

John S. Farnsworth  
Santa Clara University, California

Peter Quigley, *Housing the Environmental Imagination: Politics, Beauty and Refuge in American Nature Writing* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 278 pp.

There is a great deal to admire in Quigley's latest book, *Housing the Environmental Imagination: Politics, Beauty and Refuge in American Nature Writing*. His critique of literary theory, a critique from within, is well worth the read, especially to anyone who might enjoy theory with a bit of wit. To get things rolling, Quigley grapples with Eagleton's assertion that "Structuralism is a way of refurbishing the literary institution, providing it with a *raison d'être* more respectable and compelling than gush about sunsets," responding with a word of caution, that "gushing at sunsets is embraced by this book as an essential need for humans and worthy of study" (4). Similarly, Quigley rails against the "arrogant lexicon that has spun out of cultural studies," concluding that "When one is ushered into this special language, one actually comes to believe one is working within a rare and exacting field" (20).

Most of the theoretical heavy lifting takes place in the opening chapter, "Modernism and Our Discontents," where William Cronon emerges as a major locus of Quigley's discontent. Quigley is troubled that critics such as Cronon treat attraction to nature as a mere episteme (5), and is especially concerned with Cronon's complaint that the move toward solitude functions as part of a "male wilderness romance" (7). Unfortunately, at least in terms of the book's central argument, Quigley's almost exclusive focus on male writers seems to prove Cronon's point. In a nutshell, Quigley's project in *Housing the Environmental Imagination* has been to explore how the physical house (or cabin) functions as a nexus point between nature and culture for five nature writers: Henry David Thoreau, Robinson Jeffers, Gary Snyder, Wendell Barry and Scott Russell Sanders.

The prevailing question throughout my reading of the book has been why Quigley selects these particular writers while ignoring others. Quigley addresses this question in his concluding chapter, stating, "I have tried to present writers whose writing project was indistinguishable from their living project" (249). Yet, as a student of American nature writing, I find this explanation troubling. Why not include John Burroughs, who built an Adirondack-style cabin, "Slabsides," and wrote, "Life has a different flavor here" in his essay "Far and Near," in 1904? Or why not include Aldo Leopold, who purchased a desolate, windswept tract of land in Sand County, Wisconsin, rebuilt the dilapidated chicken coop into a family retreat they called "The Shack," and ultimately planted more than 40,000 trees in an attempt to reforest the property? What about Henry Beston, whose 20'x16' beach cottage, named "Fo'castle," became the impetus for a classic of

American nature writing, *The Outermost House?* Leopold and Beston are indeed mentioned in passing in a potpourri chapter titled, "Variations on the Theme," but their treatment therein begs the question why some writers are being canonized while others are being glossed.

Leaving behind these more historical figures, as a baby boomer I also found myself wondering about the work of contemporary environmental writers such as Michael Pollan, whose *A Place of my Own: The Architecture of Daydreams* would have provided an intriguing counterpoint to the architectural processes of a Snyder or Jeffers. (What better point of comparison than foodie intellectual vs beat poet vs inhumanist?)

Several women writers are mentioned in passing in "Variations on the Theme," almost as an apology for their omission from the canon. Terry Tempest Williams' book, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, for example, is deemed by Quigley to be "a tempting potential target for larger study," but is passed over because it doesn't focus on "the significance of place for an individual." This is dangerous territory for the author, but Quigley clarifies, "For inclusion here, there needed to be a significant value placed on the house as a basis and focus for much of the writing and living project." Quigley goes on to state, "There are other women writers who focused on houses in their work, but the quality of their writing didn't rise to the level of a Terry Tempest Williams, or of a Jeffers, Sanders, Snyder or Thoreau" (177). In this same paragraph, Quigley mentions Ann LaBastille's project, *Woodswoman: Living Alone in the Adirondack Wilderness*, but critiques the work thus: "[...] the book raises no environmental, social, and political issues of significance and was therefore left out." I find this approach to LaBastille's work a bit dismissive; she was a woman with a doctorate in wildlife ecology from Cornell who published 25 scientific papers while serving as a role model at the dawn of second-wave feminism, living sustainably in the wilderness in a cabin she'd built herself. Personally, I find significant environmental and social issues to have been raised both by her work and by how she lived her life.

Annie Dillard might have served as an interesting addition to Quigley's canon, although in some ways she might function as an antithesis to Quigley's assertion that "Context is important for the presence, perception and presentation of beauty" (10). In *The Writing Life*, Dillard famously advises, "Appealing work places are to be avoided. One wants a room with no view, so imagination can meet memory in the dark" (26). That said, Dillard inhabited at least two cabins as part of her writing life. In Randall Roorda's *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing* these are described as "her pine-shack study at Cape Cod and coastal cabin at Puget Sound" (162). Dillard writes about her Puget Sound experience in the third chapter of *The Writing Life*, how it necessitated that she learn to spit wood, and concludes that section with typical humor, "The island comedy was over; everybody had to go back to work; and I never did get warm" (44).

The point here is that by yielding to his impulse to canonize a handful of writers, Quigley misses the opportunity to engage in some serious scholarship that would have emerged had this study been more comprehensive. If the nature writer's cabin in the woods is a trope growing out of some male wilderness romance, why not examine it as

such? When Quigley writes, in the book's final paragraph, "We are free to find a piece of land, stack stones, cut and sand wood, enjoy the feel and the relation between wood, stone, and glass, stare out the window, note the light spilling generously over the oak floor, write about and contemplate a wondrous, unfolding world," is there something essentially male about such a project? That this question is not even addressed in the book must be considered a serious oversight.

Let me state for the record that I'm a long-time fan of Quigley's work. The anthology *Coyote in the Maze: Tracking Edward Abbey in a World of Words*, which Quigley edited in 1998, pioneered new directions in Abbey scholarship, helping us move beyond the memorializing-Cactus-Ed stage and into serious studies about why Abbey's writing continued to be persuasive for new generations of readers. My work conducting a rhetorical analysis of *Desert Solitaire* has benefited substantially from insights contained in Quigley's anthology.

Quigley writes, "Critics today are free to roam and explore outside any canonical requirements; burning the house down on the way out the door, however, is not necessary" (35). I should heed this admonition myself, for it has not been my intention here to burn down *Housing the Environmental Imagination*. In various classes I teach the writing of all Quigley's saints, and my understanding of Thoreau, Jeffers, Snyder, Berry and Sanders has gained depth as a result of Quigley's contextualization of their work. Additionally, I have gained insight into my own process as a writer, one who has spent the better part of the past year trying to evoke natural history. It has always been an essential part of my process to be able to stare out the window at the natural world, even here in my departmental office, and now I have a little better sense why that is.

## Works Cited

- Dillard, Annie. *The Writing Life*. NY: Harper and Row, 1989. Print.
- Farnsworth, John. "What Does the Desert Say?: A Rhetorical Analysis of *Desert Solitaire*." *ISLE* 12.1 (2010): 105-121. Print.
- Pollan, Michael. *A Place of my Own: The Architecture of Daydreams*. NY: Penguin, 2008.
- Quigley, Peter. *Housing the Environmental Imagination: Politics, Beauty, and Refuge in American Nature Writing*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012. Print.
- . *Coyote in the Maze: Tracking Edward Abbey in a World of Words*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah Press, 1998. Print.
- Roorda, Randall. *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing*. Albany, State U of New York Press, 1998. Print.
- Williams, Terry Tempest. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*. NY: Pantheon Books, 1991. Print.