desert Solitaire was being regarded as, “just literature.”

Wendall Berry is correct when he says he believes that Abbey is “going to become harder to ignore, and for good reasons—not the least being that military-industrial state is working as hard as it can to prove him right” (14). Perhaps the most reverberating message the readers take with them when they set down Desert Solitaire is best described by Linda Graber, “[a]lthough wilderness and civilization can be reconciled on an intellectual plane, the often-noted conflict between wilderness preservation and economic growth remains serious” (56).

NOTE

¹This is a pantheist reading of Abbey. Abbey can be interpreted from a panentheist perspective as well. Pantheism, as defined in the Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion, originates from the Greek words *pan* and *theos* meaning “everything is god” (Reese 546-47). “The term was applied to a variety of positions where God and the world are held to be identical” (547). For the pantheist “God is wholly immanent in the world” says Max Oelschlaeger in Caring For Creation (122). The nature mystics, or “nature religionists” find “God shot through nature in continuing acts of creation” (122). Panentheism originates from the same Greek words as pantheism yet its definition is from the “view that all reality is part of the being of God” (Reese 545). In The Idea of Wilderness, a panentheist view distinguishes between God and His creation; it allows for “both the divinity of creation and a separate existence for a divine cosmic presence (Oelschlaeger 190). Compare the above with Matthew Fox’s definition of panentheism in The Coming of the Cosmic Christ, pg 57. For additional views and the historical use of “pantheism” and “panentheism” see Reese pp. 545-47, Idea 414n35, Idea 414n28, and Idea 416n60.

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