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The Umbrella Term Beyond Reach: Elusive Wilderness in Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* and *The Journey Home*

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Abstract. *This article reexamines Edward Abbey's vision of wilderness, as presented primarily in Desert Solitaire and The Journey Home, by showing that the writer's definition of wilderness is more complex than is widely known, and that it encompasses the ungraspable as well as phenomena usually not associated with nature.*

Key words*: Abbey, Desert Solitaire, The Journey Home, wilderness*

1. INTRODUCTION

In his review of *Desert Solitaire* (1968), Clifton Fadiman named Edward Abbey a "road-company Thoreau" (Fadiman 1968, 10). As Cahalan (2001, 163) also reveals, a few years later, Larry McMurtry, in his 1975 *Washington Post* review of *Dancers in the Scalp House* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, described William Eastlake as "the Kafka of the American desert," and Abbey as "its Thoreau" (McMurtry 1975, c8), a comparison that made Abbey's publisher coin the well-known blurb phrase "the Thoreau of the American West" originally accepted by Abbey (Cahalan 2001, 162-163; Burkholder 2010, 655). Nevertheless, the writer later objected to the designation, and wrote to his publisher, Jack Macrae, with a request to remove the ad slogan from the cover of *Beyond the Wall* (1984). In a letter on March 2, 1985, he revealed: "I know it was my idea in the first place but now I find it an embarrassment. I am not the Thoreau of the American West (there was only one Thoreau) and wish to break out of that limiting categorization" (Abbey, pers. comm.). In the meantime, in an introduction to his collection of essays titled *The Journey Home* (1977), he denied being a nature writer (1991b, xiii). Despite the writer's denial, this paper reexamines Abbey's vision of wilderness, as presented primarily in *Desert Solitaire* and *The Journey Home*, by showing that his definition of wilderness is more complex than is widely known, and that it remains elusive to a certain extent, encompassing the ungraspable as well as phenomena usually not associated with nature.

2. ABBEY'S DEFINITION OF WILDERNESS

In *Desert Solitaire*, the leading publication of American twentieth-century nature writing, Abbey makes one of his numerous attempts to define wilderness, a task that may initially appear too simple or even naive. Disagreeing with the bureaucratic interpretation by the government authorities to whose viewpoint a non-urbanized and uncultivated area constitutes "a minimum of not less than 5000 contiguous acres of roadless area" (Abbey 1990, 207), Abbey considers the accepted legal definition of wilderness to be concise but inadequate to grasp the real significance of the notion. However, the "desert rat," as the writer refers to himself (1990, 298), does not provide us with direct or precise answers, which would unambiguously explain to the reader what he understands by the concept allegedly easy to delineate: "*Wilderness, wilderness*. . . . We scarcely know what we mean by the term, though the sound of it draws all whose nerves and emotions have not yet been irreparably stunned, deadened, numbed by the caterwauling of commerce, the sweating scramble for profit and domination" (Abbey 1990, 207). Otherwise put, although unable to clarify what is meant by wilderness, Abbey notes that the word itself appeals to those whose senses - sight, hearing, or touch - are still acute enough to make them withdraw from the rat race held continuously in densely populated, citified places. He does not seem to state that nature-lovers completely shun the exchange of goods and services, trade relationships, or other economic mechanisms. With the conscious disengagement from the relentless pursuit of higher incomes and privileged positions of influence, Abbey protests against "the scramble," "the caterwauling," that is, the knock-out competition, the ruthless struggle for power, and among other things, the business plans which desensitize our existence. By claiming that "the word itself is music" (Abbey 1990, 207), the author of *Desert Solitaire* not only implies that the thought of an unspoiled wilderness evokes in him a sense of pleasure and harmony, but also that enthusiasts of nature are marked by heightened sensitivity to territory almost untouched by the human hand.

In his informative outline of green critical writing which has flourished for the last three decades, David Kidner (2010, 112) argues convincingly that Abbey opts for "the physical immediacy" of reality rather than its Platonic conceptualization. Admittedly the importance of actual experience is conspicuous in his literary output, but Abbey does seem to allow us to content ourselves with the mental picture of wilderness. In his magnum opus, where the author "codifies his stratagems" (Ronald 2000, 78), Abbey (1990, 162) remarks that "we need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it". Therefore the very awareness that there is such a place as Alaska is enough to make him content with the ever-present possibility of travelling to the Last Frontier state, regardless of the fact whether he will finally reach the destination or not (1990, 162). Be that as it may, it is hardly believable that Abbey would elaborate at length on the definition of wilderness if not his vast empirical experience of nature in North America, Europe, and the Australian outback. As he writes on the picturesque scenery of the Colorado Plateau in *The Journey Home*: "This is a landscape that has to be seen to be believed, and even then, confronted directly by the senses, it strains credulity" (1991b, 86). Thus, according to Abbey (1990, 162), each of us may become "a lover and defender of the wilderness" without the real exploration of backcountry regions, and the imagery of uncontrolled natural environment should be sufficient to make people willing to protect the earth. In Abbey's case, the mere evocation of mental pictures visualizing arid deserts and rugged mountains would obviously gratify the absence of authentic vistas for a while, as well. However, it is simply beyond the bounds of possibility that he could be satisfied with the

abstract concept of wilderness exclusively, dwelling just mentally in the canyon lands of the American West, artfully cherished in his non-fiction writings, *Desert Solitaire*, *The Journey Home*, and in his thematically contentious novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975).

With regard to the hierarchy of human needs created by American psychologist Abraham Maslow, it is possible to deduce that the very idea of wilderness as well as its actual physical realization meet Abbey's basic and higher needs. In his 1968 collection of essays, Abbey equates the physiological need of sustenance mandatory for maintaining life with a visit, or the thought of it, to the places uncontaminated by civilization. He states: "wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread" (1990, 211). Furthermore, the vision of wilderness is obligatory to answer the needs of higher levels, desire rising beyond provisions and personal safety, the metaphysical state which enables us to study the nature of existence:

> The word suggests the past and the 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 limit. Romance - but not to be dismissed on that account. The romantic view, while not the whole of truth, is a necessary part of the whole truth (Abbey 1990, 208).

That is to say, wilderness, in Abbey's viewpoint, has forged our identity as human beings, as it can still testify to our beginning as well as common and uncommon occurrences which have followed the inception of humanity. Obviously, it is "something" we have destroyed irrevocably in large measure, but fortunately great stretches of land still remain to be saved. Wilderness, by curious paradox, is also considered by Abbey to be a deeply rooted element of the self, and at the same time, the particle of the unreachable, lying outside the range of our perception, both visual and mental.

With reference to the subject matter of his fiction and non-fiction writings, Abbey inherited, with great generosity, but not uncritically, the literary legacy of American Romanticism with Thoreau as its primary representative (Burkholder 2010, 654-655). As is widely known, in the *Walden* chapter "Where I Lived, and What I Lived for," Thoreau (2003, 1855) declares: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life." In the first chapter of *Desert Solitaire*, published over one hundred years after Thoreau's tour de force, Abbey makes a similar declaration: "I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us" (1990, 7). The bridge between nineteenth-century Transcendentalism and green writing in the second half of the twentieth century has certainly been built. What Thoreau calls "the marrow of life," Abbey names "the bare bones of existence." Thoreau intends "to front," whereas Abbey wishes "to confront," therefore both writers intend to face the very essence of life, which is emphatically stressed by their choice of anatomical vocabulary. Granted that both writers agree that nature provides a path to spirituality, that "the romantic view. . . is a necessary part of the whole truth" to refer to the aforementioned citation from *Desert Solitaire*, that does not

mean that Abbey accepts lush vegetation, thriving, for instance, in the proximity of Concord, Massachusetts, as the only complete exemplification of nature, the only landscape which amounts to the category of the sublime. This "romantic view," illustrated on the title page of the first edition of *Walden* (1854), by the author's sister, Sophia Thoreau (Gray 2011, 65), is undeniably the obligatory component conceiving the vision of wilderness, and yet it is "not the whole of truth" in Abbey's opinion. As he further explains in *Beyond the Wall* (1984): "To most Americans, to most Europeans, natural beauty means the sylvan - pastoral and green, something productive and pleasant and fruitful - pastures with tame cows, a flowing stream with trout, a cottage or cabin, a field of corn, a bit of forest, in the background a nice snow-capped mountain range. At a comfortable distance" (Abbey 1984, 54). The Thoreau of the American desert, as McMurtry refers to the author (McMurtry 1975, c8), Abbey extends the realm of the sublime inherited from the Transcendentalists, by adding to it a new territory, the arid canyons of the southwestern states, the sunburned, redrock wasteland of the Four Corners region, previously largely ignored due to the lack of the characteristics emblematic of the Appalachian landscape.

3. DESERT AS THE SUBLIME FORM OF WILDERNESS

The central work in the canon of American nature writing, *Desert Solitaire*, as other works by Abbey, aims at praising the major landforms of the globe. "Grandeur, color, spaciousness, the power of the ancient and elemental, that which lies beyond the ability of man to wholly grasp or utilize," these are the features one can find and cherish regardless of whether we hike in the mountains, sail across the sea, or traverse the sand dunes (Abbey 1990, 300). Notwithstanding the positive qualities, the ocean landscape reveals itself as tedious. With its great mass of green-tinted water, it serves primarily as the background to the equally uninteresting voyage by ship, whose final destination is the long-awaited shore (Abbey 1990, 301). Nor are the mountains attractive enough to make Abbey speak of them constantly with awe. In fact, he questions the sense of trekking, walking up, and reaching a summit, since the violent weather on a mountaintop usually discourages hikers from rumination, forcing them to descend a summit as quickly as possible (Abbey 1990, 301-302). "The desert is different" (Abbey 1990, 302). "God's forsaken country" (Abbey 1991b, 12), "completely passive, . . . spare, sparse, austere" (Abbey 1990, 300-301), "totally useless, quite unprofitable" (Abbey 1990, 35), but still, it is "the most beautiful place on earth," as we read in the first sentence opening the book detailing Abbey's sojourn at the then Arches National Monument (Abbey, 1990, 1). Here it is necessary to mention that "the Great American Desert," as one of Abbey's *The Journey Home* essays is entitled, constitutes a fairly distinct landform from the sand dune Sahara in Africa. Much as its climatic conditions resemble other waterless places in the world, the Four Corners area, particularly admired by Abbey, exemplifies a semi-desert plateau with deeply carved canyons, flat-top mesas, and steep-sided buttes (Durczak 2010, 154). Interestingly enough, Henryk Sienkiewicz (1956, 423), in his letters dispatched from the United States, classifies the region as "steppe," speaking of it in derogative terms in stark contrast to the Ukrainian one praised for its poetry and soul.

Fond as Abbey is of the barren southwest, he does not hold the idealized view of the region abounding in the landscapes of pristine beauty as well as in ever-present threats.

The essay collected in *The Journey Home* lists three main possible hazards endangering the safety of visitors, who may survive their encounter with the desert, but will not remember it as a pleasantly memorable experience. With regard to animal life, not only does Abbey enumerate a considerable number of dangerously poisonous species, but also depicts, in graphic detail, the harmful physical consequences resulting from a painless bite from the *triatoma protracta*, an insect paradoxically better known as the kissing bug (Abbey 1991b, 13). In spite of its relative scarcity, the desert flora is "as venomous, hooked, barbed, thorny, prickly, needled, saw-toothed, hairy, stickered, mean, bitter, sharp, wiry, and fierce as the animals" (Abbey 1991b, 14). And the third grave peril constitutes the intense sunshine, which, although enjoyable at the beginning, becomes unbearable in the long run, and may contribute to dehydration, more serious skin inflammations, and obviously skin cancer (Abbey 1991b, 14-15). Therefore, Abbey strongly advises against exploring the American southwest: "Stay out of there. Don't go. Stay home and read a good book, this one for example. The Great American Desert is an awful place. People get hurt, get sick, get lost out there. Even if you survive, which is not certain, you will have a miserable time. The desert is for movies and God-intoxicated mystics, not for family recreation" (1991b, 13).

Given to his readers, the advice to avoid the inhospitable terrain is certainly not the one Abbey himself intends to follow. In the account of his experiences as a ranger on a Numa Ridge fire lookout in Glacier National Park, in the summer of 1975, Abbey discusses the definition of wilderness offered by Doug Peacock, his "bear-loving friend," according to whom a spot should be categorized as "wild" on condition that there is an ever-present possibility of being attacked by a life-threatening animal, for instance, "a rhino or two," or a grizzly bear (Abbey 1991b, 38). Inclined to agree upon Peacock's explanation, Abbey adds that "a wild place without dangers is an absurdity" (1991b, 38). As a matter of fact, the statement complements Abbey's vision of an earthly paradise, sketched in his 1968 collection, which, in contrast to the Christian concept of Eden, is inhabited by venomous reptiles, hit by natural disasters, and haunted by disease and death (1990, 208).

4. WILDERNESS IN THE CITY

The self-described desert rat and frequent visitor of the redrock country, Abbey, to many readers and literary critics, will always remain a classic nature writer remembered as the perverse author of numerous eulogies praising the American West. Yet, the claim that he completely neglects the urban experience of nature, that he overlooks the fact that "the city *is* nature" (Durczak 2013, 25), and therefore it should be treated as a natural habitat to some species of flora and fauna, would be the clouding of Abbey's vision of wilderness, and at the same time the inadequate narrowing of its concept he endlessly attempts to frame. With all his lifelong, unabated rapture over "the dogma of the sun and the doctrine of the rock" (Abbey 2015, chap. 1), in the essay titled "Freedom and Wilderness, Wilderness and Freedom," published in *The Journey Home*, we find the writer's observation that while dwelling in Hoboken, a New Jersey city on the Hudson River opposite Manhattan, where he lived in the late 1950s and early 1960s between his escapades to the West (Cahalan 2001, 80), there was "all the wilderness we needed" (Abbey 1991b, 227). And here by the term "wilderness" Abbey not only means the local

swamplands abounding in different kinds of waterfowl, but also the man-made elements of urban architecture, like rotting, deserted storehouses, derelict depots, and "the jungle of bars" along the streets near the Hoboken waterfront (1991b, 227). Cognizant of the high level of pollution contaminating the environment, the desert anarchist, strangely enough, is able to admire the sunset over the industrial landscape punctuated with the bulrush surviving despite the poison-rich waters. Upon the collage of the overwhelming urbanization and the remaining patches of green in the city, Abbey comments with ironic, or even derisive overtones, alluding to Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "I loved also and finally and absolutely, as a writer must love any vision of eschatological ultimates, the view by twilight from the Pulaski Skyway (Stop for Emergency Repairs Only) of the Seventh Circle of Hell. Those melancholy chemical plants, ancient as acid, sick as cyanide, rising beyond the cattails and tules" (1991b, 228). In another essay, being part of the aforementioned compilation, Abbey also depicts his seemingly grand Hoboken apartment house as the enclave of wilderness for intrusive cockroaches and ubiquitous rats running in the attic, basement, and inside the building's walls "in ferocious packs, like wolves" (Abbey 1991b, 90-91), the comparison which, in effect, transfers the reader from typical downtown accommodation to a backwoods far away from any municipality. Thus, with his focus on some traces of the wild in the city, with his attention directed to the notorious city parasites, Abbey appears to pave some part of the way for urban nature writing, which, since the 1990s, has been challenging the traditional vision of "the world as a checkerboard of the natural and the nonnatural" (Durczak 2013, 25, 28-29).

5. CIVILIZATION AND WILDERNESS

Apart from the observations on the natural interpenetrating the irrepressibly urban landscape, Abbey's comments on the relation between civilization and wilderness additionally seem to blur the traditionally clear-cut differentiation between the world of the wild and the results of human creation and invention. In "Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks," one of the first essays edited in *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey asserts that "wilderness is a necessary part of civilization" (1990, 58), surprisingly making the former dependent upon the latter. The message is reinforced at the end of the collection in question, in the chapter "Episodes and Visions," where it is stated that the term "civilization" embraces "the love of wilderness" (Abbey 1990, 305), which consequently imposes on us the necessity of ecology and nature protection.

The idea of environmental preservation exemplifies, in fact, one of the great products of human civilization, among which, together with our devotion to wilderness, Abbey lists, for instance, the Bill of Rights, Tolstoy's writings, music compositions by Bach, and the double martini (1990, 305; 1991b, 229-230). With all its benefits whose list is long, civilization, inevitably, also generates the "the sound of madness" (Abbey 1991b, 98), audible in such municipalities like the insular New York, nicknamed by Abbey "the City of Dreadful Night" (1991b, 93), which, together with its "Vampire State Building" and other mankind's achievements (1991b, 92), keeps "floating on sewer lagoons, under a sea of fog and smoke and drizzling acid mist" (1991b, 95). A top destination for a multitude of travelers, in Abbey's eyes, it is the metropolis in the process of decomposition, where every weekday thousands of invisible commuters with "the tension stealing over each face" participate in "the stampede to taxis, buses, the subway trains" (1991b, 98), which

constitutes even a more powerful metaphor with Frederic Remington's 1908 picture *The Stampede by Lightning* in mind. Evidently, New York City, as well as other places in the States, ensures liberty, notwithstanding, Abbey underlines that citizens may easily lose control over those civilian privileges if public space is completely urbanized and technologized, and when the authorities steer the state machine in a direction known only to them. What provides an effective cure for the city madness is obviously wilderness outside the municipality, in its all possible forms, the mountains, rivers, lakes, and forests symbolizing for American society the chance of escape. As Abbey summarizes, "we need the possibility of escape as surely as we need hope; without it the life of the cities would drive all men into crime or drugs or psychoanalysis" (1990, 162-163).

Accordingly, despite possible dangers posed by nature, "civilization needs wilderness" (Abbey 1991b, 229), since the apparent threats springing from the world of the "sivilized," as Huckleberry Finn would put it (Twain 1994, 33), represent for Abbey greater and more serious hazards. In other words, Abbey continuously pines for wilderness to cut himself off from civilization so as to regain freedom again, "freedom," as he says in *Desert Solitaire*, "in the most simple, literal, primitive meaning of the word, the only meaning that really counts" (1990, 193). On the last pages of the suggestively entitled *The Journey Home*, Abbey explains what freedom he bears in mind, changing, in fact, the dependency by making liberty, the unquestionable result of civilization, reliant on wilderness:

> We can have wilderness without freedom; we can have wilderness without human life at all; but we cannot have freedom without wilderness, we cannot have freedom without leagues of open space beyond the cities, where boys and girls, men and women, can live at least part of their lives under no control but their own desires and abilities, free from any and all direct administration by their fellow men (1991b, 235).

Thus, freedom, according to Abbey, is the possibility of escaping from the fruits of progress, all the blessings and curses of civilization, the hectic lifestyles the majority of modern urbanites lead every day. As for many nowadays living in the twenty-first century, it may signify a chance to leave behind, at least for a while, the condescension of politicians, military conflicts, our professional, although not always rational, duties, our slavish attachment to household appliances, cars, telephones, and "the domestic routine," which, to Abbey, also denotes unnecessary faithfulness to a spouse (1990, 193). In *Abbey's Road*, another essay compilation originally published in 1979, the self-described "Cactus Ed" continues that wilderness guarantees a place of relief from meetings, interviews, hearings, lectures, ecological campaigns of different kinds to which, as a matter of fact, he devoted a large part of his life (Abbey 1991a, 191-192). Otherwise put, the cactus country, as well as other unspoiled corners of the earth, offers the civilized an opportunity to "slip away from the human world and its clutching, insane, insatiable demands" (Abbey 1991a, 191).

6. CAPE SOLITUDE

In the attempt to define the discussed issue, it is worthwhile mentioning that not only wilderness provides a place of relief from our obligations and daily routine, thus being a

temporary alternative to busy schedules. Abbey puts forward convincing arguments for the wilderness as a location where, by severing relations with society, it is possible for us to evoke positive feelings not only to those we left behind, but also to ourselves (1990, 192). The strained relations between the self and the surrounding world may be improved while enjoying the company of the selected Other, since Abbey appreciates the "dual solitude on the river" (1990, 192), co-experienced with Ralph Newcomb in June 1959, while rafting through Glen Canyon (Cahalan 2001, 73), and the presence of Harvey Mudd and Malcolm Brown during their 1971 kayaking adventure, partying on one of the Green River banks "away from home and loved ones" (1991b, 191). Even so, his "miniature Eden," actually discovered during the escapade with Mudd and Brown, is devoid of any signs marking the presence of Homo sapiens (1991b, 199). By traveling to "Cape Solitude," a real but unspecified place with a false name invented not to reveal its exact location, Abbey and his truck, which playfully recalls the tone of Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley* (1962), one of his favorite writers (McClintock 1994, 69), head for a remote corner of the world so that he can experience emptiness together with aloneness, while listening intently to silence. So burning is his desire of isolation, so intense his inner need to spend some time in seclusion, that he even brushes away the car tracks to be left alone, "save myself," as he says (1991a, 198), and "let somebody else save the world for a while" (1991a, 197). With the intention of "getting nowhere" which actually denotes "going home," Abbey aims to stay in Cape Solitude as long as it is necessary for him to regain strength so as to be able to face society again (1991a, 192-193).

There are other reasons why the barren, unproductive land of the American West lures Abbey irresistibly. Clearly, what he misses so much and returns to as frequently as possible is simply the spectacular views of the Colorado Plateau, "something special. Something strange, marvelous, full of wonders" (1991b, 85), something that still remains ungraspable although many have spared no efforts in capturing its beauty (1991b, 86). Yet, the enjoyment of the stunning scenery does not only make one rediscover the sense of aesthetics. To Abbey's way of thinking, by admiring the American desert, "you become a prospector for life" (1990, 303), as the red-tinted canyons of Utah and Arizona invite contemplation helping one to reconsider one's system of values and the very existence both as an individual and a community member. As Abbey writes in *The Journey Home*, the sojourn among the mesas, buttes, and labyrinths of rocks gives one an opportunity "to make the discovery of the self in its proud sufficiency which is not isolation but an irreplaceable part of the mystery of the whole" (1991b, 88). According to McClintock, the uncovered enigma shifts the prospector for life to the biocentric position, understood as "the recognition that human life is not the centerpiece of existence and that wild nature offers us the chance to learn redemptive humility" (1994, 74), being the last of the thirteen virtues suggested in Benjamin Franklin's (2003, 592) scheme of moral perfection included in his *Autobiography* commenced as early as the 1770s. In other words, the wilderness offered by the Four Corners region also ought to be protected for the sake of adventure, "adventure not only in the physical sense, but also mental, spiritual, moral, aesthetic and intellectual adventure" (1991b, 88).

4. CONCLUSIONS

In the analyzed fragments, derived mainly from *Desert Solitaire* and *The Journey Home*, Abbey appears to treat wilderness as a kind of umbrella term, combining various green ideas with intellectual and spiritual thinking. By curious paradox, when referring to it as "the womb of earth from which we all emerged" (1990, 208), he regards wilderness as our beginning, in addition to viewing the natural as the ungraspable phenomenon that is at the same time the element of the self. An Eden without people, wilderness constitutes a place where it is possible for Abbey to rebuild a harmonious relationship with the world and the Other, too. Being a remedy for the city madness, it is additionally the source of freedom, even if his favorite corner of the world, the Colorado Plateau, is far from being a free-from-danger zone. Of great importance is also the fact that Abbey redefines the territory of the American sublime by extending its boundaries and annexing the American West, as well as turning attention to the urban experience of nature at least a decade before the 1990s movement. In brief, Abbey needs wilderness not only for the sake of aesthetics, but in order to regain the spiritual balance by reestablishing the biocentric position, with the intention of appreciating what, to some, seems trivial but is, in fact, indispensable. Thus, Abbey truly remains a "Thoreauist" (Burkholder 2010, 654), although he denied it, noting in *Desert Solitaire*, subtitled *A Season in the Wilderness*: "the love of wilderness is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach; it is also an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need - if only we had the eyes to see" (1990, 208).

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