CHAPTER – II

NATURE AND SELF: ENGAGING WITH THE
DIVERGENT DEFINITIONS OF THE SELF IN RELATION
TO NATURE

“. . . [an ecological] self expands beyond our human-centered conditioning and sense of being split off and separate, in order to engage intimately with other species, cultures, and people, as well as with places.”

Elan Shapiro

The concept of ‘self’ is one of the major concerns of ecopsychology. In their efforts to root out the irrational forces that work on the human psyche and cause environmentally hazardous behavior, ecopsychologists are trying to link ‘self’ to the natural world. The basic assumption of ecopsychology is that the human psyche, at its deepest level, is intimately bonded to the earth. Man is just a constituent of the self-regulating biosphere where all living and non-living beings are linked genetically and behaviorally to one another. Roszak, while defining the boundaries of ‘self’ in his essay ‘Where Psyche Meets Gaia’, points out how the pre-ecological psychological thought considered ‘ego’ or ‘self’ as an “autonomous” and “unitary” aspect that is far removed from the external world. According to the tenets of psychology, the self is “a self-regarding consciousness” which exists in
“relational continuity with the physical world” and ‘ego’ is an ‘isolated atom’ of it. But ecopsychologists reject this earlier view as a narrow perception.\(^2\)

Freud perceived nature as “eternally remote”, as a force that destroys human beings “coldly, cruelly, relentlessly.”\(^3\) Roszak notices how he rejected that view in later years to admit, rather stoically that,

> “Our present ego feeling is only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive, indeed, an all-embracing, feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it.”\(^4\)

Modern psychology has continued to perceive ‘ego’ as an ‘encapsulated’ and ‘isolated’ entity, despite Freud’s acceptance of a close link between it and ‘nature’. Ecopsychologist Sarah A Conn comments on this tendency in the essay, ‘When the Earth Hurts, Who Responds?’:

> “Almost as if we lived in a vacuum, we view the ‘self’ as a bounded, masterful agent who is separate from and prior to the “outside” world, including the natural world . . . We have . . . cut ourselves off from our connection to the earth so thoroughly in our epistemology and our psychology that even though we are “bleeding at the roots”, we neither understand the problem nor know what we can do about it”\(^5\)

Ecopsychologists contend that creating a sense of ‘ecological identity’ in human minds may enable modern man to bring about a radical readjustment in his attitude to nature. This can be achieved by a broadening of the self:
“. . . an ecologically responsible construction of the self will require what Arne Naess calls an “ecological self”, which includes not only growth in human relationships with family and community, but a broadening of the self through identification with all beings, even with the biosphere as a whole.”

This concept of identification of the self is far removed from the idea of “self-actualization”, which in its narrow sense means only a heightened personal awareness, “obliterating all chances of any possible connection with the world around.”

Ecopsychologist Sarah A Conn describes the process of self identity as follows:

“This broadened identification is the basis for the mutuality and passionate engagement, the direct experience of interconnectedness, called for by the ecological crisis of our times. When we are able to experience this interconnectedness, we need no moral exhortations to adjust our behaviors and our policies in the direction of ecological responsibility. As Naess points out, “if we “broaden and deepen” our sense of self, then the earth flows through us and we act naturally to care for it. In Immanuel Kant’s terms, we then engage in “beautiful acts” rather than “moral acts”, motivated not by our moral duty to do what is right but rather acting out of positive inclination and pleasure.”
Ecopsychologists prefer good environmental acts emanating from passionate joy to conventional “scare tactics” and “guilt trips” often employed by environmentalists in their attempts to create awareness about the environment. Roszak considers this paradigm shift highly significant as it may enable the environmentalists to work with psychotherapists to develop innovative ways to appeal to “affirmative motivations and the love of nature” and hence he strongly supports the new outlook with a conviction that “. . . there is an urgent need to address the amount of anger, negativity, and emotional burnout one finds in the [environmental] movement.”

Ecopsychologist Anita Barrows in her essay, ‘Ecopsychology of Child Development’, traces the changes that the concept of ‘self’ has undergone in the post-industrial age. According to her, in the “psychology of postindustrial political and commercial milieu, nature is understood to serve human beings, to be utilized by them- remains in the background as indifferent, unloving nature through which a lonely individual has to struggle.”; but of late this “paradigm of a bounded, isolated self” is being replaced by “the vision of a self that is permeable and interconnected with all living beings and processes.”

In order to emphasize the fact that an infant is born not only to a social but also to an ecological context, she quotes the British Jungian Psychologist, Michael Fordham:

“. . . a self that begins in an undifferentiated state and gradually . . .

de-integrates” as an ego, still connected to the original substrate, but retaining only the vaguest memory of it. This central self is
inarticulate, nonrational and deeply responsive to archetypal patterns in the world.”

This image of a core self that is inherently present in the newborn in a state of interconnectedness with nature is endorsed by another psychologist Daniel Stern. According to him, a core self exists in all beings and it consists of “sensations and [is] capable of being moved by inchoate perceptions of sound, rhythm [and] light. . . . This matrix of sensations is a central cortex around which rings of further development will construct themselves. . . .”

It is this ‘core self’ that ecopsychologists view as the ‘ecological self’, which, if disconnected from nature, causes a psychological imbalance in human beings. Paul Shepard describes the development that this self undergoes as a child grows into an adult. According to him, on transfer from the ‘fetal landscape’ to the ‘physical landscape’, the human psyche is in need of an enlivenment of the features of the fetal landscape. A surrounding of “living plants, rich in texture, smell and motion”, “the unfiltered, unpolluted air, the flicker of wild birds, real sunshine and rain, mud to be tasted, tree bark to grasp, the sounds of wind and water, voices of animals, insects, and humans” – all these provide the second grounding for the psyche in the physical landscape. These surroundings are “swallowed, internalized, [and] incorporated as self.” The internalization of the various aspects of the physical landscape awakens a sense of the self that can exist harmoniously with the world in an ecological context. This sense is an inherent possession of all human beings. It is this ecological self that enables them to achieve a rapport between the human and the non-human.
In line with this thought, ecopsychologists promote the expansion of the self by reconnecting it to the natural terrain. Ecopsychologists Allen, D. Kanner and Mary, E. Gomes claim that ecopsychologists can “identify and nurture the dormant qualities of the self that flourish when connected with the natural world.”14 They believe that numerous capacities that lie latent, untapped and numb in the physical, aesthetic, perceptual and spiritual realms in urban man can be reawakened by expanding the self to include the natural world.

The expanded self may create a sense of guilt and shame in human minds about their previous negligent or destructive environmental behavior. Ecopsychologists compare this “environmental remorse” to the reactions against ‘past transgressions’ in psychotherapy and accept them as a part of the healing process:

“However, when “environmental remorse” arises as part of a healing process and in direct response to a strengthening bond with the land, it leads to more substantial and pervasive change than that induced by moral condemnation and other types of external coercion.”15

Ecopsychologists believe that the process of expansion of the self can revive the experiences of nature in man and bring about a sharpened sense of awareness, insights and affirmative experiences.

“When the natural world reawakens in every fiber of our being the primal knowledge of connection and graces us with a few moments of sheer awe, it can shatter the hubris and isolation so necessary to narcissistic defenses. Once this has happened, ongoing contact with
nature can keep these insights alive and provide the motivation necessary for continued change. It is these experiences that will ultimately fill the empty self and heal the existential loneliness so endemic to our times.” 16

Ralph Metzner considers the split between the spirit and nature as a core feature of Euro-American psyche. He describes the ‘natural self’ as earthy and sensual, including bodily sensations and feelings which are capable of debasing man. On the contrary, the ‘spiritual self’ is airy and ethereal and remains at the transcendental realms and hence is incompatible and opposed to nature. This split makes man feel separated from the realm of nature that surrounds him on Earth. Metzner points how the split between these two aspects of the self creates an urge in modern man to conquer nature:

“If we believe that in order to advance spiritually we have to go against, to inhibit and control the natural feelings and impulses of our own body, then this same kind of antagonism and control will also be projected outward, supporting the well-known Western “conquest of nature” ideology. For most people in the West, their highest values, their noblest ideals, their image of themselves as spiritual beings striving to be good and come closer to God, have been deeply associated with a sense of having to overcome and separate from nature.” 17

Metzner points out how the non-monotheistic religions and traditional societies always consider nature as the realm of spiritual and in comparison to them
the Western society’s affirmation of the dissociation between spirit and nature appears to be a distorted perception that makes a sustainable way of life an impossibility.

Psychologist Philip Cushman views this tendency of American self to be an isolated entity as a psychological abnormality and attributes it to certain historical factors:

“. . . recent historical factors such as urbanization, industrialization, and secularization have created an increasingly isolated and individualistic American self that bears the dual trademarks of narcissism; appearing “masterful and bounded” on the outside, and yet “empty” underneath.”

This inner emptiness results in a destructive streak in human nature, which is responsible for the ecocidal activities of modern man.

A change of identity becomes essential in such circumstances, which will allow the earth to reclaim us. In the essay, ‘The Rape of the Well-Maidens: Feminist Psychology and Environmental Crisis’ included in the book Ecopsychology, Mary. E. Gomes and Allen. D. Kanner vividly describes this process and the consequent experiences:

“As we begin to gently dissolve the hard shells of our encapsulated egos, we open up to the realm . . . [of an] undirected movement towards the new, the nonrational, the playful. It is the flow of experience, vital, spontaneous, open to the unexpected, yielding and responsive to being acted upon . . . Its effects are the uplifting,
ecstatic inspiration that comes from the experience of transformed awareness.

The transformed awareness may heal the schism in the human self, thus permitting the individual to lead a life of harmony with himself and with the world. Human actions will no longer be fragmented and incomplete:

“. . . the shift from a fragmented to a more inclusive self needs to focus on the complex interrelatedness between our crippling isolation from nature and from the different parts of the human community. Restoration offers a potent opportunity to join the issues of biological and cultural diversity with the work of creating a safe holding environment for our own absurd and exploited parts.”

The works of the contemporary American writers dealing with ‘environment’, ‘nature’ and ‘wilderness’ often portray the “rebirth of sensory aliveness and keen alertness” which provide an “awareness of continuum.” Separation of the human self from nature and the ecocidal consequences that follow are constantly analyzed. The experiences ensuing the identification and expansion of the self are vividly described by these writers as they have undergone such experiences in moments when they have tried to reconnect with nature. The prominent ecocritic Scott Slovic aptly considers contemporary nature writing as a “literature of hope” based on his assumption that the interest of these writers in the human psyche and its dealings with the natural environment may lead to a heightened consciousness and to some healthy changes in the political context. According to Slovic, the best American nature writers
“... are not merely, or even primarily, analysts of nature or
appreciators of nature—rather, they are students of human mind,”
preoccupied “with the psychological phenomenon of ‘awareness.’”

The natural environment and wilderness in particular fascinates these
“students of mind” as they can develop a complete picture of the self including
nature as a constituent of the individual self:

“Both nature and writing... demand and contribute to an author’s
awareness of self and non-self. But confronting face-to-face the
separate realm of nature, by becoming aware of its otherness, the
writer implicitly becomes more deeply aware of his or her own
dimensions... It is only by testing the boundaries of self against an
outside medium (such as nature) that many nature writers manage to
realize who they are.”

Ecocritic Joni Adamson points out how Edward Abbey exemplifies this
view of Scott Slovic when he states that he goes to the wilderness not to study
nature, per se, but to recover his true self, to confront the “bare bones of
existence.”

This inner urge for self-realization is evident in all the descriptions of his
wilderness explorations. Even in his insistence that the presence of nature is
indispensable in his life, this desire is evident:

“I had discovered that I am the kind of person who cannot live
comfortably, tolerably, on all-flat terrain. For the sake of inner
equilibrium there has to be at least one mountain range on at least
one of the four quarters of my horizon- and not more than a day’s walk away.”25

And, this is essential for him as he has “a certain reluctant affection” for the “wrinkles, bulges, eruptions, and fractures on the earth’s surface that we call mountains.”26 On some occasions, Abbey directly describes how nature enables him to experience his ‘self’:

“Here you may yet find the elemental freedom to breath deep of unpoisoned air, to experiment with solitude and stillness; to gaze through the hundred miles of untrammeled atmosphere, across red rock canyons beyond blue mesas towards the snow-covered peaks of the most distant mountains 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.”27

Implicit references to the experiences self identification and expansion abound in the writings of Abbey. Most of them may seem as mere appreciation of nature, yet what Abbey is indicating as aesthetic pleasure is much deeper than that. Nature in its pristine beauty affords him opportunity to link his self to its original source. The canyon country is “special” for him as it provides him a unique psychic experience:

“The canyon country of Southern Utah and northern Arizona- the Colorado Plateau- something special. Something strange, marvelous, full of wonders.”28
Abbey candidly admits that it is his acute sense of awareness, engendered by interlinking his self with nature that makes the place appear strange and marvelous. According to him, for the people who live in the canyon country,

“... its canyon wilderness is a treasure best enjoyed through the body and spirit, ‘in situ’, as the archeologists say ...”\textsuperscript{29}

Even when Abbey does not refer to the relationship of his self to nature, he vividly describes the sense of harmony he is able to feel when he links himself to nature. In those moments of awareness he can see the deepest meanings in many things and happenings of this universe:

“Even a simple hike up Whitney, even the mild walk and scramble to the apex of Sierra Blanca in Colorado... involves that element of risk and effort which compensates for the usual banality of our lives. We love the taste of freedom. We enjoy the smell of danger. We take pleasure in the consummation of mental, spiritual, and physical effort, it is the achievement of the summit that brings the three together, stamps them with the harmony and unity of a point of a meaning.”\textsuperscript{30}

It is the dissolution of the hard shells around the self and the opening up to the realm of nature that enable Abbey to experience the mysterious integration of the selves of the earlier Indian settlers of the Big Woods of Western Pennsylvania to the selves of the new settlers of that wilderness. While narrating his wilderness experiences during his childhood, he mentions how he used to feel a strange and
surreal feeling that the selves of the early indigenous settlers of the area merged
with the selves of the new white settlers:

“The vanished Indians were reincarnated, for a few transcendent
summers, in our bones, within our pale Caucasian skins, in our
idolatrous mimicry. We knew all about moccasins and feathers,
arrows and bows, the thrill of streaking naked through the
underbrush, taking care to tread on not a single dry twig. Our lore
came from boy’s books, but it was the forest that made it real.”31

In Desert Solitaire, Abbey shares with the readers the acute sense of
loneliness he used to feel while he was working in Arches National Park as a
seasonal park ranger. In such occasions he tried to stay outdoors in order to make a
‘contact’ with the desert wilderness. He could feel an overwhelming sensation
which made him aware of his own self in relation to the desert’s soul. This
powerful awareness wiped away his loneliness:

“. . . I made a contact with that larger world – an exhilarating feeling
which leads to equanimity . . . in the midst of such a grand tableau. It
was impossible to give full and serious consideration to
Albuquerque. All that is human melted with the sky and faded out
beyond the mountains and I felt . . . that a man can never find or
need better companionship than that of himself.”32

It is when he connects himself to nature that Abbey feels fulfillment in his
companionship with himself. It is the moment of self-realization and then he is
prepared to feel the essential harmony of all things in this universe:
“. . . each rock and shrub and tree, each flower, each stem of grass, diverse and separate, vividly isolate yet joined each to each other in a unity which generously includes me and my solitude as well.”

Abbey’s descriptions of the pure pleasure he experiences while paddling down the Colorado River show how such moments of self’s expansion when it gets connected with wilderness is a common experience to nature writers. He becomes as “imperturbable as the river itself, tranquil as the sky overhead . . .” For Abbey it becomes a rebirth or rather a return to the safety of the womb, a regaining of the lost Eden:

“My anxieties have vanished and I feel instead a sense of cradle like security, of achievement and joy, a pleasure almost equivalent to that first entrance – from outside – into the neck of the womb.”

The sense of equanimity and harmony opens his eyes to the interrelatedness of all things in nature:

“We are indeed enjoying a very intimate relation with the river: only a layer of fabric between our bodies and water. I let my arm dangle over the side and trail my hand in the flow. Something dreamlike and remembered, that sensation called déjà vu – when was I here before? A moment of groping back through the maze, following the thread of a unique emotion, and then I discover the beginning.”

When the awareness about one’s own self becomes acute, it engenders a desire to cut off all links with the fellow human beings. Abbey knows that he may be accused of misanthropy. To show that he has no regret, he quotes Shakespeare:
“Man delights not me, / No nor women neither . . .”

Yet this misanthropy is highly deceptive as the self’s identification with nature renews the human urge in him to link with the rest of humanity:

“But no, this is not at all what we feel at this moment, not at all what I mean. In these hours and days of dual solitude on the river we hope to discover something quite different, to renew our affection of ourselves and the human kind in general by a temporary, legal separation from the mass.”

Thus, the experience of the self enables Abbey to achieve “a rebirth back in time and into primeval liberty, into the most simple, literal, primitive meaning of the word . . .” which provides him a taste of a ‘delirious exhilaration of independence’

In the section ‘Burning’ of Myths and Texts Gary Snyder beautifully captures John Muir’s experiences of the self on the Mt. Ritter. Half way through the climbing, Muir goes through a death-like experience:

“. . . About half-way
To the top, I was suddenly brought to
A dead stop. . .
Unable to move hand or foot
Either up or down. My doom
Appeared fixed. I Must fall.”
Then a rebirth in nature takes place:

“... This terrible eclipse
Lasted only a moment, when life blazed
Forth again with preternatural clearness.
I seemed suddenly to become possessed
Of a new sense. My trembling muscles
Became firm again, every rift and flow in
The rock was seen as though a microscope,
My limbs moved with a positiveness and precision
With which I seem to have
Nothing at all to do.” (p.44)

Snyder recognizes the moment of self-realization in Muir’s experience that filled him with an acute awareness and energy. The influence of Deep Ecology has instilled in Snyder the conviction that natural and social environment are part of the human self. He expresses this faith in the essay ‘Four Changes’ in *Turtle Island* while proposing a new education system for the new society that he envisions:

“Find psychological techniques for creating an awareness of the
“self” which includes the social and natural environment.”

Snyder feels that humanity should be proud that among all created beings, only man can have experiences of self. We are “the first members of a civilized society since the Neolithic to wish to look clearly into the eyes of the wild and see our self-hood, our family there.” For Paleolithic people hunting was the way to gain self-realization.
“To hunt means . . . to strain your consciousness to feel what the deer are thinking today. . . . to sit still and let yourself go into the birds and wind while waiting by a game trail.”

Snyder’s belief is that the knowledge about his own self enables man to recognize his place in the one family that includes all living and non-living beings of the universe. A society which is organized according to a class structure cannot possess this holistic attitude as the social structure creates a kind of “mass ego”. If we go beyond the society, we can transcend the ego and reach the inner realm of unconscious. On the contrary, the ancient practice of recognizing everything alive - the trees, grasses, winds, and mountains – ready to talk to man and to dance with man to the rhythms of life enabled human beings to perceive the purity and beauty of nature surrounding them. This in turn inspired man to turn his attention to his own inner self:

“The phenomenal world experienced at certain pitches is totally living, exciting, mysterious, filling one with trembling awe, leaving one grateful and humble. The wonder of the mystery returns directly to one’s own senses and consciousness: inside and outside: the voice breathes, Ah!”

The inner rhythm of human consciousness should harmonize with the manifestation of nature that enters the human body as ‘breath’ in order to create awareness about one’s self, making it possible for one to have experiences of self. Snyder describes this process with precision in Turtle Island:
“Breath is the outer world coming into one’s body with pulse – the two always harmonizing – the source of our inward sense of rhythm. Breath is spirit, “inspiration”. Expiration, “voiced”, makes the signals by which the species connects . . . a new voice enters, a voice speaks through you clearer and stronger than what you know of yourself; with a sureness and melody of its own, singing out the inner song of the self, and of the planet.”

This conviction of Snyder is significant because according to him knowing the self is the way to know the planet. In the poem, ‘By Frazier Creek Falls’ in *Turtle Island*, the poet, standing on a rock, looks out, to listen to nature and realizes:

“This living flowing land
is all there is, forever
We are it
it sings through us.” (p.41)

In *Practice of the Wild*, Snyder reaffirms his faith in the power of the wild nature, which is the arena where the self and the culture are inextricably woven. Hence he feels that when human beings try to “know themselves, the rest of the nature is right there.” Nature becomes a sacred place, a pilgrim center that can guide man to realize his own self:

“A backer packer is a “wilderness pilgrim”. His “step–by–step, breath–by–breath walk” up a hill, into those snowfields, carrying all on the back, is so ancient a set of gestures as to bring a profound
sense of body-mind joy . . . take us (not only human beings) out of our little selves into the whole mountains – and – rivers mandala universe.”46

The contact with the real world of nature and the consequent self-transcendence enable man to experience a real sense of inspiration, exaltation and insight, which are akin to the spiritual experiences that ensue from religious practices. Snyder does not think that man can maintain this experience of a higher state as a perpetual state:

“The best purpose of such studies and hikes is to be able to come back to the lowlands and see all the land about us, agricultural, suburban, urban, as part of the same territory – never totally ruined, never completely unnatural. It can be restored, and humans could live in a considerable numbers on much of it. Great Brown Bear is walking with us, Salmon swimming upstream with us, as we stroll a city street.”47

The spiritual experience of the self may require a temporary detachment from society. Readiness to sacrifice the comforts and safety of home in order to face any danger and loneliness is necessary to cross the “species boundaries.” Once on the “verges of transgression” human beings can experience an expansion of vision:

“On the spiritual plane it requires embracing the other as oneself and stepping across the line – not “becoming one” or mixing things up holding the sameness and difference delicately in mind.”48
Thus for Snyder the self-experience is spiritual and it helps man have a clear, all-inclusive vision which is ecologically significant. It becomes an expression of the ecological unconscious.

As Nick Selby points out, the significance of Snyder’s ecological poetics is that it tries to override the various dualities that exist in Western society – “land versus poem, human versus nature, self versus others” – to integrate them into a holistic and universal vision of the self, society and environment.\(^{49}\) That may be the logic behind Snyder’s perception of land as a place of work as well as a place for a mythical regeneration of self. In the poems in *Riprap* the poet explores the relationship between the landscape and the self. For instance in the first poem, ‘Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout’, the first half describes the landscape while the second half portrays the landscape within. Thus, poetry becomes a realm to harmonize the self and the land. In ‘I Went into the Maverick Bar’ in *Turtle Island* the poet shows how knowing the nature provides man knowledge about his own self and responsibilities:

“under the tough old stars . . .

In the shadow of the bluffs

I came back to myself

To the real work, to

What is to be done.” (p.50)

According to Nick Selby,

“What Snyder proposes as his new version of the self is an analogue of the “self-informing ecosystem”, so that the revolutionary psyche
is viewed as a dynamic equilibrium of parts that are themselves, parts of yet other systems, all working in harmonious independence.\textsuperscript{50}

Selby quotes Snyder’s views on ‘self-realization’ as the ultimate aim of life:

“Is not the purpose of all this living and studying the achievement of self-knowledge, self-realization? How does knowledge of place help us know the self? The answer . . . is that we are all composite beings, not only physically but intellectually, whose identifying individual feature is a particular form or structure changing constantly in time. There is no “self” to be found in that, and yet oddly enough, there is. Part of you, and the “just this” of the ever-present moment holds all the transitory selves in its mirror. The Avatamsaka (“Flower Wreath”) jeweled-net-interpenetration-ecological-systems-emptiness-consciousness tells us, no self-realization without the Whole Self, and the Whole Self is the whole thing.”\textsuperscript{51}

This view of self-knowledge and its relatedness to place or nature is identical to the ecopsychological concept of man as a constituent of the self-regulating biosphere, whose psyche is bonded to the earth. Selby rightly points out how Snyder’s new definition of the self as “a self-informing system” coincides with the basic claim of ecology:

“By seeing the mind – actually the self, since what we have here is a very disciplined, structured, and culturally shaped sense of consciousness – as an emptiness that provides an opening into
infinitude and escapes the closure of nature (even “wild nature) while it yet is shaped by nature, Snyder is led to a new sense of self. The flux of nature exists as a self-informing system; that is the basic claim of all ecology. Likewise with the self of the psyche, which is flex and form, past and whole, inner and outer, moment and mirror.”52

Unlike Abbey and Snyder Wendell Berry does not analyze the experiences of self in nature; this could well be because of the fear of slipping into pantheism, given Berry’s primarily Christian worldview. Yet his poetry portrays his experiences of the self. Awareness of his own self helps him merge completely with nature. Many of the ‘window poems’ bear ample testimony to this fact. The window, which is a symbol of his poetry, opens up the vast nature before the poet and awakens his consciousness. Like a flowing river, the nature flows before his eyes, carrying the images of his mind. The self merges with the nature:

“. . . The frame

is a black grid

beyond which the world

flings up the wild

graph of its growth,
tree branch, river,
slope of land,
the river passing
downward, the clouds blowing,
The window is a form
of consciousness, pattern
of formed sense
through which to look
into the wild
that is a pattern too,
but dark and flowing,
bearing along the little
shapes of mind.”  (p.73)

Gradually the frame of the window vanishes; the separation between the poet and the nature outside is obliterated completely:

“. . . He is
a wilderness looking out
at the wild.”

Similar experiences of self-identification with the land or nature are vividly captured in many poems of Berry. For instance, in the poem, ‘From the Crest’, included in the section, ‘Clearing’ of The Collected Poems, the poet depicts one such experience:

“Little farm, motherland, made
by what has nearly been your ruin
When I speak to you, I speak
to myself, for we are one
body. When I speak to you,

I speak to wife, daughter, son,

Whom you have fleshed in your flesh.

And speaking to you, I speak
to all brotherhood that rises
daily in your substance,

and walks, burrows, flies, stands:

plants and beasts, whose lives

loop like dolphins through your sod.” (p.110)

Awareness about the self immediately connects the poet to the land and its flora and fauna, thus creating a vision of universal brotherhood of all the created things and beings in a moment of heightened awareness. In the section ‘Wheel’ of the *Collected Poems*, the poem ‘Elegy’ depicts the poet’s meeting with the dead of his locality. During his talk with his “teacher” who was an “old friend” the poet listens to the “Song in the Creation”, which culminates in a few moments of harmony of the self and nature:

“The moment, earth and song and mind,

the living and the dead, were one.”

The poet perceives the presence of a pervading spirit in the myriad forms of life on earth when his self links intimately with the nature. Berry presents this feeling in the poem ‘Desolation’:

“A gracious Spirit sings as it comes

and goes. It moves forever
among things. Earth and flesh, passing
into each other, singing together.” (p.45)

Thus the poetry of Wendell Berry is an expression of what ecopsychologists
describe as the dissolving of the hard shells of the self and the consequent
spontaneous and vital flow of the life of nature into the poet, enabling him to
connect himself to nature that is his home. His poems integrate the self and nature
irrevocably to create fascinating moments of complete harmony.

Annie Dillard considers self-consciousness as an acute sense of awareness
of one’s existence in a particular situation. This kind of self-consciousness hinders
those pure moments of life that can provide human beings “an experience of the
presence” which Dillard views as an experience of eternity. The nature experience
of Annie Dillard engenders in her such an experience of the present by blocking her
self-awareness and wiping away her sense of existence. She describes this
experience in Pilgrim at Tinker Creek:

“Experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow; you
catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall.”

This state of complete removal of self awareness to receive the grace and
intricate mystery of nature is vividly portrayed by Dillard when she narrates an
encounter with nature at a gas station in Nowhere, Virginia, north of Lexicon,
where she stops after a day’s interstate driving homeward. She finds herself alone
there in the absence of any other customer. Sipping the coffee that is offered to her
she gazes at the wooded mountain opposite to the gas station, set ablaze in the
golden rays of the setting sun:
“Before me extends a low hill trembling in yellow brome, and behind the hill, filling the sky, rises an enormous mountain ridge, forested, alive and awesome with brilliant blown lights. I have never seen anything so tremulous and alive. Overhead, great strips and chunks of cloud dash to the northwest in a golden rush. At my back the sun is setting – how can I not have noticed before that the sun is setting? My mind has been a blank slab of black asphalt for hours, but that doesn’t stop the sun’s wild wheel.”

As she watches the divine beauty of that scene, nature flows into her, elevating her from the realm of the self and wiping away the awareness of existence:

“These gold lights veer and retract, shatter and glide in a series of dazzling splashes, shrinking, leaking and exploding. The ridge bosses and hemmocks (hummocks) sprout bulging from its side; the whole mountain looms miles closer; the light warms and reddens; the bare forests folds and pleat itself like living protoplasm before my eyes, like a running chart, a wildly scrawling oscillograph on the present moment. The air cools; the puppy’s skin is hot. I am more alive than all the world. That is, I think, this is it, right now, the present, this empty gas station, here, this western wind, this tang of coffee on the tongue, and I am patting the puppy, I am watching the mountain. And the second I verbalize this awareness in my brain, I cease to see the mountain or feel the puppy. I am opaque, so much
black asphalt. But at the same second, the second I know I’ve lost it.

The moment she becomes aware of her state of being, of herself and her whereabouts, her senses delink from nature. A sense of alienation sets in:

“I sip my coffee. I look at the mountain, which is still doing its tricks, as you look at a still-beautiful face belonging to a person who was once your lover in another country years ago: with fond nostalgia, and recognition, but no real feeling save a secret astonishment that you are now strangers.”

Self-awareness blocks the passionate involvement and integration with nature. Annie Dillard laments the loss, the “premature ending” of an “experience of the present”:

“It is ironic that the one thing that all religions recognize as separating us from our creator – our very self-consciousness – is also the one thing that divides us from our fellow creatures. It was a bitter birthday present from evolution, cutting us off at both ends.”

Dillard considers nature experiences as experiences of the present and she feels that awareness of the self should be curbed from interfering with our enjoyment of the present:

“Catch it if you can. The present is an invisible electron; its lighting path traced faintly on a blackened screen is fleet, and fleeing, and gone.”
Such a link between nature and the sharp human senses is perceived as a transitory phase. An everlasting connection of the psyche to nature seems to be implausible:

“. . . the point is that not only does time fly and do we die, but that in these reckless conditions, we live at all, and are vouchsafed, for the duration of certain inexplicable moments, to know it.”

In order to show how man is capable of receiving pure joy that ensues from a bond with nature Dillard quotes Stephen Graham from his ‘The Gentle Act of Tramping’:

“And as you sit on the hillside, or lie prone under the trees of the forest, or sprawl wet-legged on the shingly beach of a mountain stream, the great door, that does not look like a door opens.”

And for Annie Dillard nature opens that great door filling her vision with myriad lights. Dillard does not believe that consciousness by itself can prevent human beings from living in the present. In moments of heightened awareness, the self leaves man creating emptiness within him; but eventually when the self merges with nature it enables him to gain a life of harmony with the flora and fauna. This complete merging of the self with nature is what Dillard experiences when she gazes at the mountain ablaze with the rays of the setting sun or at the cedar tree with the lights in it. After experiencing such a complete integration of the self with nature, returning to the physical realm to be aware of one’s separate existence becomes very painful:
“Self-consciousness, however, does not hinder the experience of the present. It is the one instrument that unplugs all the rest. So long as I lose myself in a tree, say, I can scent its leafy breath or estimate its board feet of lumber, I can draw its fruits or boil tea on its branches, and the tree stays tree. But the second I become aware of myself at any of these activities – looking over my own shoulder, as it were – the tree vanishes, uprooted from the spot and flung out of my sight as if it had never grown. And time, which had flowed down into the tree bearing new revelations like floating at every moment ceases. It dams, stills, stagnates.”

It is quite evident from these words that Annie Dillard believes that the awareness of the self alienates man from nature. The complete integration of the self with nature seems to be the natural state of man. According to Dillard, “self-consciousness is the curse of the city and all that sophistication implies.”

In the pure moments when man can realize the ‘present’ in nature he forgets his self because it has already merged with nature. Dillard does not think that these ‘moments of innocence’ are the prerogative of only infants or animals. She has the conviction that man can regain this state, irrespective of the influences of modern industrial-urban life:

“It is not lost to us; . . . It is possible to pursue innocence as hounds pursue hares; single-mindedly, driven by a kind of love, crashing over creeks, keening and lost in fields and forests, circling, vaulting over hedges and hills wide-eyed, giving loud tongue all unawares to
the deepest, most incomprehensible longing, a root-flame in the heart, and that warbling chorus resounding back from the mountains, hurling itself from ridge to ridge over the valley, now faint, now clear, ringing the air through which the hounds tear, open-mouthed, the echoes of their own wails dimly knocking in their lungs.”

Recalling her experiences of such pure moments in the wild nature, Annie Dillard defines this state of innocence as a human being’s forgetfulness about the existence of his own self:

“What I call innocence is the spirit’s unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object. It is at once a receptiveness and total concentration.”

In *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Dillard shares with the readers one such experience that she had:

“. . . where I stood planted open-mouthed, born, before that one particular canvas, that river, up to my neck, gasping, lost, receding into watercolor depth and depth to the vanishing point, buoyant, awed, and had to be literally hauled away. These are our few live seasons. Let us live them as purely as we can, in the present.”

Annie Dillard considers human beings as an integral part of nature, as are the leaves of a tree. To experience this harmony man has to forget his self and involve himself with the intricacies of nature. She describes how she has encountered a similar situation:
“I never knew I was there, either. For that forty minutes last night I was purely sensitive and mute as a photographic plate, I received impressions, but I did not print out captions. My own self-awareness had disappeared. . . I have lost self-consciousness about moving slowly and halting suddenly; it is second nature to me now. And I have often noticed that even a few minutes of this self forgetfulness is tremendously invigorating. I wonder if we do not waste most of our energy just by spending every waking minute saying hello to ourselves.’’66

The ‘self-forgetfulness’ can be attained with ease, if man has a deep desire to connect himself to nature. Once the self is bonded to nature, one has to wait without an expectation, “emptied” and “translucent” and then the bounty of nature will flow into one:

“The death of the self of which the great writers speak is no violent act. It is merely the joining of the great rock heart of the earth in its roll. It is merely the slow cessation of the will’s sprints and the intellect’s chatter: it is waiting like a hollow bell with stilled tongue. . . The waiting itself is the thing.”67

The nature experiences of all these writers highlight their personal sense of connection with nature which has nourished their selves. Self’s integration with nature is seen as a natural process and it enables them to realize the need for gratitude and reciprocity in man’s relationship with the planet. Abbey, Snyder and Berry experience their selves merging with nature when they live in close
communion with nature. But for Annie Dillard in the most natural state, her self is continuously linked to nature. All these writers, like the ecopsychologists, are aware of the ecocidal consequences of the self’s alienation from nature and hence their writings advocate the need to develop a changed sense of identity that ensues from the merging of ‘self’ with ‘nature’ by allowing the land to reclaim man.
END NOTES


12. Daniel Stern quoted by Anita Barrows, Ecopsychology, 106.


42. Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* 120.
43. Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* 123.
44. Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* 123.
47. Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild*, 94.
49. Nick Selby, “Poem as Workplace: Gary Snyder’s Ecological Poetics”,
http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/snyder/selby.htm ,2.
50. Nick Selby, 3.
51. Snyder quoted by Nick Selby, 3.
52. Nick Selby, 4.
54. Annie Dillard, 78.
55. Annie Dillard, 78-79.
56. Annie Dillard, 79.
57. Annie Dillard, 79.
58. Annie Dillard, 79.
59. Annie Dillard, 80.
60. Stephen Graham quoted by Annie Dillard, 80.
61. Annie Dillard, 81.
62. Annie Dillard, 81.
63. Annie Dillard, 82.
64. Annie Dillard, 82.
65. Annie Dillard, 82.
67. Annie Dillard, 258.