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DESERT SOLITAIRE:
EDWARD ABBEY'S LEGACY TO THE AMERICAN WILDERNESS

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RÉSUMÉ

Ce mémoire a pour but de faire connaître Edward Abbey et ses principes. Reconnu pour ses positions radicales envers la protection de l'environnement Edward Abbey a inspiré la création de groupes environnementalistes tel que *EarthFirst!*. *Desert Solitaire* est son œuvre la plus connue, c'est un journal au travers duquel il relate les différentes expériences vécues tandis qu'il travaillait comme garde dans le parc national des arches de l'Utah. Cette œuvre qui est donc non fictionelle et est très souvent comparée à *Walden ou la vie dans les bois* de Henry Thoreau. En raison de l'implication politique de Abbey dans ses écrits, il est souvent considéré comme un écrivain qui a radicalisé l'écriture de la nature et de l'environnement. Son œuvre fictionelle la plus connue; *Le Retour du gang de la clef à molette* est une véritable éloge au sabotage environnemental.

KEYWORDS : Wilderness, Paradise, Ecology, Monkey Wrench, Edward Abbey, Henry David Thoreau

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is about Edward Abbey and his principles. Known to have radical positions towards environmental protection Edward Abbey inspired the creation of environmental groups such as Earth First! *Desert Solitaire* is most renowned work is a journal in which he relates his experiences as a park ranger in the Arches national park where he worked for 6 months. This work of non-fiction is often compared to Henry David Thoreau's Walden or life in the woods. Due to the political implication that Abbey has while writing he is often considered to have radicalized the nature writing genre. His most famous fiction: *The Monkey Wrench* gang is an authentic praise to environmental sabotage.

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The works studied are *Desert Solitaire*, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and *Walden*. Because the titles are often mentioned , *Desert Solitaire* will appear as *DS* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang as The MWG*; however the title of *Walden* does not change.

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Introduction

Ever since the American explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark reported in 1805 about the "Great American Desert", the literature of the desert has proliferated. Abbey is a writer that inscribes himself in the canon of the literature of the American West. One of America's most prominent environmentalists and defenders of his country's wilderness, Abbey gained much praise with his first Best Seller in 1968: *Desert Solitaire*. Writer Russell Martin called this book a kind of catcher in the rye for the coming-of-age of the environmental movement. *DS* is a book that established Abbey as a desert expert and that made him "the main figure responsible for the radicalization of nature writing" (Don Scheese, 35). Abbey at 17 hitchhiked through the states, sometimes riding with vagrants, encountered vast landscapes and became overwhelmed by their freedom and great openness. Abbey is someone who does not fit and does not follow. He called himself an environmentalist. Not in our current sense but in the fact that people are shaped by their social environment, the desert and the Grand Canyon shaped him. The wilderness cult had not yet begun when Abbey was already obsessed with the Southwestern desert. To him it was not a sterile place but a living one: it became his true home.

Abbey's vision is particular because he writes about the desert of the American West and in it he found sublimity and solace even though it is not a pristine wilderness. He found the sublime sense of space that one feels while out in the open fields. Abbey wrote during the flowering of modern environmentalism and the peak of the counter-culture movement. He was someone that went through an endless oscillation between solitude and society: embodying thus a central conflict in American culture: the tension between Wilderness and Civilization. In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey evokes his sense of frustration at watching the southwest fall prey to greed and a contempt for the human species for our mindless ruining of the natural world as well as an urge to withdraw from civilization. For him it is a duty to preserve the desert, to him the face of God from politicians. It is a place broad enough to accommodate his soul and it needs to be defended for its own sake.

What I wish to develop in this dissertation is how *Desert Solitaire* offers us a particular vision of the American wilderness. Even though it is a work of nonfiction, the narrative quality of it carries a clarity of meaning; the author is the narrator; it is non-ambiguous. What we read is what the author thinks. This dissertation is divided into three parts which deal with the different themes that are looked upon in *DS*. Since *DS* is non-fiction, the parts will focus mostly on the cultural aspect rather than the literary one.

The first part of this dissertation deals with the overarching idea of the wilderness. In reality the concept of the wilderness was created by the pioneers. By bringing 'civilization' they created a difference that did not exist in Indian cultures. I will expand on the representation of the wilderness in our Western societies, how and why it came to be seen such as it is. I will also consider a few concepts related to nature writing such as Pantheism and the sublime. The idea of the wilderness is subjective because of each one's personal meaning: it is not easy to define. Abbey's vision reflects an unusual point of view of what is usually considered the wilderness, a complex and even contradictory notion, a vision quite unexpected while one is writing about the desert.

The second section will focus on the political aspect: this is one of the reasons why Abbey's writing is said to have radicalized nature writing; because of his assertion that humans should not meddle with the earth in any way, thus retrieving the primitive ideology. This idea of wilderness has evolved and the general attitude has altered as an awareness of the fragility our planet spread starting in the 60's. In 1970 the United States saw the rising of movements such as Civil Rights, the peace movement and the quietest one: 'the environmental movement', a new awareness that engendered new politics. How does Abbey use his vision to assess politicians and, more globally, the society in which he lives? How is the depiction he makes of the environment he lived in for several seasons used as a tool to create awareness among people?

Finally, the third part will deal with another work of Edward Abbey, this time his most famous work of fiction: *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. How does this work constitute another step in Abbey's evolvement as a writer? This part will also emphasize the fact that even though more than a hundred years separate *DS* from Thoreau's *Walden*, they have a lot in common. Both of them offer two visions that are not so radically different. Abbey in *DS* just like in *The MWG* develops a response to the American pastoral that can recall Thoreau's ideas. In comparison between *Walden*, one of the first American non-fiction works about nature writing, and *DS* we will reflect on the ways in which *DS* can be considered a truthful twentieth century heir of *Walden*. What this part will try to analyze is how through the reading of *DS* and *Walden* we can create parallels, whether the matters that Thoreau was concerned with are still valid at Abbey's time and in ours. We shall also see how the different questions raised in their work about human interaction with nature are something that is timeless. Those two books raise questions about what the wilderness

is and about human experiences with nature; how money has become something more valuable than nature and how through their way of life both Abbey and Thoreau express an ideal where loneliness is not what we could think it is. These two non-fiction also demonstrate how progress alienates us from the natural world. I will try to develop each of these different questions with the understanding that one can grasp by reading those two works.

PART I.

AN ATYPICAL VISION OF THE WILDERNESS

What is unusual about Abbey's writing is that he celebrates the Grand Canyon as if it were an Arcadian utopia. Usually the Grand Canyon and the wilderness surrounding it are in fact more often seen as a hard environment in which man is a complete alien. The American idea of wilderness has evolved since the pioneers first came to the New World. When the first settlers arrived the wilderness was perceived as an enemy. The influence of biblical texts depicting the wilderness as the opposite of paradise was one of the reasons it was perceived as such. The wilderness had to be controlled and there was simply too much of it to even think about the possibility that it could be appreciated for its own sake. This view wasn't shared by the natives: "The Indians had no word for what we call 'wilderness'. For them the wilderness was home"[1]. What I wish to develop here is why Paradise was seen as the opposite of the wilderness in the first place and how, as time passed, this opposition has been refuted by numerous instances as a new inclination towards the wilderness appeared. An inclination which has now the tendency to conceive the wilderness as a victim rather than an enemy. Man started to realize the fragility of his environment. Due to this new awareness his behavior towards the wilderness underwent tremendous changes. Related to that there is another point in the experience of reading *Desert Solitaire*. It is worth noting how the reader comes to the realization that the southern American desert constitutes Abbey's true home, his own paradise on earth, and to what extent it conveys his message to us. Throughout the eighteenth century, philosophers extolled man's rational powers and innate virtues; they dreamed of new social-political organizations (John Locke, *Treatises on Civil Government*) in which man's natural dignity and ability would find fulfillment. War-ravaged, tyranny-ridden Europe was an unlikely place for rehabilitation of man, but the American wilderness which, in the "seventeenth and eighteenth centuries loomed up as a virgin world seemed an ideal testing ground for the new theories of human nature. Scientific progress increased man's confidence in the powers of reason: the American continent became the setting where man's self-confidence could be tested" (Rezé Michel, *Key Words*, 23).

[1]Abbey, "Floating", in *Down the River,* New York, E.P. Dutton, 1982, 237.

I) Paradise versus Wilderness

A) The Pastoral Ideal

> *"A mild climate constantly prevailed. Ripe fruit drooped from every bough, and there were no thorns to prick reaching hands. The animals in paradise lived in harmony with man. Fear as well as want disappeared in this ideal state of nature"*[2]

The wilderness has always been considered (until recently) as the antithesis of Paradise. Paradise was and still is seen as man's ultimate greatest good, whereas the wilderness represents the greatest evil. The wilderness never had any place in the paradise myth. The need to work in order to survive is absent from the description of the Garden of Eden; everything can be reached, everything is comfortable, easy, there is no struggle between man and his surroundings; all is given to him without any efforts. When the pioneers arrived into the New World they brought with them this idea of paradise; they thought they were going to arrive in an idyllic place, and the disappointment they had when they discovered that it was not so was reinforced by all the expectations they had built upon their hopes. In Genesis 1:28, the first commandment of God to man states that mankind should increase, conquer the earth, and have dominion over all living things. "In the English tradition the image of nature as a garden or estate confirms the religiously endorsed right of humans to exploit nature". (Gifford, 33)

So for a long time there was no hesitation in the mind of the pioneers who brought with them this English ideology that since the wilderness was not Paradise it had to become one by controlling it, and thus turning an unproductive and wild area into something similar to the European idea of what Paradise is. "In an uncontaminated environment, Europe might produce the kind of society it had only dreamt of on the old continent" (Kolodny, 53).

This is precisely what the pioneers were trying to do. Wilderness had no counterpart in the Old World so it offered this opportunity to realize what in Europe was impossible. In Europe every land was known, conquered and spoiled but in America the pioneers found some Virgin Land on which they could try to realize the old European pastoral dream. "To depict America as a garden is to express aspirations still considered utopian--aspirations, that is, toward abundance, leisure, freedom and a greater harmony of existence" (Marx Leo, 43).

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[2]Mircea Eliade, *the yearning of paradise in primitive tradition*, Quoted in Nash, *Wilderness*, 9.

The pioneers did think when they were leaving that they were leaving for the promised land, a place that would be abundant, where they would have more freedom in their lives (especially concerning religion), a pleasant, easier life where society would be more lenient towards them. They had the belief that they were about to create a new utopian society. But one of the major problems of the first pioneers is that they were trying to create an utopian society by becoming part of the natural environment surrounding them and at the same time they wished to maintain some distance and control over it. They exercised a one-way relationship with their environment. At the time Wilderness was everywhere; it was an overwhelming presence; there was simply so much of it that it would have been completely irrational to think that nature and the wilderness could be threatened by man, who was seen as superior to nature and whose ideal of complete control of the natural world was not to be contested.

Unfortunately for the pioneers making America into a garden was simply impossible. Some places cannot be controlled and one of those places is the desert. As time went by, wilderness areas became less and less wild since they all fell prey to the control of man but it did not necessary mean that those places had the capacity to be transformed into gardens. Watering the desert so it would blossom like a rose just like in the biblical promise was unachievable; the pioneers had to deal with the fact that some places could not fit into their ideal society. The wilderness was then accepted as it was, but because it could not be turned into a garden it was often despised; seen as a waste-land; nothing good (for humans that is) could come out of it.

> In virgin land, Henry Nash Smith shows that down to the twentieth century the imagination of Americans was dominated by the idea of transforming the wild heartland into such a new 'garden of the world'. On the whole Americans where unsentimental about unmodified nature. […] As Tocqueville noted, the wilderness was precious to most Americans chiefly for what could be made of it_ a terrain of rural peace and happiness (Marx, 142).

What is problematic in the case of the desert is that it does not coincide with the central metaphor of the American pastoral experience: the metaphor of the land as woman:

> Land is experienced as feminine, no masculine activity in relation to it can be both satisfying and non abusive, and, insofar as we do not wholly control or even understand our responses to that which constitutes the opposite gender, no activity toward it can be wholly responsible (Kolodny, 142).

The land as a woman fits the description of the wilderness as something that can be controlled and become fruitful; a place that can be productive; a welcoming fertile land, but the desert is absolutely the opposite. If the garden is seen as a woman then the desert is a man. There is a fierce contention between man and the desert that does not exist with the wilderness of the forests, the mountains or even the sea. The desert cannot be perceived as

refuge; death is imprinted in our minds as soon as the desert is mentioned. It is an association that cannot be escaped. The nature writing of Edward Abbey offers us an anti-pastoral construction of the West because he sees life in a place where the collective imagination only sees death. And he introduces the fact "that the natural world can no longer be constructed as a land of dreams but is in fact a bleak battle for survival without a divine purpose". (Gifford, 120)

In this instance Abbey is one of the few writers who challenged the collective imagination's vision of what the desert is, and what the wilderness is: he clearly states that it is a battle, and that there is no purpose to it; it is a bleak vision. Because of this duality between man and his environment the wilderness has been perceived for a very long time as an inexhaustible resource, so vast that man's actions could not have any affect over it. It is only when men were proved wrong that they started to realize that their involvement had actually had some impact. Their attitude to the wilderness had to change. As civilization kept growing and the wilderness kept diminishing, the wilderness started to be seen as fragile and the closing of the frontier also brought some limits and borders to this seemingly infinite wilderness. There was not so much of it left now, or at least what was left was known; nothing was left to discover. It took time for the wilderness to be seen as a victim and not as an enemy, even today some people consider wilderness as a dangerous place and do not see the need for its protection. It is inhospitable, not useful, so why protect it?

As Tocqueville said in *Democracy in America* the "Americans are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature" (Tocqueville, 90). Unfortunately this nearly two hundred year-old statement is more true today than ever in a society where new diseases such as computer-addiction exist and where consumption is the leading force.

Thus the wilderness shifted position: from a dangerous and evil place it became a sanctuary, a place to escape civilization. One of America's characteristics is that it has breathtaking scenery of wildness; in Europe there is some of this scenery but it has been known for centuries. In America it was new; it was a new source of inspiration for artists and writers that they could exploit in a way that has not been done before. The idea that wild scenery could be enjoyed by itself was born from the 18th century with the notion of sublime. The first appreciation of the wilderness appeared with the idea that a sort of sublimity could be found in nature.

B) Sublimity in the wilderness

In the 18th century an awakening of the sense of the beauty of nature gave birth to the notion of the sublime, the words of Burke describe this notion as "productive of the strongest emotion the mind is capable of feeling [...]astonishment ...is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect" (Don Scheese, 1). Henry Nash Smith also explains this concept in *Wilderness and the American mind:*

> From the feeling that uncivilized regions bespoke god's influence rather than Satan's, it was just a step to perceiving a beauty and grandeur in wild scenery comparable to that of god. To signify this new feeling about wild places the concept of sublime gained widespread usage in the eighteenth century. As an aesthetic category the sublime dispelled the notion that beauty in nature was seen only in the comfortable, fruitful, and well-ordered. Vast, chaotic scenery could also please. In his philosophical inquiry into the origins of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful of 1757, Edmund Burke formally expressed the idea that terror and horror in regard to nature stemmed from exultation, awe and rather delight rather than from dread and loathing. Sublimity suggested the association of God and wild nature. Wilderness as pure nature, the clearest medium through which God showed his powers and excellency. (Nash, 45-46).

This is exactly what Abbey experienced just as many other writers like him. He says so himself, in the chapter 'Down the River' that never before making this trip (down the Colorado river), has he found himself embosomed in a scenery so hopelessly beyond description. To Abbey the desert has no need for meaning. "The desert lies beneath and soars beyond any possible human qualification. Therefore sublime" (*DS*, 194). Abbey was extremely sensitive to the beauty of the desert. Just like other writers who develop an aesthetic sense to the world which surrounds them, Abbey developed an aesthetic sense that allowed him to perceive sublimity in the desert where some people will see only fear, danger, loss and destruction. Abbey has a reaction towards it that is exactly like the astonishment Edmund Burke describes, an overwhelming sense of beauty, too much to be absorbed by the human mind, a beauty "so intense, he could only weep and wonder, at the exquisite grace of Delicate Arch. There is simply no way to express the love a man can feel for our earth once he has surrendered to her call" (Loeffler, 58).

There is no vegetation in the desert; only hundreds of square miles of stone and space. What Abbey depicts is the geological sublime. Abbey first becomes aware of the grandeur of the desert, this grandeur becomes majestic and the majestic becomes sublime "and ever expanding and developing the sublime passes beyond the reach of our faculties and becomes transcendent" (Clarence Dutton, "Canyon country" in Bergon, 186). So the sublime is, by his definition, the step that precedes the sentiment of transcendence. John C.Van Dyke asks the question

> Have immensity, space, magnitude a peculiar beauty of their own? Is it not true that

> bulk and breadth are primary essential qualities of the sublime in landscape? and is it not the sublime that we feel in immensity and mystery? If so, perhaps we have a partial explanation of our love for sky and sea and desert waste. They are the great elements. We do not see, we hardly know if their boundaries are limited; we only feel their immensity, their mystery, and their beauty. And quite as impressive as the mysteries are the silences. Was there ever such a stillness as that which rests upon the desert at night! (John C.Van Dke, "The Desert" in Bergon, 279).

The notion of Sublime in nature is also linked with Pantheism. Pantheism is the view that the universe, the natural world and God are identical, and that the only thing deserving the deepest kind of reverence is the natural world. *DS* is full of passages that express Pantheism, the idea that in deep solitude and alone like Abbey was, we converse with our god more directly than by going to any church or temple. This comes from the fact that the immensity of the wilderness is commensurate with deistic qualities rather than human ones.

Pantheism is closely linked with the transcendental movement since the transcendentalists were the first to impart the idea that nature was the proper source of religion. Like Mary Austin before him for whom the desert is "forsaken of most things but beauty and madness and death and god" (Austin, 75). Abbey saw sublimity in the desert but even more than that, the inexplicableness of the beauty that surrounds him made him express Pantheism, and made the desert his temple, the place where he felt closer to God.

Abbey clearly expresses the idea that "whether we live or die is a matter of absolutely no concern whatsoever for the desert" (*DS*, 267). This asserts that we are insignificant to the desert. It has absolutely no concern for men; it lies there waiting to be contemplated. The fact that there is no compassion whatsoever and the fact that the desert is deprived of any human qualities are what makes the desert so attractive to Abbey. He finds God in a place with only the slightest traces of human presence. The desert of all places is the one that has been the least tampered with by humans; a place too powerful for humans to inhabit. If no men are present in it, all is left is the wilderness and God. But more than Pantheism, Abbey's true religion in fact is the "religion of the Earth". He wishes to become one with nature, to have the closest relationship possible without any intermediary.

To Abbey Earth is a sacred place, a temple, a place to heal ourselves from the evils and wrong doing of society. The belief is that there is an immanence of spirit in such a vast and apparently inanimate object as the desert. The fact that Abbey uses the verb 'to profane' when he talks about nature clearly shows that to him the destruction of the wilderness is like a desacralization. The problem resides also in the fact that parts of the wilderness remain beyond human comprehension. And it is an arduous task for man to accept that in order for our relationship with the wilderness to be healthy it should be the same as with

our relationship with religion: one of mystery rather than mastery. This choice of mastery over the wilderness prevents us from realizing that its destruction can be related to the murder of God. The idea that God is dead can be linked directly to the idea that the wilderness is dead too, or at least dying. The fact that more and more people are showing concern for the planet due to the growing global ecological crisis could make Pantheism a rising influence in religions of the future, a religion to which atheists might easily adhere.

Before Abbey numerous other American nature writers (it is in fact quite common among them) declared themselves as Pantheists. But Abbey differs from them; to find some sort of religious value in the desert is unusual and different from the forms of Pantheism that might have been read before. Also Abbey includes some political aspect to his Pantheism which did not exist originally. One of the most renowned Pantheists was John Muir; he felt Pantheism as a result of his experience. To him natural objects are the terrestrial manifestations of God. Muir could look at a rock and see "a portion of spirit clothing itself with a sheet of lichen tissue" and declare that it was "no more or less radically divine" (Buell, 192) than all other life forms. And of course before him Emerson (probably the first one to mention this notion so directly) expresses it even more deeply in his essay *Nature :*

> In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life […] which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all, the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of god.(Emerson, 39)

But in *Desert Solitaire* even though at times it feels like Abbey is expanding on Pantheist views he also contradicts himself as he says that the arches are "not the work of a cosmic hand but the modest wedging action of rainwater, melting snow, frost, and ice, aided by gravity" (*DS*, 5). On the other hand the presence of God is undeniable: When Abbey describes where he is, he says that he is in "the center of the world, god's navel, Abbey's country, the red wasteland" (*DS*, 4). And then he goes on refuting the idea that God has any part in the creation of such beauty because to him there is no need to find a reason to explain it all.

> God? […] there is nothing here, at the moment, but me and the desert. And that's the truth. Why confuse the issue by dragging in a superfluous entity? Beyond atheism, nontheism. I am not an atheist but an earthiest. Be true to the earth (DS, 184).

Abbey believes in the Earth. To him if man's imagination was not so weak, so easily tired, if his capacity for wonder was not so limited, he would abandon forever such fantasies of the supernatural. He would learn "to perceive in water, leaves and silence more than sufficient of the absolute and marvelous, more than enough to console him for the loss

of the ancient dreams" (*DS*, 177). And thus would not find the need to attribute supernatural or god-like qualities to the scenery he is perceiving. Abbey urges us to awaken to the fact that the planet is indeed a living entity and we and all the other species are complex parts of the greater organism. He strongly viewed our planet as our support system and it is far more sacred for him than any other anthropocentric projection (construction of dams and roads in order to alter the wilderness and make it useful to mankind) which are seen for Abbey as profanities of human folly. Maybe the Pantheism that Abbey expresses can be characterised as "biocentric panentheism: a combination of biblical rhetoric and belief in the immanence of spirit within "inanimate" objects as well as in the transcendence presence of god" (Don Scheese, 64).

But Abbey wants us to be aware, and in any case whether God is present or not, he insists on the fact that: "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, a world which surrounds and sustain the little world of men as sea and sky surround and sustain a ship" (*DS*, 37). So whether or not we have the aesthetic capacity to perceive the desert as sublime, in any case it will remind us that Humanity is nothing compared to what has been before and what will come after.

As Aldo Leopold said "man always kill the thing he loves, and so the pioneers have killed our wilderness" (Leopold "Thinking like a mountain" in Bergon, 281). The wilderness started to be seen as as an island surrounded by a sea of civilization, which is a direct contradiction of the fact that the Paradise myth is often situated in an island. An island has limits, it can be controlled which clearly contradicts the definition of what the wilderness is, something unmanageable.

> On every hand man is displaying titanic powers. What is there to be done upon the face of the earth that cannot be effected by the powers of the human mind? All nature, as though daily more sensible of the conquest, is progressively making less and less resistance to man's dominion (Marx Leo, Machine, 196).

For the wilderness to be considered as an island men had to realize how precious it was, they had to change their whole attitude.

II) Edward Abbey's true home

A) The Desert as an Island : Paradise on Earth

"Abbey's Arches, the landscape he celebrates can be seen as an island in an encroaching sea of urbanization and industrialization" (Philippon, 274).

What makes the wilderness comparable to an island? There are several metaphorical ideas related to the island that can be related to the desert; Abbey facing the immensity of the desert compares it to the sea: "a sea of desert" (*DS,* 5). One of the differences between the island and the desert is size. Whereas in our symbolic idea of it an island has limits the desert has none. The desert seems out of human reach because of its size; it can be frightening because there are no boundaries. We have this idea that size is directly linked with power: when Abbey describes the arches and says "they range in size from holes just big enough to walk through to openings large enough to contain the dome of capitol building in Washington, D.C." (*DS,* 5). He makes a clear comparison between a building that represents the power and achievement of men and what can be found in the desert. The arches are as powerful an object as any construction that man can design: this is the subliminal message in this statement. John Wesley Powell as well in the E*xploration of the Colorado River* describes distances with known buildings, streets and constructions. The distance of wild spaces is compared with the distances from the Treasury Building in Washington to Pennsylvania Avenue, the Capitol, Canal Street in NY, Lake Street Bridge Chicago....

But an extraordinary size in the case of the desert is necessary for it to be perceived as an island. If the desert of Utah were small the whole metaphor of it as an island would not work. The island has the sea to separate itself from civilization; it can be seen as an image of Paradise because it is an enclosed space and thus symbolizes innocence separated from the ills of the rest of the world. The desert needs these tremendous distances from the surrounding urbanization and industrialization to be isolated and then to be seen as an island. But how could Abbey experience what he experienced there if there were no borders at all? He felt that the desert was like a safe haven but in fact anyone could access his haven: the desert is not protected by borders like an island; you can access it quite easily. What makes it a haven to Abbey is the fact that in this place he found his heavenly island. To reach the desert does not mean that one will see a sort of paradise in it. To experience Paradise one has to find his island and that can be found in many different places; for Edward Abbey it was the desert. Each individual has a place in the natural world that carries out the image he has of Paradise. "For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness" (Cronon, 69). Also the fact that in the desert we have only the slightest traces of human history makes it pure; there is

no past (human past) that has corrupted the innocence of the place, hence the desert is like an unreachable paradise island.

> In virtually all his manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history. Seen as the original garden, it is a place outside of time, from which human beings had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin. The flight from history represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the Tabula Rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world. (Cronon, 79-80)

Many environmentalists who reject traditional notions of Godhead and who regard themselves as agnostics or even atheists nonetheless express feelings tantamount to religious awe when in the presence of the wilderness. What Abbey wants to protect is not separated physically by any borders but even if it were and was an island today everything is accessible and nothing is thus protected. There is an island-like quality to many natural places. All islands of nature are linked, but in the case of the desert maybe it is both special and linked to other islands. All the easy access to everything makes nature lose its old magic, its old charm. There is no more exploration as everything in the natural world has been now discovered and is accessible.

The desert is not an idyllic paradise for most people but for Abbey it is. He celebrates this place which is not useful or produces fruits, or goods that can be used by humans. As Herman Melville's Ishmael says in *Moby-Dick*: “It is not down in any maps; true places never are”[3]. In *Desert Solitaire* we understand that Utah’s arches are Abbey’s own paradise. The start of the book is obvious proof of that since Abbey blatantly assesses the place where he is by claiming :

> This is the most beautiful place on earth. There are many such places. Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary (DS, 1).

The most beautiful place on Earth for each of us, even though it is different for each individual is close to the image we have of Paradise. To Abbey the image of Paradise is the love of the wilderness. His paradise is not an island but a place that resembles the desert with “scorpions, tarantulas and flies, rattlesnakes and Gila monsters, cactus, yucca, bladderweed, ocotillo and mesquite, flash floods and quicksand, and yes—disease and death and the rotting of the flesh” (*DS*, 167). Thus Abbey's Arcadia has this non-expected capacity to turn into hell. But again some people's wilderness can be a simple stroll for others. Each defines his own degree of acceptance of the wilderness and to Abbey it feels like it could not be enough. The fact that disease and death are present in Edward Abbey's version of Paradise is completely inadequate to the common vision of what Paradise

[3]Herman Melville, *Moby Dick or the whale*, Arion press, 1979. Chapter 12, p.57.

means. This vision relates to the fact that: “American arcadias are usually set, not in a garden, but in a wilderness that is presumed to be in an innocent, original state that is beyond the frontier in both space and time” (Gifford, 32). What is important when we read *Desert Solitaire* is to realize that Abbey couldn’t have written the same things about the sea or the mountains (as he says himself in the book the desert inspires him). Our own conception of Paradise as a forest, a garden, a park, the wilderness, or an island matters. Abbey can talk about the Utah desert so well and it can be his paradise because of what he knows of it and the personal experience he had with it. He could have died once in one of his wanderings (this is told in the Havasu chapter) as he ended up stuck in a small canyon. But this experience, more than making him face death made him realize that, even facing complete panic because of the possibility that he might die of starvation, the desert was still his paradise.

This experience did not make him change his attitude towards it, he realized the danger of traveling alone at his own expense but even the fear of death has not changed his point of view. This deadly experience “was for him a metamorphosis, where his spirit melded with the sense of place, where Abbey’s soul adhered, once and for all, to the desert dust, the red rock, the pinion-juniper wood bark, the clear air, the wildness of the American South West” (Loeffler, 34). Abbey enjoyed life and to him placing “faith in an after-death state is to be contemptuous of life” (Loeffler, 177). He found his true home because more than anything it is the one place where he knew he could die in peace, and in fact in the chapter *The Dead Man at Grandview Point* he is even congratulating the old man found dead in the desert for:

> his choice of jumping-off place; he had good taste. He had good luck—I envy him the manner of his going: to die alone, on rock under sun at the brink of the unknown, like a wolf, like a great bird, seems to me very good fortune indeed. To die in the open, under the sky, far from the insolent interference of leech and priest, before this desert vastness opening like a window onto eternity—that surely was an overwhelming stroke of rare good luck (DS, 212)

But where the difficulty lies in this book is in the fact that to really understand why the desert is Abbey's true home we have to know about the place he describes, indeed as Dan Philippon puts it: “we cannot understand writers apart from the landscapes they inhabit, because their own personal identities are intimately bound up with the identities of these places. To know Edward Abbey we must also know something about the southwestern deserts” (Philippon, 274). (Just like a reader who has been to New York will read Paul Auster in a different way than a reader who has not). The implications of this quote are that to perceive that there is some sort of paradise residing within the desert we must have an experience of it; a tourist for example will not have developed a certain

aesthetic sense to perceive the desert the way Abbey does. The tourist will probably only see it as Wilderness, a hard and inhospitable environment in which he has no part and in which he could probably not survive but with the comforts of certain objects that civilization was able to provide him with. Another reason to consider that the desert is Edward Abbey's true home is the fact that he is proud and protective towards it. In others words he loves the desert, he loves this particular place (and as we know he went back several times as a park ranger and even explains himself that he would not mind staying there all his life.) Regrettably it is rarer for individuals to find their paradise in the wilderness. Here's the new version of Paradise:

> The twentieth-century Garden of Eden is the enclosed shopping mall decorated with trees, flowers, and fountains in which people can shop for nature at the Nature Company. The mall enclosed by the desert of the parking lots surrounding it, is covered by glass domes reaching to heaven, accessed by spiral staircases and escalators affording a vista over the whole garden of shops" (Cronon, 153).

B) The Universal Truth

DS is about what Abbey found when he was in Grand Canyon. But this book as Abbey says is not primarily about the desert. What Abbey tried to find was a kind of truth. His motto is to "follow the truth no matter where it leads"(Loeffer, 4). By depicting the desert as a Paradise Abbey is also trying to convey a universal truth about how to interact with the wilderness, not only in the desert but simply everywhere where the wilderness is present. He explains that "since you cannot get the desert into a book anymore than a fisherman can haul up the sea with his nets, I have tried to create a world of words in which the desert figures more as medium than as material" (*DS*, xii). The depiction of his experience of the desert is simply made to help him deliver his message which is (even though he confessed that he did not know anything whatever about the true underlying reality) that whether it is a garden, a park, a wilderness area island or else, all these distinct places are connected to other places. In the chapter 'The Serpents of Paradise' Abbey puts himself on the "snake's-eye level" but "stung by a fear too ancient and powerful to overcome" (*DS*, 20) he rises again afraid and disappointed, as he says a bit later "If I had been capable of trust as I am susceptible to fear I might have learned something new or some truth so very old we have all forgotten it" (*DS*, 21). There was a time when men were not afraid of snakes: in the garden of Eden were all creatures were linked to each other. The very old truth might be, as when Abbey says that the silence creates voices which speak to us in the first world language, when everything on Earth could communicate with

everything else. The world of nature as a reflection of an inner deeper reality. "I know nothing whatever about underlying reality, having never met any" (*DS, xiii*).

The reading of *Desert Solitaire* is a lesson about how things are connected and even though we do not live in the desert it still shows us how to change our point of view in order to understand the world surrounding us. But as a reader even by going to where Abbey was we will never be able to experience what he did because of human transformations (the dam, the roads) so reading this is also reading a tale about how the desert was in the past (because there are so many narrations included within the text), even though it is not such a remote past it is quite unlikely that the wilderness' status is going to improve in the coming years. This book gives us an idea on how we might have felt by going there. The setting that Abbey experienced is not the same anymore, Abbey asserts that "the solitude and total freedom of the wilderness created a perfect setting for either melancholy or exultation. Primitivism was one of the more important ideas in the romantic complex. Primitivists believed that man's happiness and well-being decreased in direct proportion to his degree of civilization" (Loeffler, 47). But this feeling of solitude and total freedom of the wilderness cannot be experienced in the Utah desert anymore. Now, except by going on foot, all access to the Grand Canyon National Park carries a fee. And during the summer there are so many people that you need to make a reservation to camp. What is most shocking is the fact that to make a non-commercial trip down the Colorado River you have a 12-year waiting list. It is something that you can only experience once in a life time, if you are lucky. So real solitude as Abbey experienced it can still be found in some wilderness areas, but in the Grand Canyon it is no longer the case.

Another aim of the book is to show us some truths about human nature, how we want to access it all without effort, without deserving it. *Desert Solitaire* tells us what our link with nature should be: not something that we should try to appropriate as an object but a mutual relationship. Nature gives to us and we have to give something back to it. It can be respect, admiration, feeling humble or something else. We are indebted to nature. This book also tells us that even though we of course have no control on issues bigger than us (population growth, climate change, loss of biodiversity and in the book about government decisions about the wild and the national parks) we can for a start as Abbey asks us to do leave our cars behind as well as comfort. Abbey did not concede that there was nothing that could be done about the economic or political issues of the American society. When reading *Desert Solitaire* the reader has to realize that what he is reading is not only a mere description of the Utah's arches or of the life of a park ranger over the course of six months but a work about human behaviors towards nature, humans interactions with it and human

understanding of it. This book tells us that the feeling of discovery in nature can still be experienced even without the need for exploration. In order to promote human welfare we should promote Wilderness welfare. All living things on Earth are kindred : that is the message to be remembered. Thus Abbey affiliates himself with a political view and uses writing as a tool to create some reactions within society. *DS* is a work of non-fiction but it is sometimes poetic, unrealistic, fictionalized, imaginary and so on but above all else there is an inavoidable political aspect to it that should be taken into consideration. Nature writing is transformed by the possibility that a wilderness retreat might no longer exist. And Abbey was one of the first to insist so much on the political aspect of our relationship towards the wilderness.

PART II.

POLITICAL FEATURE

The arches were a primitive place when Abbey first went there. But as we saw in the previous part human activity has so much interfered with this place that now it is impossible to recognize it from what it was before. Edward Abbey says in his introduction that *Desert Solitaire* is a memorial: "*You're holding a tombstone in your hands".* What made this non-fiction his most famous work, more than his most known fiction *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is the fact that beyond being a simple recollection of thoughts; a notebook in which Edward merely expresses his sentiments, it is an indictment on how society interacts with the natural world. Abbey insists on the fact that the desert should stay a no man's land by keeping tourists out, that this no man's land is vital for the well being of society and that industrial tourism is partly to blame, more specifically the tourists themselves. Abbey's want to be alone in the desert can be seen as quite elitist. To him going to the desert was a way to "enjoy a taste of the primitive and remote" (*DS,* 44). I will develop the idea that Abbey could be making an argument for the wilderness to exist for its own sake; for its own intrinsic value, as a haven from society. Deriving from this notion we also have the concept that today's society's sickness is directly linked to the state of the wilderness. Abbey clearly states that unfortunately as long as nature is seen as a mere commodity it is unlikely that anything will really improve in its protection. The use of Nature has become abusive—an abuse that has consequences and this use/abuse of nature has inspired and created a sub-genre in science-fiction writing which is becoming more and more popular: post-apocalyptic literature. This genre of literature which is expanding exponentially is directly linked to the notion that the earth has been subdued by human control. Finally I will discuss the situation of the American behavior towards the wilderness in the period since Abbey's writings and how Abbey expresses that it is the writer's duty to act as a judge over his own society and over his contemporaries.

I) No man's land

A) Loss of contact

The wilderness, because of the rise of cities, has now taken another meaning, for example we can talk about the wilderness of streets, the urban jungle in a sense. Authors such as Nelson Algren or A.Woods write about the slum conditions and urban degeneracy of the cities with titles such as *The Neon Wilderness* for Algren and *The City Wilderness* for Woods[4]. This brings to mind the idea that nowadays men are actually more lost and insecure in an urban setting than in the wilderness. This is definitely the case for Abbey who when living in the cities was always at odds with himself and to be in the desert was his remedy. Abbey knows that when in a desert he is an alien presence but he could not feel freer: there is nothing to exert any kind of control over him, no civilization, no rules. A wild personality needs a wild place to flourish. "The reason we need Wilderness is because we are wild animals. Every man needs a place where he can go crazy in peace[5]". To Abbey it was clear that the wilderness needed to be protected, for numerous reasons. One of them is to escape from the government in case of a dictatorship or war. One of Abbey's fictions actually deals with a rebel group in a future vision of the States that takes refuge in the wilderness. Abbey uses his anesthetized prose as a tool to explain that the wilderness should be preserved for political reasons, as "a refuge from authoritarian government, from political oppression and as a base for resistance to centralized domination" (*DS*, 131). This idea is reinforced by historical facts: popular revolts in Budapest or Santo Domingo were easily crushed because of an urbanized environment.

> But in Cuba, Algeria and Vietnam the revolutionaries, operating in mountain, desert and jungle hinterlands with the active tacit support of thinly dispersed population, have been able to overcome or at least fight to draw official establishment forces equipped with all the terrible weapons of twentieth century militarism. Rural insurrections can then be suppressed only by bombing and burning villages and countryside so thoroughly that the mass of the population is forced to take refuge in the cities where the people are then policed if necessary starved into submission. The city, which should be the symbol and centre of civilization, can also be made to function as a concentration camp. (DS, 131)

In Orwell's *1984* the government understood the danger of wild places if they

[4]Algren Nelson, *The neon wilderness*, Seven Stories press, New York, 1986. And A.Woods, *The city wilderness*, General Books LLC, 2009

[5]Abbey's article, '*On the Need for a Wilderness to Get Lost In*' published in the new York time,1972.

wanted to maintain power. That is why there is no wilderness in Eurasia. Individualism can be expressed in the wilderness in a way that is not possible in urban society. In society each individual has to conform to a category. The list of different categories seems infinite but everyone is still classified in one way or another. In the wilderness man is left alone with himself or with the company of a few people. He is responsible for himself alone and his focal concerns are to find food, a shelter, etc. They are basic preoccupations but which don't necessarily exist when one lives in a city. Of course homeless people are confronting the same basic preoccupations, but these preoccupations are due to men not to the wilderness. In the city people tend to lose contact with the earth. Undeniably, jobs related directly to some kind of labor and linked to the earth are becoming scarcer every year. Now a man can work in a complete Formica building and actually do nothing productive at first sight, nothing productive for his immediate needs of food for example. Abbey expresses a similar idea when he is walking into the desert and uses a lamp to see what is going on around him. He realizes that the ray of light makes the rest disappear and his gaze focuses only on what the light shows him. So using the torch actually diminishes his sight. "Edward Abbey demonstrates that we may see our constructions of concrete, Formica, and neon as triumphs of order over chaos" (Bergon, 13). But Abbey explains "mechanical gadgets tend to separate a man from the world around him; I have cut myself off completely from the greater world which surrounds the man-made shell. I have exchanged a great and unbounded world for a small comparatively meager one" (*DS*, 13). When Abbey enters into the trailer he then becomes alien to the place. When he was the only man present in the desert with no technology around him (car, light, etc) he was integrated in the landscape. This integration is realized for him through an extreme primitivism: "I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a non-natural world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, and separate" (*DS*, 6). To him the awareness that there is an ultimate ontological reality can only be found through direct experience. And this experience is falsified if there are any technological aspects to it. By going back into the wilderness man is brought back to his roots. Unfortunately nowadays most of us, if left in the wilderness would not be able to survive more than a few days. We have become too accustomed to the comforts that society has brought us and to the company of others. By taking control over the Natural World man has lost his sense of contact with it. For Abbey we have lost our

primitive instincts. We now live in a society regulated by rules that differ depending on which country we are in. But at any rate whatever the place we live in, when we return to the wilderness we are trying to grasp some truth that we seem to have lost. Maybe a sense of freedom.

That is probably why most attempts for communities that want a different kind of life than what their respective societies have to offer start out in wild places: forests, mountains or deserts. Abbey saw liberty as the supreme political commodity and if there is one place where man cannot feel more free it is the wilderness. The rules applied there are different; there is no real control over what is happening. Contact with nature differs from a contact from man to man in the sense that in nature man returns to his primitivism; he goes back to the hunter-gatherer way of life and Abbey believes "that humanity made a serious mistake when we gave up the traditional hunting and gathering way of life in favor of settling down to agriculture. Someone said that the plough may have done more damage to human life on the planet than the sword" (Cahalan, 112). This idea raises the question as to whether civilization has benefited or harmed mankind. Freud expressed this "amazing tendency of presumably civilized men to idealize simple and often primitive conditions of life, the implication that mankind would be happier if our complex, technical order could somehow be abandoned" (Freud quoted in Marx Leo, 8). Why is this primitive state idealized? Because it represents a withdrawal away from the evils of society that was now seen as corrupt. Withdrawals are made in order to resolve one's conflicts with society. Man needs the wilderness; he needs to be able to go there to escape the pressure of civilization; to be alone with himself and his thoughts. We need to know it is there in case we need it, even if we never go there. As Abbey says while walking in the mountains to escape the heat of the desert:

> The knowledge that refuge is available, when and if needed, makes the silent inferno of the desert more easily bearable. Mountains complement the desert as desert complements city, as wilderness complements and complete civilization. A man could be a lover and a defender of the wilderness without ever in his lifetime leaving the boundaries of asphalt, power-lines, and right-angles surfaces. We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it. We need a refuge even though we may never need to go there. I may never in my life get to Alaska but I am grateful that its there. We need the possibility of escape as sure as we need hope (DS, 129).

The desert is a no man's land in which self-reflection and meditation are

possible. In numerous works of American literature the hero makes this redemptive journey away from society, as in *Walden, Moby-Dick,* or *Huckleberry Finn*. There was a time before when people did not feel the need for a pastoral retreat. This need to escape into nature appeared with our industrial society as well as our concept of what the wilderness is. As a matter of fact "before agriculture we had no concept of wilderness because everything was wilderness and we were a part of it"[6]. Before people lived wherever they wanted to be, they were at home in the natural world and they did not feel any separation from it. From this notion stems the belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world is a return to simpler, more primitive living. "When man stopped hunting and gathering, he forever severed his biological relationship with wilderness. The love of the wild that remains is purely intellectual—a posture—and it is very rare"[7]. Because of this need of withdrawal, this need to return to some kind of primitivism, the preservation of the wilderness is something vital. "To protect wilderness is in a very real sense to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin" (Cronon, 76).

B) The sickness of our society

As Emerson said in his most famous essay *Nature*, "the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind" (Emerson, 53). So if nature is sick this implies that the human mind would be sick too. This notion which was put forward more than a century ago is now so much more anchored in our collective consciousness that in fact the preservation of the wilderness is just like the preservation of civilization. As the famous Thoreauvian statement declares "In Wildness is the preservation of the world"[8]. Society might be sick today simply because the wilderness is sick as well. Civilization cannot exist without its counterpart. So preserving the wilderness is actually preserving the well-being of society as well; the wilderness being vital to the mind of each individual that constitutes this society. If the world becomes a place

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[6]Dave Forman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior,* Crown publishing group, 1991, 156.
[7]René Dubos, *The Wooing of the Earth*, Athlone Press, 1980, 45.
[8] Henri David Thoreau, *The Atlantic monthly, volume 9, n°56, June 1862.*

where no wilderness can survive, it becomes a place where no man can either. There is a sort of pleasure in knowing that the wilderness is available, that there are still such timeless and uncontrolled parts of earth as the desert, forests and mountains. Among nature writers there is this recurring idea expressed famously by Writer Wallace Stegner that:

> Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clean air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste[9].

In *Desert Solitaire* Abbey is not only recounting his experience as a park ranger, he is also, while describing the sublime nature of the desert, using descriptions that can make the reader realize how out-of-place and unnatural a road in a middle of it would be. By adopting a ecocentric point of view rather than an egocentric one he captures the attention of the reader. Abbey wishes to suppress this tendency of perceiving our surroundings in terms of the self. The reader can be compelled by the reading of *DS* to have a nature-centered point of view rather than a human-centered one. A switching of values is necessary for the reader to experience as Abbey does an awareness of the beauty of the desert. Abbey wants this awareness to stir up emotion and by this device provide us with a consciousness of its fragility if men start to tamper with it. The Arches won't be wilderness anymore if too many tourists visit it; the place won't constitute any wilderness if there are coke machines and paved road all along. Where does the limit stand to designate the desert a wild area if you can access every part of it while staying in you car?

> We are a wild species, as Darwin pointed out. Nobody ever tamed or domesticated or scientifically bred us. But for at least three millennia we have been engaged in a cumulative and ambitious race to modify and gain control of our environment, and in the process we have come close to domesticating ourselves. Not many people are likely any more, to look upon what we call progress as an unmixed blessing (Stegner in Bergon's anthology, 156).

In reality we have not come close; we have reached this age, and we are indeed domesticated. We are domesticated by an environment which can offer

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[9] Wallace Stegner , *The wilderness letter*, written to the Outdoors Recreation Resources Review Comission; december 3rd 1960.

everything one might need, the possibilities of services offered today are so tremendous that now a man can live 24 hours a day without leaving his home, ordering food from the internet, etc. Mankind has become domesticated by the very thing he has created. This domestication started steadily from the fifties with the expansion of all the different kinds of appliances available. And the two items most representative of this domestication in the United States are doubtlessly the car and the television. On the grounds that we are effectively domesticated, the preservation of the wilderness is essential and is to be used as a tool to bring us back to the reality that is outside our everyday world. But Abbey goes further than declaring that wilderness should be preserved for humanity's sake. He admits that the wilderness has a purpose for us and is an obvious asset but he extends this argument by claiming that:

> Wilderness is worth saving for its own sake. Not for human benefit or pleasure, but simply for its own existence. In other words, I'm saying that wild things and wild places have a right to exist and continue existing with no relation to human wishes. I say that bees, birds, animals, snakes, buzzards, bugs, whatever, have a legal and moral right to continue. Even rocks have the moral right to continue being rocks[…] The Earth was here first and all these living things before us (Cahalan, 127).

He urges us to realize that the planet is a living entity and that all species are linked and are complex parts of a greater organism, "Our planet is our support system and is far more sacred than any anthropocentric projection and must not be profaned by human folly" (*DS*, 85). The wilderness has an intrinsic value and to make the reader realize this Abbey tries to depict different aspects of the wilderness to the reader: In *Desert Solitaire* there are numerous physical processes of observation (as when Abbey gets on the floor to see things on a snake-eye level). All these observations enable the reader to understand the others forms of life which humanity shares this earth with; to understand that what is valuable is not necessarily something that has significance for us. The theme of ecocentrism is clearly depicted when Abbey tells about his encounter with the snakes. To him they were a "presence watching me like totemic deities". Abbey experiences anthropomorphism and attributes human motives to different animals several times in the book.

To him it is "simple-minded rationalism which denies any form of emotion to all animals but man and his dog. [...] Many of the nonhuman undomesticated animals

experience emotions unknown to us". Abbey deplores the human condition, comparing us with what the animals feel, they "do not sweat and whine about their condition, they do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins" (*DS,* 20-21).

Man's view of the world as our property and our dominion is for Abbey completely irrational. Imagining oneself as the center of existence, with all other beings having no purpose but to serve one is similar to a child's behavior. Abbey urges us to grow up. It is only quite recently in the past four decades that there has been an increase in man's realization that the wilderness and nature as a whole are fragile and they need protection. But even with this realization as long as nature is only be seen as a commodity that is useful only when it is useful for man, ecocentrism will only stay a concept. The right to make a dollar is superior to the right of nature. As early as 1862 John Adams said:

> I firmly believe that before many centuries more, science will be the master of man. The engines he will have invented will be beyond his strength and control. Some day science may have the existence of mankind in its power, and the human race commit suicide by blowing up the world[10].

Science may not yet have the existence of mankind in its power but it is perhaps worth exploring the question as to whether our current capitalist society already has. Money and profit are today and in our western societies prevailing over Nature or any wilderness areas just as greed prevails over protection. This is why a lot of politicians consider national parks and others protected areas, like those in Alaska as locked-up resources. And it is probably correct that such places are only seen or enjoyed by a few people but it is not a justifiable argument to destroy it in order to create something more useful (in the sense of more profitable) for man. If we follow this reasoning then we should destroy universities, libraries and museums as well since after all they are indeed not useful to the major part of the population and only enjoyed by a few. But turning those cultural places into fast-food restaurants would be unthinkable. Just like the flooding of the Dam canyon: "Should we also flood the Sistine chapel so tourists can get nearer the ceiling?" (Steinberg, 257). The same thing does not apply to the wilderness. Abbey thought that power was the root of all evil. And in his quest for power man has come to progressively destroy what is left of the wilderness. Today the wilderness has been entered into in

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[10]Henry Adams to his brother Charles, April 11, 1862, quoted in *The Machine in The Garden*, p.350

every corner of the planet, from the highest peaks to the north pole. From the Amazonian forest to the African desert, every place has, at one moment or another been accessed by man. Because the wilderness has now been more or less fully explored and has boundaries, the initial fascination that it created is now shifting. The wilderness was first admired for its sublimity but now that it is becoming threatened, the fascination springs up from what would happen if it came to be utterly destroyed, and what would then become of humanity. It is no wonder that the literature of environmental apocalypse is becoming so successful; we live in an age where we are witnessing more and more environmental catastrophes. And if life can go on without the wilderness the question arises: can man carry on without the wilderness?

II) Use and abuse of nature

A) The literature of environmental apocalypse

Humanity has always been fascinated by narrative predictions of our end, the end of life on earth, the last days, and the apocalypse. Since more than five centuries there have been many dates claimed for the end of the world, and even though nothing has ever happened it does not prevent new dates being set all the time. The apocalypse has become an industry; websites spring up everyday with advice on how to survive, how to be prepared. Shops are getting specialized in selling water purifier, silex to start a fire and other survival kit items. Hollywood as well is making money over blockbusters depicting the apocalypse, the recurring idea in the movies being that the pursuit of technology is what leads us to our doomsday.

Movies like *Matrix*[11], *The Day After Tomorrow*[12], and more recently *2012*[13]. The apocalypse in the film industry has always been exploited in order to entertain, but now there is a new aspect to it because what was before mere entertainment is now becoming a conceivable reality. There are so many scenarios, some imagined from ordinary people, some from qualified scientists. Among the range of different possibilities you are sure to find an apocalypse that suits you. More than the

[11]*Matrix*, directed and written by the Wachowski brothers, 1999.
[12]*The day after tomorrow*, directed and written by Roland Emmerich, 2004.
[13]*2012*, directed by Roland Emmerich, written by Harald Kloser, 2009.

disappearance of the wilderness, the disappearance of the human race is what creates a real attraction to the post-apocalyptic novels and film.

A recent TV show called "*Life After People*"[14] depicts with computer-generated images what the Earth would be like if the human race came to disappear. It has had huge success in the United States. It shows how the greatest cities, New York, Chicago and so on would look like once uninhabited, devoid of any human presence, projecting us thousands of year into the future. This show expresses the view that life will go on, the planet will survive us but there will be no one to talk about it or think about it. Because if the wilderness can survive without man the opposite is improbable. The growing interest about what will come after the apocalypse is expressed in the success of recent films as well as literature: among recent best sellers in the United States there is always at least one post-apocalyptical to be found. Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* is a non-fiction which along with the fictional novel *The Road* by Cormac Mc Carthy had success in the United States in 2007.

> For the first two centuries of settlement, American environmental thought remained millennial rather than apocalyptic, driven by the vision of wilderness as an inexhaustible resource waiting to be transformed into productive farms, towns, and cities, in the spirit of the biblical promise that the desert shall blossom as the rose. Only by gradual degrees, during the nineteenth century, did the sense of environmental endangerment gather force and begin to challenge this gospel of plenty; indeed, only during the past two or threes decades, and scarcely even then, have larger numbers of Americans declared themselves wiling to curtail their taste for abundance to alleviate pressure on the environment (Buell, 300).

That is probably why the expansion and success of the post-apocalyptic novel has appeared these last few decades. The post-apocalyptic novel started with *The Last Man* by Mary Shelley (1826). In her book it is a plague that has devastated humanity, and until the fear of an atomic catastrophe after World War II, diseases were the starting element of the end the world. *We* by the Russian author Yevgeny Zamatin (1929), *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (1932) and *1984* by Orwell (1949) are three books which are visions of a technological advanced society that evolves towards an absolute social control. With Hiroshima in 1945 the idea of an impoverished, a simpler future has been rekindled. The origin of the end of he world

[14] *Life after people*, directed and written by David de Vries, 2008.

is not diseases anymore, nor the collapse of government or totalitarian regimes. Now the fear rests on nuclear accident. In *On The Beach* by Nevil Shute (1957) the atmosphere is polluted by nuclear fallout. *Fiskadoro* by Denis Johnson (1985) is set in a time-warp, some 60 years after a nuclear destruction. The return to a pastoral innocence that could be hoped from the destruction of the environment and a new start will only be reached by first going through the worst kind of acts. There are in most post-apocalypse novels the notions that the future will be more primitive than the past. The absence of technology creates an increase of barbarian behavior among humans. The survival instinct is reawakened and humanity is reduced to the most animalistic of instincts, such as cannibalism. In *The Road*, a mother eats her own offspring and the world is completely devoid of any human compassion.

Jamestown by Matthew Sharpe (2007) is a struggle between Manhattan and Brooklyn for the resources left. After a catastrophe referred to only as the "annihilation," most of the environment has become toxic. Looking out for fuel a group of survivors finds a small community that has adopted American-Indian customs in order to survive. The most charismatic character is a young woman called Pocahontas and the chief of the Manhattan residents is called John Smith: the future is the past. So is it a fresh beginning or does Sharpe allude to the fact that repeating the past means not having learned the mistakes that had been made before. Recent post-apocalyptic novels most of the time deal with how the human race manages to survive in this new environment rather than dealing with the earth itself and how it came to be destroyed. It is interesting to note that if there was indeed such a post-apocalyptic society the social status of the pre-apocalypse time will have direct implications on the post-one. The South of the United States as an illustration would probably be in a bad position compared to the North: most journeys are by car and most of the population owns a gun. With the racial tension maybe stronger than in the North it will probably be the places that endure the most damages. Is it novels of the end or the end of the novel? The end of the world in *The Road* is also a metaphor for the end of the novel; a world where the end of nature is the end of art, character, dialogue, politic and complexity of social relationships—everything that is usually necessary in a novel. Nature is dead, so is the novel.

If civilization does end in an ecological catastrophe, the few human survivors

might decide to return to a way of life close to the hunter-gatherer: a way celebrated by radical environmentalists and deep ecologists like Abbey. James Howard Kunstler depicts in his 2008 novel, *World Made by Hand* the end of industrialized society as we know it and how it forces Americans to live on a smaller-scale agrarian community. The fact that technology is what in those imaginary futures leads us to our ruin is not such an incongruous notion. Nowadays we use devices without having the slightest idea of how they work. In the past the machine was an ally to man, helping him in his progress through the wilderness. It is now an enemy and men fight against it in order to save the wilderness. A shifting of position from the machine as an ally to the machine as an enemy is currently taking place. Darwin already thought that progress was a mixed blessing but today some think that we can actually still go further. There are no limits to our discoveries, to science. The Earth has limits but not the human unquenchable thirst for knowledge. As Abbey said "human curiosity is powerful and can't be denied. The growth of science is a natural extension of that curiosity. For some people, faith isn't enough. Hard evidence is the path to truth" (Cahalan, 148). Reasoning as such and thinking that whatever our actions, science will fix it is a mistake: no laboratory can create the wilderness. We are cutting ourselves out from the reality of nature. A world where people shoot each other in the streets for a loaf of bread is not unimaginable. Yet it has happened before and if faced with no other choice we will return to such a world. We are the first species that might deliberately cause its own doom by our faith in science to fix it all even if no laboratory is the world is capable of reconstructing the wilderness.

> Who is more likely to treat other peoples as machines, a person, who has trained herself to feel that plants and animals are fellow beings or a person who looks at them as convenient resources? If there is anything that can "stop the human specie from poisoning the earth or blowing it up" writes feminist ecotheologian Carol Christ, it is "a deeply felt connection to all beings in the web of life (Buell, 257).

This web of life and connection between all beings is what more or less sums up the ecological movement, but a well-spread belief prevails that no apocalyptic scenario will not happen in our life time . It is common among "American farmers to cynically shrug off environmental problems as something for "posterity" to deal with, and "what has posterity ever done for us?" (Reze Michel, *American West*, 58). This has to do with our attitude towards the wilderness and nature.

B) Inadequate behavior

One of the reasons why there is such a fascination with the apocalypse might be linked with the fact that maybe the Golden Age is ending. Now the consequences of the consumer society are starting to be felt, (notably through the financial crisis that took place at the end of 2008). Disparity is nowadays more tremendous than ever: we have extremely developed sciences on one side while half the population is illiterate; and famine, and misery while some live in an unprecedented luxury.

> What has helped man continue to fool himself into thinking he is superior to nature and not part of it, to close his eyes to what he has been doing to his physical home, including the wilderness, and to behave as if he himself is subject to no ecological laws is the now discredited twofold belief that the world is simply to vast to be significantly harmed by his actions. (Bergon, 5).

The realization that we have an impact on our environment is a hard issue to admit; deep down we never thought we could alter nature; it is just so big and changing that it would just take an unimaginable geological time. "We have changed the atmosphere and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial" (McKibben, 58). But now Scientists are discovering that even before our time the collapse of former civilizations might have been directly caused by an inadvertent destruction of their habitat, what is referred to as an ecological suicide. This is what is elaborated in Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*[15]: how the alternation of the environment has led to the end of the Maya or the population of Easter Island. This book along with a range of similar ones is scientific proof that we do alter our environment. Nonetheless even by presently knowing it, when scientists are making predictions on population growth, on water resources and other such environmental issues we do not realize that 2030 is actually as close as 1990. "We live in the shadow of a number, and this makes it hard for us to see the future" (McKibben, 7).

The other dilemma in changing our way of life is that the effects of our actions stay a mere threat. They have no real impact on us. For example our toxic waste which is a direct result of our way of life is thrown in other area than the one

[15]Diamond, Jared. Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail Or Succeed, London, Penguin, 2006.

we live in. In the United States most disposal places and national dumps are close to small towns usually inhabited by different ethnic communities, Black, Hispanic or Asian. So the poorest are burdened with waste that they did not even produce, and the pollution they have to deal with; and the diseases that they can catch from living close to such areas are the consequences of the richest. So Ecology in that case and other similar ones is directly linked with a problem of ecological social justice. As long as the problems are removed in space or time they can be avoided. "It is human nature to shrug off what may seem to us a vague threat of future disaster. Men are naturally most impressed by diseases that have obvious manifestations" (*Silent Spring*, 169). Even so the United States is a nation that is becoming more energy conscious every year. Politicians show that it is a matter that concerns them, (Al Gore received the peace Nobel Prize in 2007 partly due to the documentary he made, *An Inconvenient Truth*[16]). But in spite of that "the majority of Americans would not be willing to emerge from the familiar luxury of their automobiles" (*DS*, 56). The United States is a nation that remains addicted to consumption. This irony of being almost since the beginning of their history a "nature-loving and resource consuming nation" (Buell, 4) is unequaled. This nature-loving and resource consuming attitude is probably experienced in its most contradictory form in California. "Orange county is a place so constructed that it verges on becoming still another form of nature: nature as virtual reality" (Cronon, 43). There the American upper class is willing to spend millions in order to build their dream house in a terrain that is most likely to get destroyed by earthquakes or fires. But the view is breathtaking: so by actually wanting to be closer to the nature they are willing to take the risk of seeing their house and belongings being destroyed. Or they are willing to spend a lot of money to undergo a 'wilderness experience' and try to climb the Himalaya, or go into the Moroccan desert, or into the Amazon Rainforest. This need for a wilderness experience did not exist 50 years ago, it was actually the opposite: people wanted to live and be in big cities. This wilderness experience is actually used by numerous travel agencies as an attractive aspect to the package tour they offer. Soon a new motto could even start to appear such as "experience it before it is too late".

The attitude that man had towards the wilderness is directly linked to the society in which he lives and the culture he was brought up in. The Aborigines of

[16] *An Inconvenient Truth*, directed by Davis Guggenheim, 2006.

Australia, the Native Americans and several other tribes have a completely different approach to what is the wilderness than the one we have in our Western culture. Americans are unfortunately a people that both love and destroy irremediably the wilderness. The piece of technology that allowed the average American family to enjoy the wilderness during the holidays is also the one that had the most devastating effect on it, the car. “Henry Ford's 'Tin Lizzie' gave access to places of historical interest and unspoiled natural splendor” (Rezé, *American West*, 55). The car is surely the symbol of man's conquest over the natural world. With it you can access areas faster and further. The proponents of biocentrism overtly assert that parks are for nature and for people who like nature unmodified. They consider the age of the car as a tyranny, building roads in a middle of the national park to make easy their access is seen by them as sheer madness. As Nash puts it “eliminate the risk and you eliminate the wildness” (Nash, 328). This idea stems from the conviction that what gave the wilderness its attractiveness is its uncertainty and its possibility for adventure and danger. When in a car this possibility ceases to exist. But *“*Our impulse is to adapt the earth not ourselves*”* (Nash, 242). So if it is more convenient for man, the road will be built. “Even as nature tourism increases, doubts remain about its effectiveness in preserving wildness. Even nonhunting tourism is not always compatible with preservation. Those who can afford to import nature are, in general, older people unprepared to rough it in the wilds” (Nash, 373). When Abbey was given the argument that building a road will allow young and old people to undertake an adventure in the wilderness of the desert he was quite demonstrative about it: young people can wait and old ones should have come here before. Abbey points out the fact that the wilderness that remains is all that we will ever have, and it’s already crowded. “We in America are being systematically robbed of the most elementary decencies of life—clean air, sunlight, pure unmediated water, grass and woods to play in, silence and solitude and space, even time, even death. Instead—? Insanity. Tee Vee. Hi-fi. Super-Duper. Glittering Shit. And finally, morphine” (Cahalan, 62). The destruction of the wilderness is something that Abbey considered a downright aberration, to him it is simply “shameful, in the eyes of the world, to destroy wildness needlessly just as it would be to wreck Chartres cathedral or the Taj mahal. A truly civilized society protected its natural as well as its cultural treasures” (Nash, 364).

Whether a good deed or not, meddling with the earth can result in more

catastrophic results than what was before. For instance the case of the Grand Canyon National Game Preserved: In 1906 Roosevelt thought to increase the deer population by hunting all their predators (coyotes, mountain lions, bobcats). By wanting to protect deer for game their population did increase at a tremendous rate, but they ended up starving because they were too numerous with no other predators to reduce their rate but man. Their overpopulation also has an impact on the park as they reached for food higher on the trees and further on the land. This example is the most famous one when it comes to the experience of a Malthusian crunch deriving directly from the tampering of man with nature. It would just have been better to leave it at that even though it was actually a good intention that initiated those actions. This example is often used by ecologists to demonstrate that the natural world takes care of itself better when man stays out of it. But it is not completely accurate; the birth of the ecological movement is partly due to the belief that the Earth needs to be defended, and deep ecologists take this assumption to an extreme. Abbey is one of them and he thinks that eco-warfare is the solution. The Earth cannot defend itself against the acts of men. Abbey saw terrorism as the threat to commit or the actual committing of violence against humans, other living creatures and natural habitat. So logically deriving from that thought Eco-defense is resistance to terrorism. But maybe the whole "environmental movement is itself a kind of imperialist nostalgia. Can it be an accident that ecological consciousness has appeared in the industrialized world of Euro-America?" (Westling, 170). At any rate, whether the environmental movement comes from nostalgia or an authentic desire to defend the earth Abbey plainly uses his status of writer to dispense his apprehension of what the wilderness is.

C) The writer's duty

There has always been for Abbey a "moral obligation as a writer to criticize his own society, his own nation, his own civilization. I write to make a difference I write to give pleasure and promote aesthetic bliss. To honor life and to praise the

divine beauty of the natural world*"*(Cahalan, 198). To Abbey the wilderness is more a state of mind than an object to reach for. If you go into the wilderness you will not necessarily experience it; to live a true wilderness experience as Abbey did when he almost died, stuck among the rocks, you have to be willing to let go of your everyday comfort. Abbey mourns our loss of contact with the Earth and uses his writing as a tool to criticize as well as lament what is happening to the wilderness. Abbey's rules for writing were "write right, write good. Right wrong, Write on!" (The *MWG*, xiv). "Write right: correct, write good, with style and wit, right wrong, be a crusader, write on! (it does pay to be persistent.) Specialize! Seek controversy. Honesty is the best policy in art and journalism" (Calahan, 198). As numerous writers before him Abbey was not the first one to make an allegation about the rights of the wilderness. Muir was the first person in America to accord rights to other creatures and even more than creatures about nature itself, as he claims while writing about the twining lily: "Like most other things not apparently useful to man it has few friends, and the blind question, "why was it made?" goes on and on with never a guess that first of all it might have been made for itself" (Muir, 26). Where Abbey innovates is in the fact that he explains out-loud that words are not adequate anymore; they make the reader aware but words alone are not sufficient: action is necessary. He became involved in action. He practiced what he preached: this earned him an FBI file for un-American behavior for almost thirty years. The sense that something has been lost while reading Abbey's work "runs commonly through even early writings about wilderness, and our own complicity in furthering that loss by our presence troubled our discussions. It is easier to oppose powerful oil, timber, mineral, and real-estates interests, whose ravages are obvious, than to oppose ourselves, whose effects on the wilderness seems so minor" (Bergon, 7). Abbey is not troubled by our own complicity in the destruction of the wilderness, he accepts this guilt and gives us a reason for monkeywrenching: by destroying the material that will destroy the earth, man can redeem himself from the destruction already brought before upon the natural world. Abbey is a *"*writer who is able not only to persuade those who shared his values but also to convince those who did not share his values to see the world from another perspective" (Philippon, 272). This possibility of transposing one's perspective is what can initiate change into the society where any major novel was brought. Rachel Carson six years before *Desert Solitaire* also wrote a non fiction called *Silent Spring.* She believed that whenever there occurs any destruction or

substitution of a wild or natural feature of the Earth by something artificial or man-made we have retarded some part of man's spiritual growth. Her books denounced the dangerous effects of DDT.

> Along with the possibility of extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man's total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm. […] It is ironic to think that man might determine his own future by something so seemingly trivial as the choice of an insect spray. Future historians may well be amazed: how could intelligent beings seek to control a few unwanted species by a method that contaminated the entire environment and brought the threat of disease and death even to their own kind? (Carson, 25).

This book was held to be the starting point of launching the environmental movement: It made numerous Americans realize that we are the only species destroying ourselves knowingly. *Silent Spring* translates the central truth of ecology: that everything in nature is related to everything else. America's blind faith in science must be put to test. It has been an everlasting faith, once the conquest of Earth was done; man started the conquest of space. This faith in science evolves in a never-ending desire to conquer all. The Earth has been subdued but it is not enough. The success of *Silent Spring* actually engendered laws against DDT use. So writing in her case resulted in action just like the creation of the radical environmental group Earth First after the publishing of Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Environmental literature has often been reserved for scientists: biologists, geologists, etc. But some changes are occurring, "La littérature d'environnement, bardée de savoir certes, est maintenant une littérature populaire" (Suberchicot, 196). Nature writing can become an opposition to the post-apocalyptical novel by becoming a literature of hope. Could it be that the wilderness literature in the future will function as a surrogate for the actual wilderness experience? In some cases it already works as a surrogate, for those unable to go to The Arches National park, *Desert Solitaire* offers a foresight of it. In truth Abbey's most famous work of non-fiction, exists for many readers as "pure rhapsody—indeed, as an elegy for the lost (or, at least, fast-disappearing) pristineness of the Canyon Country in Utah. This tension between aesthetics and morality is evident throughout Abbey's work. Abbey tends to emphasize disjunction and unpredictability in his effort to prompt awareness" (Slovic, 11). Abbey uses his sense of humor as well as irony to deliver a crucial

message. To Abbey "the author is an imaginary person who writes real books"[17]. In reality Abbey himself becomes less as a writer than a character. Even when writing a fiction, in the case of *The MWG*, each facet of Abbey's personality is embodied by the main four characters. The fact that he has an overlapping literary personality is reflected on the fact that *DS* can be read equally as a poem, a novel, an autobiography, or a travel narrative. "Such writers as Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez are not merely, or even primarily, analysts of nature or appreciators of nature-rather; they are students of the human mind, literary psychologists. And their chief preoccupation, I would argue, is with the psychological phenomenon of awareness" (Slovic, 3). This awareness relates to the previous conviction that I mentioned that the sickness of our society is linked with the status of the wilderness. As Wallace Stegner puts it in his W*ilderness Letter:*

> As a novelist, I may perhaps be forgiven for taking literature as a reflection, indirect but profoundly true, of our national consciousness. And our literature, as perhaps you are aware, is sick, embittered, losing its mind, losing its faith. Our novelists are the declared enemies of their society. There has hardly been a serious important novel in this century that did not repudiate in part or in whole American technological culture for its commercialism, its vulgarity, and the way in which it has dirtied a clean continent and a clean dream. I do not expect that the preservation of our remaining wilderness is going to cure this condition. (Wilderness reader, 329)

His vision is quite pessimistic; even if the remaining wilderness is preserved it is too late. In an age where the eagle which is the national American symbol is disappearing, the only way to change things would be as radical environmentalists and deep ecologists think: the end of humanity. As soon as a man enters the wilderness it stops being perceived as such. So "if wild nature is the only thing worth saving, and if our mere presence destroys it, then the solution to our own unnaturalness, the only way to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity, would seem to be suicide" (Cronon, 83). Abbey does not go so far as such thinking but it is his political aspect present throughout *DS* that honored Abbey with the title of the Thoreau of the West. He is a writer of the West, and even if he refused the status of nature-writer he undeniably adopts numerous of its characteristics. He is after all seen as the godhead of the radicalism environmental group Earth First, a group that was inspired by his most renowned fiction: *The Monkey Wrench Gang.* The term monkey wrenching is actually coined from this novel.

[17]Edward Abbey, A *voice crying in the wilderness*, St Martin's press, 1991, 16.

PART III.

FROM REALIZATION TO ACTION

The Monkey Wrench Gang is the second most famous work by Abbey. Even though it is a fiction it had a far-reaching impact into the reality of today: this book inspired the creation of radical environmental groups such as *Earth First!* and ELF (Earth Liberation Front), a group labeled by the FBI as America's top domestic terrorist threat. The novel praises Monkeywrenching as something not only morally right but morally appropriate and necessary. The novel reinforces Abbey's reputation as Thoreau of the West. "As the first American 'monkeywrencher', Thoreau would have likely been sympathetic to both ends and means of modern environmental radicals" (Nash, *Rights of Nature*, 167). Indeed even if *DS* is closer to *Walden* than *The MWG*, *The MWG* tackles issues that bring to mind Thoreau's *Civil disobedience.* The main element of the plot of *The MWG* is for the gang to find a way to blow up the Grand Canyon Dam. This man-made construction, because of the hugeness of its scale, can be ranked along with the pyramids of Egypt, Mt Rushmore and the Great Wall of China. If the Human race came to disappear, these are the monuments that would probably continue to subsist the longest. The destruction of the Grand Canyon Dam is the absolute fantasy of eco-warriors and one of the recurring topics in discussions among the Gang. This last part will firstly deal with The *MWG* and how from realization to action this novel had repercussions in the reality of the American society that it narrates. Secondly we will make a comparison of the analogies between Abbey and Thoreau and thus Why *DS* can be considered as a 20th century heir to *Walden.*

I) Monkeywrenching

A) Resist much, Obey little

"Resist Much Obey little"[18] is a Whitman maxim that could summarize *The MWG*. Abbey foresaw the necessity of such groups as the Monkey Wrench Gang. In the epigraph of his fiction Abbey claims that "this book, though fictional in form, is based strictly on historical fact. Everything in it is real or actually happened. And it all began just one year from today". He might have been right to say that everything

[18]Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, Charleston, South Carolina, BiblioBazaar, LLC, 2009, p.17.

he describes is real; yet it had to be imagined before it could happen. Abbey imagined it, wrote about it and indirectly his writing crystallized into something that was not fiction anymore but real events. Indeed such actions that are found in the book actually took place due to the craze for environmental protection of the Earth First! group.

This group has been controversial because they adopt violence as a means to draw attention. Their activity has been criticized by both environmentalists and others. Due to their far endorsement for intrinsic value, they have been accused of prioritizing animals and trees above human beings. Philosophically speaking they adopt the ideology of 'deep ecology' that argues that humans are no more valuable than animals or plants. The term 'deep ecology' was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973, as he considers the essence of deep ecology to be about asking deeper questions. In one action that the group carried out a worker got badly hurt; using a saw in an attempt to cut a tree down he broke his jaw and knocked out his teeth because the tree was spiked. The group was responsible for the spiking but their reaction was one of indifference to the accident as they did not consider themselves responsible: they had put the company on notice about the spiking. The main criticism that radical ecologists receive from the rest of the green movement is that by putting in jeopardy human life, they have acquired a bad reputation and have tainted the rest of the ecological movement with it. Because of their radicalism they might, despite their good intentions actually threaten other environmental groups by filling the anti-environmentalist countermovement with an angry public. But “as far as the strategic question is concerned, radical greens might suggest that their radicalism, far from turning people off green politics altogether, makes eco-moderates seem more respectable than they already are, thereby smoothing their path through the corridors of power” (Dobson, 200). In the case of this accident in particular, the worker was simply doing his job; he was not the one giving the order but he suffered the consequences. In any case because of their extremism Earth First!'s political intentions have increased public attention, and make other environmentalists look more respectable. Their aim is to raise the costs of acts that they consider against the earth (building of roads, cutting of trees...). . And as the founder of Earth First! Dave Foreman claims:

> The actions of monkey wrenchers invariably enhance the status and bargaining positions of more reasonable opponents. Industry considers mainline

> environmentalists to be radical until they get a taste of real radical activism. Suddenly the soft-sell of the Sierra Club and others white-shirt-and-tie eco-bureaucrats becomes much more attractive and worthy of serious negociations (Foreman and Haywood, 22).

Earth First! is a new kind of movement: Ecowarfare or as Abbey labelled it Ecoterrorism. At the beginning of *The MWG* Abbey's dedication to Ned Ludd, whose sabotage temporarily slowed England's industrial revolution sets the tone. *The MWG* will indeed become a reality. As we saw in the first part the wilderness of the desert was Abbey's home and it was wholly reasonable to him that it should be defended as such. His foreword in Dave Foreman's book is an explanation as to why the American wilderness should be defended. He castigates the political system by asserting that representative democracy in the United States has broken down and that the legislature no longer represents the majority but a minority that exercises control over public finances and propaganda. *The MWG* can be read as an instruction book on how to defend the wilderness. But Abbey, even if he backs up the extremist ideas of radical environmentalists, clearly insists that no human life should be hurt in the preservation of the wilderness. In the *MWG*, when the gang is blowing up a railroad-track he creates a way out when Bonnie mysteriously cannot push down the detonator. Fortuitously there was someone in the train who was not expected to be there and Abbey uses the weakness of the female character, Bonnie, to escape a situation, however fictional, in which a human being would have got hurt by a monkeywrenching action. But 7 years earlier, he states in *DS* that he would "prefer not to kill animals. I'm a humanist; I'd rather kill a man than a snake" (*DS*, 17). Maybe he is making a point about the fact that "the human population has become so disproportionate from the biological point of view that if one had to choose between a specimen of Homo Sapiens and a specimen of a rare even if unattractive species, the choice would be moot" (Callicott, 26).

One of the ideas propounded by environmental radicalists, deriving from the biological point of view that Callicot brings out would be the compulsory use of birth control—a controversial idea to say the least in a country where abortion is still a major political issue. The fear of a Malthusian crunch is an idea anchored into the thinking of deep ecologists. Even if originally from the British economist Malthus, the spreading of unchecked population growth that the environmentalists fear raises what the native Indians had to experience with the spreading of the white population. As Cooper's character Magua expresses in *The Last of the Mohicans* the almost

cancerous growth of the human population and settlements is revealed by the description of whites as people whose "young are more plentiful than the leaves on the trees and whose appetites devour the earth. […] God gave him enough, and yet he wants all. Such are the palefaces"19.

This extreme position about the Malthusian crunch thesis led Earth First! to some quite shocking ideological statements, such as that famine is the earth's way of avenging uncontrolled population growth. Or that "if radical environmentalists were to invent a disease to bring human population back to sanity, it would probably be something like AIDS...the possible benefits of this to the environment are staggering... just as the plague contributed to the demise of feudalism, AIDS has the potential to end industrialism"20. As Callicott alleges "Making great and spectacular efforts to save the life of an individual makes sense only when there is a shortage of people. I have not lately heard that there is a shortage of people" (176). That the wilderness needs to be protected is only a truism. But it is a step further to suggest that human life would not be not such a dreadful price to pay, provided that it could protect the remnants of the wilderness. Even if it is logical from a biological perspective this thought is devoid of any human compassion. Radical ecologists are not devoid of human compassion; the central problem with deep ecology, from Murray Bookchin's perspective, is that it has "no real sense that our ecological problems have their roots in society and in social problems. Deep ecology is at its core deeply misanthropic. This misanthropy in turn fosters a crude eco-brutalism" (Cronon, 264). But they do hold a grudge against contemporary anthropocentrism. I use the word 'contemporary' because if the belief that humans are the central and most significant entities in the universe was admissible during the 17th century, is it considered quite preposterous by actual environmentalists to think the same now. If there is one thought that establishes the whole extent of radical green disagreement to actual forms of human behavior in the world, it is probably that. Concern for ourselves at the expense of concern for the non-human world is held to be a basic cause of environmental degradation and potential disaster. But maybe anthropocentrism is an unavoidable feature of the human condition. "Man's conscious actions are anthropocentric by definition. Whether he seeks to establish a

[19]Fenimoore Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, penguin popular classics 1994, chapter XXIX, 356-357.
[20] Reed C. 1988, 'Wild men of the woods', the guardian, 13th of July.

system of biotic rights or to transform a forest into a residential suburb the act is conceived by man in the context of his social and political culture ”21. But anthropocentric as man might be, we are now entering an era where there are more refugees due to environmental catastrophes than refugees displaced by war. The catastrophic effects of our actions are exceeding the effects of direct human aggression. And faced with an environmental catastrophe man is usually unable to do anything; we have recently experienced such a feeling of powerlessness when faced with the recent volcanic eruption in Iceland. Katrina in New Orleans in August 2005 and the most destructive fires that Australia has experienced in over a century in 2009. Man is left with no control whatsoever over the situation. And deriving from that, new wars will appear due to environmental problems. “The invasion of Iraq, though legitimated by the incitement of terror, has been the first war primarily conditioned by global ecological crisis”(Kovel, 17). John McCain admitted that the Iraq invasion was a war for oil before the elections in May 200822. Just like Alan Greenspan's famous statement made in September 2007: "I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil"23. The United States is a country that has to break free from its addiction to oil; even if it does succeed soon other ecological crises will follow. The issue over water for example in some African countries is already a major problem, more so than food. And if we listen to mainstream scientists it is expected that the southern population might migrate into northern countries to find a more hospitable climate. Our environment is what defines us, and to experience the wilderness one needs first to develop a sense of place; if the majority of the population is driven out of their original place, then the sense of belonging somewhere might be diminished and so will the experience of a place. This experience of a place is what Abbey wants to defend. He firstly expressed this desire in *DS* but he then switched to fiction and with *the MWG* Abbey allowed himself to fantasize about ecowarfare. Each of the members of the gang is a facet of Abbey's personality and the line between the author and his creations can sometimes become blurred as Abbey expresses his own beliefs through them.

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[21]O'Riordan, 1981, 11 *environmentalism*

[22]June 15th 2010“WAR FOR OIL - John McCain Townhall Blunder”http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEeTaCq5zcI&feature=PlayList&p=031A783F26865241&playnext_from=PL&playnext=1&index=100

[23]*The Sunday Times*, September 16th 2007; “Alan Greenspan claims Iraq war was really for oil”.

B) Abbey's characters

The *MWG* is not only a book that brought Abbey attention as a writer, published during the environmentalist craze in 1975, its success also turned Abbey into a literary celebrity in the South West of the United States. The anecdote about this novel is that it gave him a double status. He gained academic respectability but as the same time a sort of counter-cultural notoriety. The *MWG* is a novel that mixes fact and fiction: Abbey framed the novel with an inspiration that he drew from his own experiences and those of his friends. Just like he uses fictionalized elements in his non-fiction to achieve the desired aesthetic and rhetorical effects that he wants, Abbey often starts off with fact and then remodels it into fiction. Abbey is a writer who is more successful when writing about himself: it almost feels like Abbey would have been a skilled autobiographer. His characters are all a fictionalized part of himself or his friends; he borrows from real life what is useful to create an efficient fictional character: this gives them an authenticity because they are close to what Abbey knows: his own and his friends' exploits. Hayduke is probably the character that would best portray a young Abbey; he is vengeful. Hayduke is introduced right away as someone who "has a grudge" (*The MWG,* 16). Hayduke calls the desert a holy land and alleges that there is a higher law against its destruction. He is a character that eats the earth (29) and tries to be as close to the wilderness as one can be. Hayduke's actions are what Abbey wanted to do himself but could not. Writing in this case acts as an outlet for his frustration over what is happening to the western landscapes. Hayduke is an impetuous character: "had he risked his life for a laugh? Yes and it was worth it" (*The MWG,* 305). To him "if death is really the worst that can happen to a man there is nothing to fear. But death is not the worst"(*The MWG*, 337). Abbey does not expand on what could be worse than death but through Hayduke he conveys two of his beliefs: that "when the situation is hopeless there is nothing to worry about" (*The MWG*, 294) and "what's more American than violence?" (*The MWG*, 176) which are also used as justifications for the gang's actions. It is all about fighting back.

The character of Doc Sarvis is less Manichean, he is less impulsive than Hayduke, and conscious that even if he thinks his actions are politically justified

they are in substance contradictory since it might pollute more and actually create more damage to destroy and burn billboards than to leave them just as they are. Yet as Abbey expresses several times through almost every character of the gang: “someone has to do it” (*The MWG*, 153, 191). Doc Sarvis is the staid character of the gang. He is the one that comes up with the argument that “the wilderness once offered men a plausible way of life, now it functions as a psychiatric refuge. Soon there will be no place to go. Then the madness become universal. And the universe goes mad” (*The MWG*, 63). When the gang do accomplish their sabotage, the murder of a machine is compared to a deicide: “all of them, [are] awed by the enormity of their crime, by the sacrilege of it” (*The MWG*, 86). This act is seen as an act of freedom, as Eliade points out “l'homme ne sera vraiment libre que lorsqu'il aura tué le dernier dieu” (Eliade, 172). And since Abbey alludes to the fact that the machine in our society has become the new God. The destruction of the machine can as such be regarded as an act of liberation. What Abbey seems to advocate in *The MWG* is a counter industrial revolution. But man cannot abolish the past since he is a product from it, and thus a counter industrial revolution seems only possible if we reach the zenith of our present industrial revolution. Some say that the collapse has already started just as some said that the industrial revolution is still at its beginning with now China and India catching up. Nevertheless to Abbey the destruction of the wilderness marked the origin of the collapse of our modern society.

Throughout *The MWG*, the reader comes across a great number of ideas that Abbey reiterates from *DS*. This is due to the fact that in *DS* Abbey realizes the presence of the wilderness surrounding him; which will then give birth to the description of such actions that occur in *The MWG*. For this reason *The MWG* could not have been written before *DS*. In reality “*DS* opened the way for *The MWG* that would settle in cement [Abbey's] reputation of radical environmentalist writer” (Calaghan, 154). Abbey's gang follows the Jefferson ideal of eternal hostility against any form of tyranny and each member of the gang represents a new kind of cowboy, not the typical cowboy fighting Indians anymore but an ecowarrior cowboy, rebelling against the machine. The archetypal act of heroism in the West in Abbey's universe is the switch from cowboy to monkeywrencher. The image of the gang could have been inspired by characters such as the hero wandering into the desert in

movies like *The Treasure Of The Sierra Madre24* for instance. Maybe because of this influence Abbey's novels have a certain cinematic quality. Two of Abbey's novels have been made into movies. The novel *The Brave Cowboy* was made into *Lonely Are The Brave25* with Kirk Douglas as well as *Fire On The Mountain26.* This later adaptation depicts two protagonists who are cowboys and cannot seem to be able to cope with the realities of the new West. The rights to *The MWG* were sold during Abbey's lifetime but a movie has not yet been released. "The beat poet Gary Snyder had a theory about why studio executives felt so nervous about the project: showing blood and gore and mass murder was perfectly acceptable in Hollywood; but the gleeful destruction of private property? That seemed dangerously Un-American" (*The MWG*, introduction, XVI). You can show blood as much as you like on the screen, just like terrorism is everywhere in Hollywood films, but not environmental sabotage. The sabotage of machinery is a destruction of one of the most sacred values in American culture: private property. Abbey was never politically correct; he often made remarks just to shok and provoke, in order to incite some kind of reaction, as he might have put it: to wake us up from the slumber in which society has drowned us. Abbey's realization probably started as he discovered authors like Thoreau; the analogies between those two writers are quite abundant. *Walden* is the book with which *DS* is the most often compared. But not only in their writing, also in life Thoreau and Abbey shared many common points of view.

II) A Response to Trancendentalism

A) The Thoreau of the West

*"No truer American existed than Thoreau" (*Emerson, 398*).* Even though more than a hundred years separate Abbey and Thoreau their ethics are in harmony

[24]*The treasure of the Sierra Madre*, 1948, directed by John Huston (also screenplay) and B.Traven (novel).
[25]*Lonely are the brave*, 1962, directed by David Miller, writers: Edward Abbey (novel), Dalton Trumboo (screenplay).
[26]*Fire on the mountain*, 1981 (TV), directed by Donald Wrye, writers: Edward Abbey (novel), John Sacret Young (screenplay).

with one another. Abbey is even referred to as the Thoreau of the American West[27]. It is quite apparent from the parallels that we can draw between *DS* and *Walden* that Abbey embraced many of Thoreau's principles. But curiously enough Abbey is not compared to the elite of the transcendental movement like Emerson; he is closer to Muir. Describing himself as a Redneck in *Abbey's road* but in the same time declaring that "Power is the root of all evil" (Cahalan, 203) and proclaiming himself to be an anarchist and against the Vietnam war, Abbey's personality is hard to grasp. One way in which we can try to define him is through the parallel that exists between him and Thoreau. Thoreau "is one of the few American writers to have become canonized as both a popular hero and a hero of high culture, and this fact in turn raises a number of pointed questions about what literary canonization means and ought to mean. His praise of the wild has inspired writers far more masculinist than he, such as Edward Abbey" (Lawrence Buell, 24). Abbey is also a writer that embodies this double status of popular hero and scholar. In truth "supposing, God forbid, that Thoreau drank, smoked and ran after women. If he had, he'd probably have written a lot like Edward Abbey"[28]. In *DS* Abbey starts an inquiry into the consciousness of civilized men with their environment as a reflection of Thoreau's own psychological questioning. The closeness between those two authors does not only emerge from the style of their writing (choosing the mode of a journal, a non-fiction with "I" being the narrator and the author, the use of the natural cycle of the seasons to frame the narrative), but also in their substance. Thoreau is often seen as the early literary guide against the machine of American capitalism and he would have then without hesitation adhered to Abbey's precept to "Keep America beautiful: Burn a billboard"[29].

Henry David Thoreau's recommendations are also echoed in *The MWG*, When Abbey recommends the breaking of unethical laws this brings to mind Thoreau's question: "Did the civil rights and anti-war activists keep their profiles low? "(Nash, 190). Abbey is prone to the Creation of a scandal to have an impact rather than a silent revolution. Just as Thoreau estimated that "what is called resignation is confirmed desperation" *(Walden,* 8) Abbey impels us to be active. To have an impact was for Abbey a way to thoroughly take part in life; he thought that

[27]Appellation given to him by Larry McMurtry.
[28]*Kirkus review,* May 1, 1979, 2; Ray Murphy, *Boston Globe*, June 28, 1979, 44.
[29]*Nature writing: the tradition in English*, volume 2002, partie 2. Robert Finch, John Elder, 625.

“Not death or dying that was tragic but rather to have existed without fully participating in life that is the deepest personal tragedy” (Calahan, 208). Hence in his epigraph of *The MWG*, Abbey quotes Thoreau: “Now. Or never.” And the tribute he pays to him is redundant throughout *DS*. When Abbey avows “to confront, immediately and directly if it’s possible, the bare bones of existence” (*DS*, 6) it is a Thoreauvian iteration: “I went to the woods because I wished to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and nor, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”(*Walden*, 90). In addition Abbey makes a retrospect of Emerson's eulogy to Thoreau, exemplifying thus the disparity among the early and late representations of Thoreau. Emerson writes,“wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home” (Emerson, 415). Abbey rewrites: “wherever there are deer and hawks, wherever there is liberty and danger, wherever there is wilderness, wherever there is a living river, Henry Thoreau will find his eternal home”(*DS, 153*). Abbey resented being trapped in the label of nature writer but because undeniable similarities exist with Thoreau this aspect of his writing is hard to escape from. Even if *DS* is quite an unreliable work of non-fiction; it has been re-worked and romanticized in numerous instances such as the chapter “The Moon-Eyed Horse”: his encounter may very likely never have happened at all; the reader cannot help but wonder if Abbey made it all up. Many ideas must have been developed while he was elsewhere than the arches. In any case *DS* is too close to a typical journal of a nature-writer not to be considered in some measure as such. The American wilderness in Thoreau's time came close to an immaculate nature; an optimal land to try out the recent hypothesis of the human disposition to the powers of reason. The New World turned out to be a place where man's self-assurance might be put to the test. Both Thoreau and Abbey did such a thing; they tested their masculinity by becoming part of an hostile environment. “Critical readers of Walden have often noticed the conflict between Thoreau's desire to become part of the natural environment at the pond on the one hand and his need to maintain distance and control on the other” (Westling, 43). The alternation between the wilderness and civilization is what both writers attempted to do and they acknowledge this as an ideal existence. (Abbey moved to New York after having lived in the Arches). Hence Thoreau urged that a few places be kept wild, just like

Abbey did after him. “For modesty and reverence's sake, or if only to suggest that earth has higher uses than we put her to”30. To Thoreau the preservation of the wilderness is the same thing as the preservation of civilization. Thoreau declared in his essay *Walking* that **“**In wildness is the preservation of the world”. The notion of the wilderness contains this idea of huge intact spaces, isolated territories, remote deserts, whereas the notion of wildness do not have this spatial dimension to it. The character of wild things is what gives its meaning to the wilderness. The etymology of wilderness in itself derives from the word wild. So Thoreau remains accurate with his proclamation. On Mt Katadhin Thoreau experiences absolute wilderness: “the solid earth! The actual world! The common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?”31. He is at loss as to how to express what he feels. This sentiment is close to an idyllic feeling that can only be interrupted by the intrusion of an opposing manifestation, a monstrous machine, like the vapor machine haunting the peaceful shores of Walden Pound, or the catching sight of a savage beast, representing the hostility and violence of nature. For Abbey the monstrous machine is not a train but builders and construction sites. Yet as Leo Marx reveals “if technology is the creation of man, who is a product of nature, then how can the machine in the landscape be thought to represent an irresolvable conflict?” (Marx, 242). This irreconcilable conflict is linked to the destruction of the machine as a counteraction to any uniformity that denies the spirit of individualism. “In *Walden* Thoreau is clear about the location of meaning and value. It does not reside in the natural facts or in social institutions or in anything “out there”, but in consciousness” (Marx, 264). This consciousness as we saw previously resides in the fact that “La nature présente encore un charme, un mystère, une majesté religieuse. Il n'y a pas d'homme moderne, quel que soit le degré de son irréligion, qui ne soit sensible aux charmes de la Nature” (Eliade, 131). Here the problem of aestheticism is raised; a sense of beauty is what makes Americans want to respect the environment. But it is also a disadvantage: beauty closes the perception of nature to an aesthetic level which sometimes might be excessively reductive. And if to Abbey the arches are the visible traces of God on earth, God might be found for others in other places, Thoreau found in the woods what Abbey found in the desert. But both these authors present the reader with questions that they themselves do not hold the answers to. They want

[30]*I to Myself, an annoted selection from the Journal of Thoreau*, Yale university, 2007, 448.
[31]Thoreau, *The Maine woods*, Boston: Ticknor and fields, second edition, 1864, 71.

their reader to tackle some of the elemental problems of life. Thoreau and Abbey do not demand that their reader take on their lifestyle but to unaffectedly act in accordance with their beliefs. And Abbey is like any other scholar he reveres: "Lao-Tse… Socrates… Jesus… Paine and Jefferson, Blake and Burns and Beethoven, John Brown and Henry Thoreau, Whitman, Tolstoy, Emerson, Mark Twain, ….Nietzsche and Thomas Mann, Lucretius and Pope John XXIII, and ten thousand other poets, revolutionaries and independent spirits, both famous and forgotten, alive and dead, whose heroism gives to human life on earth its adventure, glory and significance." (*DS*, 244).

B) *Desert Solitaire* as a tribute to *Walden*

Diverse Thoreauvian ideas were reiterated by Abbey with an even more ardent angle which is one of the reasons why *DS* is so often compared to *Walden*. Abbey's definition of the wilderness is as a "word [which] suggests the past and unknown, the womb of earth from which we all emerged. It means something lost and something still present, something remote and at the same time intimate, something buried in our blood and nerves, something beyond us and without limits" (*DS*, 208). This concept that nature is acted upon but is active too, had already been expressed by Thoreau: "the earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruits, not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic" (*Walden*, spring 309).

This statement for Abbey includes men as well, compared to the living earth and in this great central life we are part of, we are mere parasites. The underlying notion of this statement is that life on earth started billions of years ago, and if we compare the human span with the age of the earth we are insignificant. Thoreau experienced an intimate relationship with nature, just like Abbey when he goes down on the Colorado River: "we are indeed enjoying a very intimate relation with the river only a layer of fabric between our bodies and the water" (*DS*, 154). Creating an intimate relationship with nature through its elements is a way to own it. Another

way we can own nature is by naming it. But as Abbey points out places of nature don't need us to name them to exist; places of nature were there thousands years ago and will still be there thousand years later. For the most part, nature is indifferent to our presence and this naming of natural places is looked upon by both Abbey and Thoreau as an expression of human conceit. In *Walden* Thoreau vehemently asks "what right had the unclean and stupid farmer whose farm abutted on this sky water, whose shores he has ruthlessly laid bare, to give a name to it?" (*Walden*, the ponds, 195). The fact that naming something gives it existence is associated with the problem that "at the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitively wild" (*Walden*, Spring, 317).

One of the troubles in our present way to approach the wilderness is the fact that we don't create our own experiences. We live through those of others. "How could youths better learn to live than by at once trying the experience of living?" (*Walden*, Economy, 51). Thoreau denotes an important aspect of the way of life of his time and our time: the best thing to do when we wish to learn something is to experience it. As he said after graduating he realized that he had studied navigation but "if I had taken one turn down the harbor I should have known more about it" (*Walden*, Economy, 52). The way we experience nature has changed; when Abbey is talking about the dam and rainbow bridge, we realize that what once meant the wilderness and adventure has been transformed. Abbey argues that experiencing the wilderness should not be another motorboat excursion; the beauty of the wilderness resides in the fact that because of its remoteness it requires an effort on our part; that nature doesn't come to us served on a plate. This makes it even more enjoyable when we reach it. When seen in the context of their environment as an integral part of it, objects of nature are more beautiful than if we can just see see them in isolation. This is the problem of industrial tourism which reduces nature to a mere museum where everything should be accessible and people can go easily from landscape to landscape, from place to place. "I love better to see stones in place" (*Walden*, Economy, 57). Abbey feels the same way as Thoreau; to him when removed from its original place a beautiful natural object loses its values, and this is what happen with the dam, rainbow bridge has lost its value; instead of a goal, a place to reach it just became an "isolated geological oddity" as Abbey calls it. "Politicians say that paved roads and Lake Powell have made the region much more accessible, but "that is a lie.

For those who go there now, smooth, comfortable, quick and easy, sliding through as slick as grease, will never be able to see what we saw. They will never feel what we felt. They will never learn what we know"[32]. About wandering by themselves Thoreau and Abbey share the same point of view: "Most of my wandering in the desert I've done alone. Not so much from choice as from necessity. I generally prefer to go into places where no one else wants to go. I find that in contemplating the natural world my pleasure is greater if there are not too many others contemplating it with me, at the same time" (*DS*, 200) Thoreau thinks so too, for when you are two you always have to wait for someone else; you are not free. When alone you are facing yourself.

Another similarity between Abbey and Thoreau is their view on money. When Abbey talks about the Indians and how money should be distributed in a fairer way among society to help the Navajos getting out of their state of poverty. "They cannot see that growth for the sake of growth is cancerous madness" (*DS*, 144). Thoreau and Abbey share the same idea that by living in a simple way you will get richer in life experiences which are more valuable than unnecessary luxuries. In Thoreau's words: "I am convinced, both by faith and by experience, that to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship but a pastime, if we will live simply and wisely" (*Walden*, Economy, 70). It is a common saying in our culture that money does not make people happy. If a man has all the basics things needed in life: shelter, food, clothing, etc., his happiness will then depend on his family, friends, and love life; not on how much he is earning or how much he spent on things. Nonetheless money is depicted in the western media culture as a goal, advanced countries conveying the idea that the more you have and the more you spend the happier you are: "for I was rich, if not in money in sunny hours and summer days and spent them lavishly."(*Walden*, 192).

Abbey and Thoreau are in agreement in their views on institutions, regarding them as more damaging than helpful. "Wherever a man goes, men will pursue and paw him with their dirty institutions, and, if they can, constrain him to belong to their desperate odd-fellow society" (*Walden*, Village, 171). Abbey strongly criticizes those institutions which are supposed to protect nature and instead create roads for tourists or dams. Parks are for people, not for cars, and even less to create money. Would anyone think about driving his car into a cathedral? The same goes for the wilderness

[32]Abbey, "How it was", in *Slickrock* (1971), 31

that Abbey and Thoreau considered as sacred as human institutions.

Both Thoreau and Abbey's ways of life were deemed impertinent by their contemporaries yet both of them considered them in fact very natural and pertinent within the society they emerged from. “Most men, even in this comparatively free country through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluously coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them” (*Walden,* Economy, 6). Thoreau and Abbey concur on the notion that we are blinded by barriers that we impose on ourselves. Thoreau comments on the Indian way of life where everybody owns a home, that they are considered as savages. But civilization cannot provide shelter and do the same for the families of the new world so what does that say about what is considered civilization or not? Thoreau was convinced, that if all men were to live as simply as he then did, “thieving and robbery would be unknown. These take place in communities where some have got more than is sufficient while others have not enough”. (*Walden,* Village, 172). The validity of this assertion is unimpaired today. When the colonists discovered the first Indian tribes they realized that they had no sense of ownership, but they also had no robbery since everything was shared and everybody was living at an equal level. In contemporary communities where this principle is implemented there is no inequality within it. Sometimes the most attractive and productive industry is to do nothing, to be idle and enjoy oneself, to be rich not in money but in time, in experiences. This is inconceivable to the most part of society today. When Thoreau meets the Irish farmer and tries to explain to him how his life would be better if he kept it simple, how he and his family would be better off if they followed his way of life they dismiss his views out of fear, preferring to keep their way of life even though it was obvious that it was not right since they had to work hard, yet were being kept poor.

When tourists meet Abbey or hikers meet Thoreau, in both cases people wonder how they achieved their way of life, how they did not feel lonely. Both were living by themselves: they were 'solitaire' but did not feel solitude. “I am twenty miles or more from the nearest fellow human but instead of loneliness I feel loveliness” (*DS*, 14*)*. This is what Abbey said after killing a rabbit with a stone: he no longer feels isolated; he is now a part of the wilderness, because he has embraced his true nature. “Are men no better than sheep or cattle, that they must live always in view of one another in order to feel a sense of safety?” (*DS*, 58). Abbey might have been right since so many people know that the life they have does not correspond to

their needs or even less to their desires but they keep following the path they have created for themselves. Abbey admits that there are times when solitude becomes unbearable and admit that we need society, but not society in the broader sense that we think of. "Solitaire become solitary, an entirely different game" (*DS*, 95). He concedes that we need a society of friends or family, not the huge metropolis where people are all living so close to each other and where in fact as Thoreau points out "we are for the most part more lonely when we go abroad among men than when we stay in our chambers" (*Walden,* Solitude, 135*)*. Abbey explains he is solitary because there is no other human presence but he is not alone; there are the animals of the desert with him and the desert itself. When the tourists are gone Abbey enjoys it, being left alone in the wilderness, at the center of things, where all that is significant takes place. "I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, […] I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life" (*Walden*, Solitude, 131). Both Thoreau and Abbey share the same opinion: they do not need to live crowded in cities, but they do need a kind of society. Thoreau was sensitive to the presence of some sort of society in nature: every sound and sight around his house was peaceful and made him think that human neighborhoods were insignificant. Silence can be oppressive but it is for both Abbey and Thoreau a way back to our roots, as when Thoreau is screaming in the woods like the owl: the sound he makes does not sound human but it is nevertheless a natural sound because it imitated the owl. "I have learned that the swiftest traveler is he that go afoot" (*Walden*, 53). To enjoy nature we cannot be separated from it by any mechanical means, it has to be ourselves, our foot that guides us and nothing else, otherwise we would not really enjoy nature; staying in our cars we are just as alienated from it as if we had not gone there at all. Both Abbey and Thoreau have this conception that to enjoy nature we need to become part of it, and if there is anything 'unnatural' with us, cars, gadgets and the like, then we are not experiencing nature as we should.

It is curious to see that even though industrial tourism was not a matter of Thoreau's time he still doesn't think any good of the railroad. "What! Exclaim a million Irishmen starting up from all the shanties in the land, is not this railroad which we have built a good thing? Yes I answer, comparatively good, that is, you might have done worse; but I wish, as you are brothers of mine, that you could have

spent your time better than digging in this dirt" (*Walden*, 54). Criticizing the railroad once more, Thoreau says "I will not have my eyes put out and my ears spoiled by its smoke and steam and hissing" (*Walden*, 122). Humans have meddled enough with the natural world, and some of the consequences are that the animals and nature as a whole become victims. It was Thoreau who said: "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me the truth" (*Walden*, 330).

Conclusion

"The first in time and in importance of the influences upon the mind is that of nature" (Emerson, 85). Abbey was like a plant, deriving his flavor from the soil in which he grew: in this case the Colorado plateau: it definitely had a huge impact on Edward Abbey's writings. It seems that in his case, knowledge was derived through the sensory experience that he had with the wilderness, with the desert. As Baudrillard famously expressed: "I get to know more about the concrete, social life of America from the desert than I ever could from intellectual gatherings"33. A writer "with a pen in his right hand and a monkey wrench in his left" as Terry Tempest William defines him, Abbey represents a new kind of writer: he takes action, he brought "eco-sabotage" into our vocabulary. When a writer dies he becomes his readers. In Abbey's case he lives on through the next generation of activists and desert lovers to whom he is an inspiration. *DS* is indeed a legacy because Abbey's vision and ideas are still alive: The Wilderness Act of 1964 makes nature a right to any American citizen; it also gives the legal definition of the wilderness as an area where the Earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. This has been challenged and Abbey has been one of the first to urge action; his writings still affect the present. "The managers have generally been too busy to realize it, but wilderness management is a blatant contradiction in terms. By etymology and by tradition, wilderness is uncontrolled" (Nash 339). *DS* is a book that makes a distinction between ecologism and environmentalism. Ecologism seeks radically to call into question a whole series of political, economic and social practices in a way that environmentalism does not. Abbey tries to make us understand that instead of seeing environmental protection as a burden on the economy the ecological modernist sees it as a potential source for future growth. Unfortunately one problem that remains is that nature writing and environmental literature as a whole are generally read by people who are already concerned about the environment.

More than twenty years after Abbey's death there exists a non-profit association in his name that aims to teach his philosophy to future green-thinking

[33]Jean Baudrillard, *Critical and fatal theory*, Routledge, 1991, p.186.

students. Abbey with *DS* and *The MWG* bequeathed his passion of the American Southwest to the wilderness conservationists of today. Even if he often contradicted himself, both in his writings and in real life (he had 5 children even though he believed in zero population growth). Abbey endures as "a post-war pioneer in trying to save the southwest from the ravages of American industrial society" (Cahalan, 28). Abbey started numerous controversies, one of the most famous being when he alleged that "Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest". Originally from Diderot, he used it in the university's student paper that got shut down because of it. Abbey liked being controversial, even in death: There is a whole mystique about his illegal burial in the desert that drew public attention, and more readers loomed over him. What one can expect to find while reading Abbey is an another nature writer, but Abbey did not see himself as such. He liked the stone and he was like the stone: his manner of writing may sometimes be more likened to a beat writer like Kerouac rather than the nature prophet John Muir. With a political vision close to Thoreau, Abbey indicts the American culture of the seventies: perceived from the outside as a land of characters such as Mickey mouse, Ronald McDonald and Barbie and trying to turn the National Parks into Disneyland. Abbey offers a new character: the modern eco-cowboy, depicting his haven which is also the haven of outlaws, like Butch Cassidy and the wild bunch. Because the visible traces of God for Abbey were to be found in the American wilderness, "the idea of wilderness needs no defense. It only needs more defenders"34. Abbey agreed with the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata that "the earth like the sun like the air belongs to everyone, and to no one"35. *DS* and *The MWG* are still selling today and *DS* considered one of the best 100 Western books right after Mary Austin *Land of Little Rain.* Abbey is an underrated American writer and borrowing both from Jeffersonian ideals and nature writers *Desert Solitaire* constitutes a major work of the American literature of the West because it is groundbreaking and marks a turning point in the nature writing genre. Abbey's hard anti-pastoral vision of the desert might have what inspired other South-West writers such as Cormac McCarthy with *No Country for an Old Man* or *Blood Meridian.* The most sought-after and most intensely managed wilderness in the United States and arguably, the world, is the Grand Canyon of Arizona. The Grand Canyon of the Colorado River is considered,

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[34]Abbey, "Shadow from the Big Woods"(1974), in *The Journey Home* (1977), 223, 226.
[35]Abbey, "Come on in", in *The journey home* (1977), 88.

along with Yosemite Valley, Death Valley and the Florida Everglades as a national heritage. The future of the wilderness everywhere could well be on display now in Grand Canyon National Park. Hence a book about the Grand Canyon and what Abbey experienced while living there is also a legacy to the American wilderness. Once in the desert Abbey realized that there was nothing out there. Nothing at all. Nothing but the desert. Nothing but the silent world. And then it struck him: emptiness has a great value of its own. Abbey through his literature gives a voice to the wilderness, a voice still alive today, that is why *DS* is indeed a true legacy to the American wilderness.

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