

PISCATORIAL PROTESTANTS:
ANGLING, RELIGION, AND NATURE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

A Thesis
by
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ABSTRACT

PISCATORIAL PROTESTANTS: ANGLING, RELIGION, AND NATURE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA. (May 2012)

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This thesis focuses on philosophies of George Washington Bethune, Henry Ward Beecher, and Henry Van Dyke, ministers who championed angling as a method to reconcile human nature with the natural world. On the heels of European Enlightenment, nineteenth-century American intellectualism dramatically changed popular opinions of the wilderness, and Puritan perspectives of sinister wilderness gave way to idyllic, transcendental experiences in nature. In both practice and literature, angling exploded in popularity among Protestant ministers throughout the nineteenth century, and the pursuit of fish in New England backwoods became a conduit to nature's God. Angling offered the opportunity to actually *become* part of the natural setting. The rush of the river, intense study of fish patterns and habitat, and the stress-free nature of the "gentle art" offered spiritual renewal for the troubled soul of modern man. Despite the rise of Transcendentalism, many clergymen anglers remained dogmatically Christian and presented various biblical and moral defenses of the sport. They likewise waxed eloquent on the restorative powers of nature through angling, and effectively laid the foundation for a new Christian environmental ethic.

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My family: Dad, who taught me how to cast and mend, as well as live and pray, I thank from the heart of my bottom. Though the subject of angling clergy seems obvious, you have shown the most interest and have given me the motivation to continue with a subject that has become as enjoyable and frustrating as fishing itself. Mom, your undying support laid the foundation for my confidence in growing from a little boy into, well, a bigger boy. I have never had a more enthusiastic fan. Miss Gail, all who know and love you understand that you are a rock of faith and determination. Tony, you made me a man.

Finally, my angels: As tears wet the keys that put these thoughts to paper, I struggle to understand the depth of grace and patience that emanates from the love of my life, Bregitte. You have been a bastion of composure and a cornerstone of tranquility while I continue to hurl us into turbulence and confusion. Your love shakes me like an earthquake. And little Frog, I love you more than life. I cannot help but think that the tiny hands that constantly knock on the door of my office, as well as my heart, bring me out of my own complicated head into a world of simplicity and serenity. The patter of your feet is the music of my soul.

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INTRODUCTION

Many historians and environmentalists share a common approach to early American nature attitudes: Since the landfall of Puritans in the New World, American Christians have viewed the wilderness as sinister, foreboding, and in need of cultivation to return to a perfected, Edenic state. The resulting degradation of New England forests and reduced fish and wildlife populations lends evidence to support the criticism, and both Great Awakenings promoted the individualism that ultimately produced trends of wealth accumulation at the expense of the American wilderness. Scholars likewise highlight the roles that Enlightenment-era Europeans and their Transcendentalist disciples played in forging new philosophies about wholesomeness and purity derived from sublime experiences in nature. What has been left out of the scholarship, however, is the function that American Protestants served in advancing many of the same ideas about seeking the Divine in the wilderness and thus placing a redeeming value on nature. Through the vehicle of recreational angling, this thesis illuminates a key component of the history of American naturalism and conservation that has been largely neglected.

American Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman are given due credit for shaping progressive American perspectives on the non-human world and leaving behind Puritan apprehensions of the wilderness. Historian Roderick Nash correctly asserted that they did not seek to erode the ideas of seclusion or

primitiveness associated with the frontier, but rather furthered the Enlightenment supposition that those aspects of wilderness should be sought by modern man.¹

A different group of New Englanders, however, is often overlooked as a contributor to reforming ideas about nature. Until recently, the assumption that adherents of John Calvin's strain of Protestantism universally sought to return the natural world to its previously perfect condition through cultivation and domination of natural resources remained widespread in scholarship. In spite of the general supposition, a handful of modern reinterpretations of early America highlight the inaccuracy of such a broad suggestion. The men studied in this thesis, in fact, echoed many of the same calls for simplicity and seclusion without adopting a quasi-pantheistic worship of nature, and remained steadfast on some of the common tenets of traditional Christianity. This work highlights three important ministerial figures of nineteenth-century Protestantism, George Washington Bethune, Henry Ward Beecher, and Henry Van Dyke, all of whom added to an enlightened change in nature attitudes through angling literature, not only in religious communities, but also in the secular world. Angling serves this thesis with a vehicle to demonstrate the influence that Protestant ministers exerted on the evolution of the American nature ethic. While Transcendentalists "lived deliberately" and focused on a wide range of wilderness activities, these three ministers focused on the special relationship that anglers enjoyed with creation and its creator. Some Romantics like Thoreau observed the connection between fishing and the natural world, but seldom did they concentrate heavily on the sport as these men did.

The history of angling, especially among members of American religious circles, has become part of a relatively new breed of scholarship that offers a fresh perspective on the

¹ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 44.

development of American attitudes toward nature. The nature narrative, once seen as a straightforward Puritan castigation of savage wilderness, has undergone as many interpretations as the word “nature” itself. Early American religious leaders like John Winthrop sought the Christianization of wilderness in promoting the “city on a hill,” but in the following century, devout Calvinist adherents like Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather sensed a divine calling in the natural world.² Natural theology, emerging in both Europe and the United States toward the end of the eighteenth century, further loosened the restrictions on Christian relationships with the untamed frontier. As recreational angling grew in popularity throughout the nineteenth century, theologians began casting flies as often as aspersions, and through clever and emotional analogies, reformed ministers in New England redefined piety and promoted a healthy experience with nature through angling. The writings and speeches of three popular Protestant ministers of the nineteenth century provide excellent case studies of the transitions of both the sport of angling and American Protestant theology in the critical years of the nineteenth century.³

Fly fishing historians from Charles Goodspeed to Paul Schullery agree that due to a dearth of fishing literature from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Puritan approval of angling as a profitable employment of leisure time remains uncertain.⁴ Records show that American settlers as early as John Smith were pleased with the prospect of rod-and-line fishing for amusement and sustenance.⁵ Schullery notes that in Boston, “judging by the pace of recreation in the early 1700s, earlier fishing must have been going on,” and that from

²Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 40-43.

³ William Washabaugh, *Deep Trout: Angling in Popular Culture* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 27.

⁴ Charles Goodspeed, *Angling in America: Its Early History and Literature* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1939), 14.

⁵ Joel Daehnke, *In the Work of Their Hand is Their Prayer: Cultural Narrative and Redemption on the American Frontiers, 1830-1930* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 2003), 158.

eighteenth-century Pennsylvania “the richest historical legacy has been given us of early American angling.”⁶ This problem of ambiguity, however, inevitably leads to arguments about the message that Puritan anglers left to successors, but the surge in fishing’s popularity in the nineteenth century speaks volumes regarding what followers heard.

Scores of efforts have been made to observe the union of religion and nature, and the literature of fishing and wilderness has become stunningly widespread in the past three decades. The popularity of angling history is growing. Particularly since the publication of Norman Maclean’s 1976 novel *A River Runs Through It*, fishing historians have explored the relationship between angling and righteousness. Of course, since the earliest days of angling literature in Europe, aficionados promoted the innate virtues of fly fishing, but recently serious scholarship has been devoted to exploring the psychological impact of linking outdoor sports with religious piety. Another part of the history of environmentalism plays perhaps the most important role in this thesis. The aim is to question the perceived roots of American preservation and conservation ethics that are usually bestowed on Transcendentalists and their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment ancestors. This thesis also highlights the religious transitions that have been famously recorded as a large part of the emergence of American nationalism.

Angling history is a young discipline, but in the past few decades, historians have turned to outdoor sports to trace ideas like conservation and manliness. Most of the important works on the history of angling follow the development of technology and fishing styles, or else present little more than thorough literature reviews. Several like Paul Schullery’s *American Fly Fishing: A History* and Andrew Herd’s *The Fly* do both, and

⁶ Paul Schullery, *American Fly Fishing: A History* (New York: Nick Lyons Books, 1987), 15, 16.

provide broad, yet fairly complete, overviews of the history of the sport.⁷ Some efforts such as John F. Reiger's *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, which initiated a trend that has become one of the most popular approaches in histories of sport and environmentalism, attach the formative years of popular angling with the roots of American conservation.⁸ Other works plunge deep into the psychological nature of sports, and as professor William Washabaugh has demonstrated in *Deep Trout: Angling in Popular Culture*, they often delve into anthropological discourses that highlight the paradoxes and conventions of angling. Few works focus exclusively on theological promotions of the sport that helped spur progressive conservation practices.

Despite the lack of attention, angling parsons have been an inextricable part of the American fishing story. Several authors and editors knew this well in the last decades of the nineteenth century, but surprisingly few modern historians have covered their impact. The fact that the nineteenth century witnessed a tremendous rise in American church membership and religious optimism illustrates the influence Protestant ministers exerted on the reforming culture that subsequently emerged. Histories of abolition, women's suffrage, and social reform are rooted in liberalized Protestantism, yet historians and environmentalists have thus far failed to note the same connection to nature ethics. This thesis emphasizes the writings of three of those clergymen who became popular in part because they preached a progressive conservation ethos of temperance, wise-use, and respect for the nature in which they saw the Divine.

Although the focus of this thesis centers on angling as an intermediary to nature, understanding the religious context of the era is crucial to appreciating the theological

⁷ Andrew Herd, *The Fly* (London: Medlar Press, 2003).

⁸ John F. Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*, 3rd ed. (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001), 19.

transitions that Protestant nature writers experienced. Two of the most important authors of early American religion, Jon Butler and Nathan Hatch, help clarify the religious climate in which this thesis operates. In *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, Butler posited that religious philosophies that emerged in eighteenth-century America became the first real delineation between American and European Christianity. Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* contrasted that assertion by arguing that the nineteenth century and the rise of democracy and liberalism shortly after the Revolution defined American Christianity much more specifically than did the First Great Awakening. The significance of either position remains important to this thesis, which argues that modern environmentalism shares the same historical roots with social reform and equality movements in that they all grew out of nineteenth-century Protestant efforts to reconcile modern man with God. Butler argued that American Christianity in its markedly non-European form began long after singular-minded Puritanism descended on the New World. He suggested that British asceticism accompanied religious leaders to America during the seventeenth century and contributed to the lack of American religious fervor. Puritan visions of a new practicable religion "fell away to an awkward localism and then brought forth an expanding secularism," produced anxiety among settlers, and led to religious indifference in the New World.⁹

Tossing aside widespread academic versions of Puritan influence on American religious tradition, Butler contended that the real modification and subsequent high parishioner turnouts on Sundays appeared in the colonies as early as the 1670s, but were cemented to religious tradition in the decades that followed the First Great Awakening. The change owed itself to diversity and religious pluralism, later an obvious trend of nineteenth-

⁹ Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 37.

century nature ethics, as well as a revival in denominational authority and coercion in the years leading up to the American Revolution.¹⁰ Eighteenth-century Christians were able to blend an eclectic array of cultures, spiritualism, and syncretism to promote religious adherence, societal improvements and, according to Butler, the first genuine American brand of Christianity. The crux of his argument lay in the foundation of doctrinal liberalism and cultural enlightenment that reached its zenith in the mid-nineteenth century.

Contrary to Butler's emphasis on pluralism and the ascension of diverse religious awareness in the 1700s, Nathan Hatch offered a different opinion on the origins of American religious tradition. In *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Hatch pointed to a higher rate of laity involvement and improved relationships in denominational hierarchies that surfaced after the Revolution as the source of distinctive American Christianity.¹¹ The result generated a powerful optimism in hopes of a harmonious, utopian society rooted in Jacksonian democracy and the rise of populism. On the heels of Revolutionary angst directed at authoritarian establishments, evangelical movements in the early republic directed doctrinal focus away from intellectualism, returned to spiritual individualism outside of traditional theology, and fused the denominations into popular culture. Church attendance boomed throughout the nineteenth century because of this new democratic nature, and the prospect of laypeople's ability to interpret scripture erased much of the need for a super-elite clergy.¹² Hatch, in contrast to what he thinks is the assumed view, believes the boundary that was obliterated was not one of learning and intellect, but of class in general. Without that

¹⁰ Butler, 177.

¹¹ Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 9.

¹² Hatch, 182.

distinction, the rise of enlightened thinkers of the nineteenth century becomes confusing, but from Hatch's perspective, optimism in the 1800s flourished because those lines were blurred.

Though neither work reflects any philosophies on nature that might have resulted, they do stage many changes wrought in the nineteenth century and allow an investigation of the potential effects of those two arguments. With regard to religion and nature, history generally sides with Hatch's assertion that camp-meetings, revivalism, and the Second Great Awakening stirred the organizers of liberalized religion to move away from strict Calvinism and embrace aspects of Universalism and the inherent goodness of man. From a Universalist perspective, the idea of communing with nature and nature's God opened the doors for American Romantics and Transcendentalists to cut the chains of traditional theology and in many ways thrust American Protestantism into a novel, liberal direction. This new bearing however was not without Reformed precedent in relation to the ways in which Christian luminaries experienced nature.

Two important Reformed fathers, John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards, have received attention from at least a handful of scholars in regards to God and nature. In *The Theater of His Glory*, Susan Schreiner discusses Calvin's belief that God maintains order in the natural world through Providence. Schreiner insisted that because he felt that God was constantly involved in the cosmos, Calvin understood that the wonders of nature divinely revealed the spirit of God and reflected the inherent "goodness" of the natural world. In this way "sin neither annihilated the natural world nor thwarted God's purpose in creation," which was to point toward salvation.¹³ This sentiment would later be reflected in the works of both traditional and liberal American angling ministers.

¹³ Susan Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1991), 4.

Biographer Robert Jenson traced the life of one of the country's most famous preachers in *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards*. Jenson neatly reexamined the philosophies of "the Last Great Puritan" and offered some surprising revelations of Edwards who believed that "the Son of God created the world ... to communicate himself in an image of his own excellency."¹⁴ Jenson insisted that Edwards, despite his transcendental rhetoric, boldly promoted the deity of Christ, unlike later Unitarians and Transcendentalists. He also argued that Edwards deeply believed that God created every breath of wind and every atom of earth to satisfy Christian desires. Though it was this utilitarian mentality that became a source of contention for historians of religion and nature, exploration of the nature doctrines of both reformers should arouse an interest in the history of Reformed Protestant thought about nature. If Transcendentalism completely influenced American Christian nature attitudes, the same views and promotion of sport and wilderness should have emerged in other sects like Methodists and Baptists, yet it manifestly did not. Ostensibly, the democratic character and appeal to lower classes of these other denominations may hold the answer, but further inspections will be left for another project.

Most modern scholars generally focus on only one aspect of Protestantism's influence on ecological reform that advocated the destruction of the wilderness for the improvement of the human condition. Since the 1960s, historians like Roderick Nash and Lynn White, Jr. have pointed out that Christianity has long "insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his natural ends."¹⁵ Both Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* and White's "Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" were first published in 1967, three years after Rachel Carson produced *Silent Spring*, in an academic world looking for the source that

¹⁴ Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 19.

¹⁵ Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1205.

sanctioned American domination of nature. Nash felt that Renaissance Christianity forced adherents to focus on the afterlife instead of the present situation. This in turn, he offered, influenced Puritan colonists to pit themselves in a war against “heathenism, idolatry, and devil worship” in the wilderness.¹⁶ He also cited the promotion of Manifest Destiny in the nineteenth century, ostensibly encouraged by Providence, as a continuation of pride in the power of Christian attempts to civilize the savage wild.¹⁷ Nash believed that the Progressive-era nature ethic surfaced from a rejection of Calvinistic obstacles that suggested that truth came only from the Bible. Supporting Nash’s assertions in an often misunderstood and famously referenced article in *Science*, White argued that the ancient pioneers of Christianity destroyed animism and its association of spirits in nature to create a climate of indifference to the natural world.¹⁸ He noted that Eastern Christianity recognized God’s voice in nature, but believed that the Western version’s attempts to understand God’s mind led to scientific efforts to bring nature under the dominion of man. White did not suggest that religion was totally at fault, but he supposed that the human-centered nature of Christianity and the blend of science and technology it promoted bore a large burden of guilt.¹⁹

Perhaps the most popular modern author to continue holding the Western Judeo-Christian tradition accountable for wilderness destruction is eco-feminist Carolyn Merchant. In *American Environmental History: An Introduction*, she agreed with White’s assessment of the Christian obliteration of animism and rising culture of indifference in.²⁰ She regularly condemned not only Christianity’s anthropocentrism, but also suggested that its reliance on

¹⁶ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 37.

¹⁷ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 42.

¹⁸ White, Jr., 1205.

¹⁹ White, Jr., 1206.

²⁰ Carolyn Merchant, *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 10.

salvation of the world through male believers gave nature the female gender and associated it with Eve, who needed to be “transformed and redeemed.”²¹ In *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture*, first in an article published in 1995 and later as a lengthier book, Merchant led the charge that defined the Christian wilderness ethic as an “Edenic narrative.” She related the story as a decline of nature after Original Sin, and the Western mantra became one of cultivation and beneficial use of nature in an attempt to return the land to its perfect state that resembled the original Garden of Eden. Though Merchant’s solution was Edenic itself, she painted an interesting picture of the results of Christian influence on the American wilderness. This thesis attempts to build from scholarship like hers to denote that the positive change in Western nature attitudes came from the very religious followers that Merchant blamed for the modern ecologic crisis. Though the subjects of this study embody the utilitarianism that Merchant bemoaned, they often saw nature as antithetical perfection to man’s innate fallen nature.

Seldom have historians dared to assert that strains of Puritan dogmas and American Christian directives influenced the mainstream wilderness ethos in a positive way. Historian Mark Stoll, however, declared that American Protestantism produced two extremely conflicting philosophical camps that challenge some of the common castigations of religion. In *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America*, he conceded that American Christianity ordered its adherents to work diligently and supported capitalism, industry, and the same individualism that receives much of the blame for the modern ecological crisis. In a rare move, Stoll also contended that the same religious principles, namely stewardship and generous charity, that stemmed from biblical directives also promoted the wise use and

²¹ Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden: The Fate of Nature in Western Culture* (New York: Routledge Press, 2003), 50.

protection of the American wilderness. He began his seminal work with an interpretation of the Puritan Anne Bradstreet's seventeenth-century nature poems that were popular even among the most devout Puritan leaders. Stoll credited her with challenging the commonly held belief that Puritans needed to cultivate the New World in hopes of resurrecting Eden, and asserted that "Bradstreet's poetry is evidence that already the New England elite in its wilderness Jerusalem was thinking in terms of the redemption of fallen man in his wilderness paradise."²² He claimed that she and her admirers predated Transcendentalist thinking about nature, human nature, and society by nearly two centuries. Stoll proceeded to produce a series of biographical excerpts that ranged from Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson to John Muir and Aldo Leopold, and insisted that each subject derived personal principles from the influence of American Protestantism. Though the work has received loads of criticism, Stoll opened the door for forward-thinking historians to consider the dramatic changes in American Protestantism as described by Hatch and Butler, and his work has dramatically influenced the approach of this thesis.

At least a handful of academic endeavors follow the Puritan roots of sport and outdoor activities and set up opportunities for examinations of the background of nineteenth-century angling, but none associate theologically sanctioned recreation with nature ethics and the evolution of conservation. Bruce C. Daniels' *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* posited an argument that would support the findings of this thesis and contended that American Calvinists might not have been so determined to refrain from enjoying the bounties of the sinister wilderness. Daniels argued that because no early restrictions on fish and game existed in the New World, Puritans enthusiastically pursued

²² Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 64.

recreation in an “outdoor sportsman’s paradise.”²³ He might have explained the potential that Puritan activities left to successors in promotion of sport and divine nature, but the book is more of an insight into seventeenth century sporting than a cause-and-effect history.

Other publications, however, such as Joel Daehnke’s *In the Work of Their Hands is Their Prayer*, highlight the Christian fellowship of sports like fishing that “enjoyed a sort of immunity from the timeworn critique of leisure as idleness and frivolity.”²⁴ Daehnke understood that nature’s divinity became especially evident to anglers, but failed to explain how Protestants employed the sentiment as readily as Transcendentalists and deists. He also focused on the fraternity of pious men that angling produced. In “American Angling: The Rise of Urbanism and the Romance of the Rod and Reel,” an essay in *Hard at Play: Leisure in American, 1840-1940*, Colleen Sheehy wrote a compact, yet excellent overview of the increasing value that modern nineteenth-century society placed on the benefits of angling. Although she mentioned Emerson, Thoreau, and the vision of “the natural world as the means to spiritual truth,” she failed to discuss the important role that Protestant ministers played in sanctioning angling as a method to experience God outside of the city.²⁵

²³ Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 168.

²⁴ Daehnke, 159.

²⁵ Colleen Sheehy, “The Rise of Urbanism and the Romance of the Rod and Reel,” in *Hard at Play: Leisure in America, 1840-1940*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 81.

I.

NATURE AND PROTESTANTISM IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

Mainstream nineteenth-century American theology represented the culmination of several European movements whose philosophies centered on nature. Transcendentalism blended the effects of both the Scientific Revolution that sought to understand God through the study of nature and the Enlightenment which tried to reunite reason with the Divine. By the time that men like George Bethune and Henry Ward Beecher emerged into the public eye, Natural Theology, Transcendentalism, and Darwinism dominated the discussion of the natural world. Throughout the rest of the century, modernization of theology forced Protestant ministers either to reject new proposals at the risk of losing intellectual esteem, or embrace them and jeopardize losing steadfast adherents. As a result, New England luminaries like William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau influenced the transition in theology that was once so strictly Calvinistic and grim in its estimation of the natural world.

Historical accounts often surmise one recognizable reality of Transcendentalist-era nature writings and philosophies. Scholars like Robert C. Bredeson have suggested that even as the description of “true” nature underwent dramatic changes in the middle of the nineteenth century, appreciation for the natural world came only to those who did not depend on it and could afford leisure time. In an article in 1968, Bredeson asserted that “it was the privilege of those far enough removed from nature to be able to see it as a scenic backdrop

and not, as in the case of the plain dirt farmer, in the relationship of daily antagonist.”²⁶ Like most notable American clergymen, the three ministers studied here were either born into wealth or, as in Beecher’s case, thrived off of good salaries and fees for speaking engagements. Class distinctions drawn by commercial affluence and the rise of American capitalism played a major role not only in the attitudes of prosperous New England clergy but also in the development of the Romantic wilderness ethic.

Two themes of modernization dominated Protestant discussions of nature. First, since the earliest days of Puritan New England, wickedness and temptation flourished in the wilderness that Christianity had not reached. Secondly, the spreading of civilization, industry, and modern culture reflected the Puritan method of thwarting evil that lurked in nature. In the aftermath of Enlightenment rationalism and due in part to the emergence of emotional Transcendentalism, the tide began to turn in mainstream religious circles. As cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and New York became overrun with hedonism and intemperance, many New England preachers realized that evil might well have penetrated the once-sacred town. As a result, various ministers, many of whom were products of the Second Great Awakening, began promoting the revelation of God in the solitude of the frontier. Likewise, the idea that science supplanted God as an explanation for natural phenomena crumbled as Calvinists of the period discovered that intricacies of nature inexorably pointed to nature’s God. Scientific study of the natural world supported ideas like William Paley’s *Natural Theology*, and scores of ministers became part-time biologists in an attempt to blend intellectualism and religion. The overturning of these two Puritan

²⁶ Robert C. Bredeson, “Landscape Description in Travel Literature,” *American Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (Spring, 1968): 89. (86-94)

misconceptions laid the foundation for how Protestants in the nineteenth century and beyond would view the natural world.

George Washington Bethune and Pre-Emersonian Nature Philosophy

*There is not a vibration of the air to a voice of nature, but makes part of a profound harmony, arranged by infinite skill, if we use it aright, to cheer the heart, refine the mind, and uplift the soul in aspirations of praise to that world, where a chorus, whom no man can number, strike the harp and swell the voice with diapasons full, unceasing, and of perfect joy.*²⁷

“Dr. Bethune, eloquent among the men of an eloquent generation, took endless delight in having been arrested as a suspicious character in one of the towns on Lake Champlain when he came out of the woods on some errand, sunburned, weather-beaten, and shabby.”²⁸ Instead of embracing the proud, ascetic nature of a Calvinist minister made wealthy by a successful merchant family, George Washington Bethune could have easily scorned soiled clothing and the rude manners of frontiersmen. Instead, the good-natured Reformed minister seemed pleased with the fact that he was as comfortable with Adirondack woodsmen as he was with Boston intellectuals. Willing to disregard dirt and water, he was never bothered by bringing home “more mud than trout.”²⁹ This portrait of Bethune stood in stark contrast to the minions of austere Reformed ministers who preceded him, but then again, Bethune did as much to reform the Protestant perspective on wilderness as anyone else in early nineteenth-century New England.

Bethune, born into staunch Calvinism in 1805, represented the earliest of theologians faced with the difficult doctrinal transitions that affected traditional Protestants of the first

²⁷ George W. Bethune, *Sermons* (Philadelphia: Mentz and Rovoudt, 1846), 223.

²⁸ “Untitled,” *The Outlook* 90, no. 3 (September 19, 1908): 107.

²⁹ Abraham. R. Van Nest, *Memoir of Reverend George W. Bethune, D. D.* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1867), 210.

few decades of the nineteenth century. The uneasiness regarding wilderness that Puritanism imparted to nineteenth-century New England ministers promoted the need to civilize untamed nature. Yet by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, even Calvinist ministers noticed a trend of modern American society that Puritan forefathers pointed out: The same evil that lurked in the rugged backwoods of the American frontier was just as readily tempting in the contemporary centers of business and industry. Bethune's father, a successful merchant and founding member of Princeton Theological Seminary, reminded the young scholar that the city, once a bastion of Puritan civility, could be as full of savagery and temptation as any Puritan wilderness.³⁰ A conflict from this seeming contradiction between innocent nature and sinister wilderness arose not only among early nineteenth-century New England theologians, but also in Bethune's philosophy. Castigation of vices in civilized society and praise for the strengthening of faith in the backcountry of frontier America became a common theme in his preaching. Faced with the proposition of resolving the two opposing views of nature, he became one of the first conventional American theologians to synthesize the rival perspectives into a progressive view of nature through poetry, art, speech, and especially commentary on angling.

Bethune focused on a tenuous balance of business and leisure in his preaching, yet he frequently mimicked the calls of Transcendentalists to escape the vexation of town and retreat to the wilderness for rest. He often addressed rooms full of New England businessmen, advancing commercial utilitarianism and preaching virtuous business practices and benevolence, and though fond of promoting the Puritan work ethic, Bethune remained careful to temper commercial zeal with stewardship rhetoric. He was at once transcendental in his perspective on nature, and conservatively pragmatic in terms of fiscal success. In

³⁰ Van Nest, 42.

many ways, he provided an excellent example of early-century ministers who experienced personal theology and wilderness ethos in transition.

Though he embraced evangelism and some aspects of Puritan aspirations of reaching lost souls on the frontier, he commonly lamented modernity's intrusion of the hearts of men as well as the backwoods of New York. In a poem entitled "To My Mother," he expressed the sorrow he felt over the unrecognizable natural world of his childhood:

Those scenes are fled; the rattling car
O'er flint paved streets profaned the spot

Where in the sod we stowed the "Star
Of Bethlehem" and "Forget-me-not;"

Oh! Wo to Mammon's desolate reign,
We ne'er shall find on earth a home again!³¹

Although according to Bethune "the history of ... modern liberty is identified with the history of commerce," industrial enterprise often enslaved men and kept them from experiencing transcendent goals of life, and often intruded on scenes of otherwise unspoiled nature.³² While he granted commerce its due, Bethune instructed that "the right pursuit of knowledge, and cultivation of the heart, are the true methods of making life profitable."³³ Ideals of hard work and accumulation of wealth served Bethune only for the endorsement of charitable action, and too often the lure of economic spoils obstructed the path of righteousness. For Bethune, that path to righteousness often went unpaved and it led away from centers of commerce into the wilderness.

Bethune's utilitarian values sometimes seemed to oppose his enthusiasm for untrammelled nature, but through an admiration of science, art, and in his own poetic

³¹ George W. Bethune, *Lays of Love and Faith: With other Fugitive Poems* (Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1847), 17-18.

³² George W. Bethune, *Orations and Occasional Discourses* (New York: George P. Putnam, 1850), 62.

³³ Bethune, *Orations*, 65.

endeavors, Bethune frequently imitated Romantic ideas about the natural world. He did, in fact, anonymously publish his most extensive exposition on angling, yet through other literary endeavors he displayed no reluctance to marvel openly at the splendors of nature. In matters of science, he concluded that studying the natural world supported ideas about the revelation of God to man. He acknowledged that art had its limitations in reflecting the true beauty of nature, but lauded its ability to inspire man to connect with its subject. In spite of wise-use rhetoric, appreciation for horticulture, and admiration for art, unspoiled nature moved Bethune the most. Long-time angling partner Reverend Joshua Cooke recognized Bethune's legacy in regards to his muse, commenting that "Dr. Bethune was an ardent lover of Nature...It was not as her processes are developed under human training that he sought her, but as she exists in the forms and sounds of the perfect wilderness."³⁴

Though the philosophy of conservation remained decades away, Bethune understood the dangers of exploiting natural resources, albeit from a concern for man rather than nature. From an 1839 sermon entitled "How to Use the World as not to Abuse It," he presciently charged adherents to understand the consequences of overindulgence. He appreciated that the utilization of the earth and its resources was moral and often valuable to society, but noted that abuse of it portrayed a reflection of perversion. "When used in the manner and within the limits which God has prescribed, the world must be not only good, but beneficial; when we pervert or exceed its natural ends, we torment ourselves by our own sin. The warmth of a winter fire is no reason for burning down one's house, nor refreshment of a bath for suicide by drowning."³⁵

³⁴ Abraham R. Van Nest, 202.

³⁵ G. W. Bethune, *Sermons*, 142.

Bethune devoted countless hours to scientific study of nature with the understanding that knowledge of the natural world contributed to the ongoing revelation of God to man. He recognized that “in the pure and elevated atmosphere of . . . science, the mirror of nature reflects more distinctly the image of God.”³⁶ Echoing some aspects of Paley’s *Natural Theology*, he further examined the proper use of science in the 1839 speech “Leisure”:

True science is the knowledge of things in their causes; and the knowledge of the First Great Cause is the end and height of science. But He, who has caused the Scriptures to be “written for our learning” of Him, has also given us His book of Nature, and every demonstration of science should be regarded by us as a step of that ladder.³⁷

Bethune’s promotion of natural science mirrored the Transcendentalists’ study of nature, though it also caused him to diverge from it in a number of ways. Bethune demonstrated the same attitudes of men like Thoreau in noting that the purpose of science was not temporal and could unite man and nature, and in this regard, he also seems less utilitarian in his approach. “The true end of science . . . is the elevation of the soul, the spiritualizing of the heart from mere sense, and the education of immortal man for the eternal converse with his God face to face.”³⁸ He praised Cicero for understanding that everything natural is in its right place and when man discovers the remnants of the Divine in his own self, he is drawn to study “nature, the land, the seas, the origin of all things.”³⁹

Lest Bethune seem overtly transcendental, he belligerently opposed the emanation theory of the Oversoul. His belief in the separation of creator and creation led him away from the worship of nature to the adoration of nature’s creator.⁴⁰ He also recognized that the ends of science could be perverted, and issued stern warnings against seeking to supplant

³⁶ Bethune, *Orations*, 31.

³⁷ Bethune, *Orations*, 63.

³⁸ Bethune, *Orations*, 67.

³⁹ Bethune, *Orations*, 68.

⁴⁰ Bethune, *Orations*, 129.

God's revelation with man's fallible reason, commenting that "science may indeed be valuable, but the study of nature comes to a miserable end, when it leads us from the worship and trust of nature's God."⁴¹ Cooke noted that "he was not a worshipper of nature," and believed that "he had none of that regard for it which some of our day seem disposed to nurse up into idolatry."⁴² For Bethune, science could bond man to nature but, without realizing from where the mind for inquiry came, natural study was irrelevant.

Aside from the rational and sometimes materialistic vision of the pursuit of science, nature held an intimate spiritual appeal. In the midst of all of Bethune's philosophical defenses of interaction with the wilderness, he most thoroughly flaunted his passion for the wilderness through poetry, a gift that became evident early in life.⁴³ As a young man, he insisted that nature offered as much of a beacon to rational behavior as it provided sustenance and inspiration to his romantic side. From a letter written during his early ministry, he confessed that "I am becoming very fond of nature. It has a good influence on me. I am persuaded there is more of conscience than of romance in my awakened fondness for this first book of the Creator's hand."⁴⁴ Drawing from his father's stern warnings about the wickedness of modernization in cities and humanity, he also believed that experiences in the wilderness both infused a sense of disenchantment with society and an irresistible desire to improve conditions for the destitute. But as he developed from a young, overwhelmed theological student into an energetic preacher and emotional poet, he discovered nature's cure for the infirmities of modern man. As he pondered romantic stimulations from nature, intense awe of the divine and meaning he found in the natural world surfaced in his poetry.

⁴¹ Bethune, *Orations*, 43.

⁴² Van Nest, 202.

⁴³ Van Nest, 36.

⁴⁴ Van Nest, 107.

Through poetry, Bethune brushed aside religious fears of an untamed and menacing natural world and embraced the sublime in the Transcendentalists' nature. Poetry about the frontier, once a stronghold of the devil in Reformed theology, symbolized his departure from Puritan wilderness contempt. Bethune's outdoors now presented man with uninterrupted encounters with the creator, and the lack of civility offered relief from the burdens of polite society. God spoke to Bethune through nature, and the minister pleaded with desperate people to seek Him there as well. In the poem "To a Young Friend," he recognized that the same call that drew men to study nature beckoned them to experience spirituality in it.

Are there not moments when thy heart is burning,
Sweet lady, thy young happy heart,
With strange mysterious sympathies; a yearning
To walk from ruder scenes apart,
Alone with holy Nature; from her learning
Wild numbers, and, with gentle art,
To echo back her voice ?

For by that conscious token,
God to thy heart hath spoken.⁴⁵

The demand that society seek God's voice in the wilderness appeared often in Bethune's poetry. It defined not only his charge to turn to nature, but it also represented his scorn for the direction of humanity.

In a way Bethune could not regard nature as flawless because of the Fall in the Garden of Eden. Keenly aware that "what seems immediately hurtful, such as disease or suffering, is manifestly only a modification of the original system," the righteousness that he saw in the natural was obvious, and life lessons were abundant.⁴⁶ Natural laws dictated the moral code, and nature's message regarding health seemed apparent. In a castigation of gluttony and intemperance, Bethune warned that "nature teaches us better. All summer long,

⁴⁵ Bethune, *Lays of Love and Faith*, 49.

⁴⁶ Bethune, *Sermons*, 221.

she gives us a succession of fresh fruits and vegetables, leaving for our winter's store others which last us till summer comes again."⁴⁷ Science demonstrated that nature reliably pointed to its creator, for "the mighty chain of cause and effect has been let down upon earth, that we may trace its links upward to the supreme height where it is riveted in the throne of the Lord God Almighty."⁴⁸ Perhaps most important to Bethune was that nature's transcendent character served as a reminder that man remained impure in his being and in desperate need of salvation, but that God's promise of redemption was manifest through the beauty of the natural world. In Bethune's mind, "the dwelling place of primeval innocence, among whose holy shades God walked with his sinless children, was a garden; and still He loves to scatter flowers about our path, and gives us taste to relish the beauty of his works."⁴⁹

Mid-Century: Nature, Transcendentalism, and Henry Ward Beecher

*Nature would be scarcely worth a puff of the empty wind if it were not that all nature is a temple of which God is the brightness and the glory. And whenever a man becomes a Christian ... he comes right home to God in everything and everywhere. Not the Bible alone, but the earth, teaches us of God.*⁵⁰

From the 1850s through the 1880s, Henry Ward Beecher became perhaps the most popular preacher in the United States. He descended from a line of devout Congregational preachers, and his father Lyman was one of the most significant figures of turn-of-the-century New England Calvinism.⁵¹ In spite of his relatively austere background, Beecher eventually joined the company of Transcendentalists, adopted a progressive strain of free-

⁴⁷ Bethune, *Orations*, 379.

⁴⁸ Bethune, *Orations*, 309.

⁴⁹ Bethune, "Genius," *Orations*, 10.

⁵⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, *Morning and Evening Exercises: From the Published and Unpublished Writings of the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*, ed. Lyman Abbott (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1871), 250.

⁵¹ Barry Hankins, *The Second Great Awakening and the Transcendentalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 156.

will philosophy, and promoted the miracle of the discovery of Darwinism. His theology, if he had one, required him “to search out truth in ten thousand places beside the Bible ... The Bible is but God’s finger, pointing the direction where truth is to be found.”⁵² This statement of faith by a mid-century Congregational minister might have seemed blasphemous a half century earlier, but as a man with a penchant for dramatics, Henry Ward Beecher saw no problem in uniting science and nature with religion and did so with unparalleled flair.

Raised by a popular Calvinist who rejected predestination and embraced the restorative character of the wilderness, Beecher resorted early to nature for spiritual revival. Being an extremely shy child who constantly struggled with insecurity and miserable feelings of depravity, the young Beecher found difficulty in making friends.⁵³ Accounts of his youth paint a vivid image of a young man who turned to comforting recesses of meandering streams and low mountain meadows in search of acceptance and place.⁵⁴ Beecher discovered the security of intimation with God in the Connecticut wilds, and he confessed that “the first distinct religious feelings I had were in connection with Nature...It was not until years later that I knew it was the Divine element.”⁵⁵

Contrary to the old popular Puritan fear of the evils lurking in the wilderness, Beecher realized that “in the woods...the devil did not tempt me half so much then as at other times...But when I was shut up, so that I could not go out, the devil got big in me, and I went

⁵² Clifford E. Clark, Jr., *Henry Ward Beecher: Spokesman for Middle Class America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 84.

⁵³ Clark, *Henry Ward Beecher*, 11.

⁵⁴ Frank S. Child, “Early Formative Influences in the Life of Henry Ward Beecher,” in *The Boyhood of Henry Ward Beecher: The Record of a Litchfield Beecher Day*, ed. Frank S. Child (New Preston, CT: Frank S. Child, 1887), 27.

⁵⁵ William C. Beecher, Samuel Scoville, and Mrs. Henry Ward Beecher, *A Biography of Reverend Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1888), 77.

into abnormal mischiefs [*sic*].”⁵⁶ His famous sister Harriet Beecher Stowe concurred with Beecher that real trouble lurked in the city, not the countryside near Litchfield, where he spent his first eleven years, and she remembered that “there was a pure and vigorous atmosphere of moral innocence about the mountain towns of Connecticut in those days . . . There was not in all Litchfield in those days anything to harm a growing boy, or lead him into evil. But in Boston, the streets, the wharves, the ship yards, were full of temptation.”⁵⁷ The idea of redemption in the woods as opposed to the streets of modern cities marked an incredible transition for a young man who grew up in a society where “nature was little spoken of except as the antithesis to grace.”⁵⁸ Later, during the years of his western ministry, Beecher sought to Christianize not the wilderness itself, but the influence and intemperance of society that had sprung up on the frontier.

As Beecher’s intellect grew, he became disenchanted with the theology of proper society, and his thirst for knowledge of the natural world supplanted dogmatic pursuits. He became an expert horticulturist, regularly penning gardening columns in popular periodicals like Philadelphia’s *Saturday Evening Post* and a host of farming magazines. He also authored several botanical publications like *Plain and Pleasant Talk about Fruits, Flowers, and Farming*. As a gardener, Beecher shone among his contemporaries, but as a farmer he was less inclined to industrious toil. Despite his fascination with cultivated nature, Beecher remained in awe of the untouched natural world, and his idea of the correct use of a farm revealed his own meditative character. He mused that “the chief use of a farm, if it be well

⁵⁶ Henry Ward Beecher, “Physical Hindrances in Spiritual Life,” in *The Original Plymouth Pulpit*, Volumes 7-8, ed. T.J. Ellinwood (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1872), 151.

⁵⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Lives and Deeds of Our Self-made Men* (Hartford: Worthington, Dustin, and Company, 1872), 516.

⁵⁸ Stowe, 521.

selected and of a proper soil, is to lie down upon,” and humorously remarked that his was “an excellent one for such uses, and thus [he] cultivate[d] it every day.”⁵⁹

By the 1850s, Boston Romantics began embracing an elegant transcendental natural philosophy and began moralizing about the wilderness, and although Beecher frequently threw support behind utilitarianism, he offered his take with the same dash of Romantic nostalgia. He knew the limits of man’s intrusion to the wilderness, and felt that although “wealth can build houses, and smooth the soil; it can fill up marshes, and create lakes or artificial rivers; it can gather statues and paintings; but no wealth can buy or build elm trees.”⁶⁰ Idyllic imagery aside, Beecher frequently promoted common sense approaches to natural resource use, and in the article “Towns and Trees” promoted temperance:

What then, it will be said, must no one touch a tree? Must there be no fuel, no timber? Go to the *forest* for both. There are no individual trees there, only a forest. One trunk here, and one there, leaves the *forest* just as perfect as before, and gives room for young aspiring trees to come up in the world. But for a man to cut down a large, well-formed, healthy tree from the roadside, or from pastures or fields, is a piece of unpardonable vandalism.⁶¹

Through both practical appeals and flowery rhetoric, Beecher did “more than any other one man to change the conception of religion from being an expression of conscience and law to being an expression of loyalty and love.”⁶² He likewise altered many Protestant attitudes toward nature and effected that change through an espousal of the most intellectual philosophies coming out of mid-century Boston.

Of all the period’s Protestant ministers, Beecher was perhaps the one most distinctly associated with Transcendentalism. As Beecher blended into circles of Romantics and nature

⁵⁹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers; or Experiences of Art and Nature* (New York: J. C. Derby, 1855), 268.

⁶⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 136.

⁶¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 281-282.

⁶² Lyman Abbot, “He Changed the Concept of Religion,” in *Henry Ward Beecher as His Friends Saw Him*, ed. Lyman Abbot (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1904), 140.

writers, New England intellectuals accepted his liberalized, reforming philosophies, even to the point that Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to Beecher as one of the only Transcendentalists of the 1850s.⁶³ Beecher echoed Henry David Thoreau's criticism that society encouraged men to lead "quiet lives of desperation," and that burdens of civilization had become as egregious as those on the frontier.⁶⁴ Though he retained a taste for art, material objects vanished in importance when he shook the bonds of modernity and sought the backwoods of New England. In a way, Beecher reflected the transcendental approach of dispensing with commercial aspirations and fleeing to the tranquility of the wilderness.

In 1855, Beecher published a collection of nature essays that originated as a series of columns in the *New York Independent*. This work, entitled *Star Papers: or, Experiences of Art and Nature*, surfaced during a critical decade that produced Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, Thoreau's *Walden*, and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Beecher's first monumental effort publicly revealed the same passion for the outdoors, and early critics hailed it in two ways. Some saw it as liberation of traditional theology. The original write-up in the New York-based art gossip magazine *Crayon* concluded, "We wish that many others of our divines might study divinity, where Henry Ward Beecher has studied it, and would give us less of icy thought, and more of the fervid feeling and happy content breathed through *Star Papers*."⁶⁵ Others, like those at the *Knickerbocker*, likewise applauded the equivocation of religion and the "air of absolute reality" from an author who is "perfectly at home with Nature."⁶⁶ In *Star Papers*, Beecher approached the solitude of the wilderness in

⁶³ Debby Applegate, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 273.

⁶⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, "The Peace of God," *Plymouth Pulpit: The Sermons of Henry Ward Beecher*, First Series (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1869), 301.

⁶⁵ "Review: *Star Papers*," *The Crayon*, 2, no. 6 (August 8, 1855): 86. (83-86)

⁶⁶ "Review 2: No Title," *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine* 46, no. 1 (July, 1855): 80.

much the same way that his contemporary and acquaintance Emerson did, and several detractors rebuked this flowery, transcendental approach. A resounding critique came from the *Liberator*, a periodical that incidentally remained at odds with Beecher's position on abolition: "His *Star Papers* are full of froth and transcendental twaddle...in one who has taken upon himself the responsible office of a preacher, a teacher, and a leader of the people, it is pitiful, it is humiliating, it is a sad commentary on the weakness of poor human nature."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, his reputation among Boston elites expanded, and his relationships among circles of high-minded Romantics quickly materialized.

Beecher asserted that he modeled his behavior toward nature after Christ's, but his admiration of Jesus was markedly different than the Transcendentalists' praise. He maintained, unlike Emerson, that Jesus was decidedly part of a separate Godhead yet experienced the wilderness in many of the same ways that man did. Beecher likewise enjoyed the same "places that Christ loved to stray" and was fascinated by "Christ's love of nature."⁶⁸ Despite the overt transcendental tone of Beecher works, and though he found companionship in Romantic circles, many friends insisted that he preached the gospel only and denied pantheistic leanings. Judge Albion W. Tourgee claimed that Beecher "could not conceive ... of a nature that did not reveal the mind of a creator. He has been called a Christian pantheist. Nothing could be wider of the truth. He did not worship nature, but saw in it the evidence of God."⁶⁹ Reverend Newell Dwight Hillis conceded that Beecher denied Christ's humanity, but maintained his belief in the Trinity and the absolute deity of Jesus.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Castigation, "Henry Ward Beecher," *Liberator* 25, no. 27 (July 6, 1855): 107.

⁶⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 170.

⁶⁹ Albion W. Tourgee, "Lost Among the Hills," *Anecdotes of Henry Ward Beecher* ed. N. A. Shensstone (Chicago: J. C. Buckbee and Company Publishers, 1887), 362.

⁷⁰ Newell Dwight Hillis, "Ruling Ideas of His Sermons," in *Henry Ward Beecher as His Friends Saw Him* ed. Lyman Abbott (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1904), 31.

Beecher himself denied the existence of God as an Oversoul, preaching that “God and Nature are one. Not that they are one in the sense of the Materialist, nor in that of the Pantheist; but nature is simply the manifestation of the universally diffused power that is making for righteousness everywhere.”⁷¹ He did endorse Transcendentalism’s witness of God in nature, but remained uncomfortable with its rejection of Christ’s divinity.

Like Bethune and other clergymen of mid-century New England, Beecher felt the divine appeal of science which was “but the deciphering of God’s thought as revealed in the structure of this world.”⁷² As one of the first popular Protestants to attempt a syncretism of evolution and religion, he naturally endured criticism, but the theory served him as another part of God’s plan of revelation. Evolution aided Beecher’s rejection of Original Sin, and he remained transcendental in his attitude toward science in observing that “we can accept the deductions of science, and still maintain truth in regard to the destiny of mankind, and the regeneration of the souls of men, through the influence of the Divine Spirit.”⁷³ Interestingly, Beecher found that science fell short due to its inability to “supply ... faith in a loving God, and a God whom we can love.”⁷⁴ Beecher’s ultimate message about the natural world was that nature emphatically allowed man to embrace the divine.

Nature without God was merely scientific inquiry, and for Beecher, God’s inspiration urged man to experience his revelation through the natural world. Ultimately, that encounter could lead to the transcendent, the magnificent, and the sublime. Beecher biographer Debby Applegate noted that he “gave a popular voice to many of Emerson’s more rarified ideas” that included the denial of the Bible as the only source of truth and man’s ability to work out

⁷¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution and Religion* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1885), 251.

⁷² Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution*, 46.

⁷³ Henry Ward Beecher, *Plymouth Pulpit* Volumes 5-6, 186.

⁷⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *Plymouth Pulpit*, Volumes 5-6, 64.

his own salvation.⁷⁵ But Beecher seemed to wrestle more with orthodox doctrine than the dictates of the Bible, and although in most of his nature writing, he seems to refer to an ambiguous God, in a revealing statement in the essay “Nature, a Minister of Happiness,” he erased all doubt about the divine that called to him through nature:

The soul seeks and sees God through nature, and nature changes its voice, speaking no longer of mere material grandeur and beauty, but declares through all its parts the glory of God. Then, when Christ is most with us, do we find nature the most loving, the most inspired; and it evolves a deeper significance, in all its phases, and chants, with its innumerable voices, solemn but jubilant hymns of praise to God!⁷⁶

A New Era: The Wilderness of Henry Van Dyke

*A tired man who has a brief furlough from active service is lucky if he can spend it among the big trees and beside a flowing stream. The trees are ministers of peace. The stream is full of courage and adventure as it rushes toward the big sea.*⁷⁷

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, American Protestant nature philosophy covered a wide spectrum of beliefs. Bethune grew up during the infant years of evolution, Beecher’s meteoric rise to fame coincided with the popularity of Transcendentalism, and by the end of the century, both philosophies found their way into conventional Protestantism. Historian William McLoughlin described the transition in which “by means of personal religious experience in Nature, men could overcome the doubts fostered by the waning of faith in Calvinist dogma, Lockean psychology, Paley’s Natural Theology, the philosophy of the Scottish Common Sense School, and the literal infallibility of the Bible.”⁷⁸ By the time Henry Van Dyke graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary in the 1870s, there were

⁷⁵ Applegate, 273.

⁷⁶ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 307.

⁷⁷ Henry Van Dyke, *The Valley of Vision: A Book of Romance and Some Half-told Tales* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919), 168.

⁷⁸ William H. McLoughlin, *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher: An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America, 1840-1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 4-5.

few surprises remaining for mainstream Calvinism, and amid the turbulence, he seemed to embody all of the changes at once. Van Dyke preached from a Presbyterian pulpit, yet abandoned the doctrine of predestination. A gentleman in every sense of the word, he was as comfortable in a camp-tent as he was in a palace. He even became a proponent of evolution who claimed that all of nature pointed to the deity of Christ. A hedonist from his youth, Van Dyke frequently endorsed utilizing God's natural spoils for personal enjoyment, but always insisted that personal gratification did not preclude temperance and self restraint.⁷⁹ He was both "thoroughly at home in the world of music and art, and all that belongs to a refined civilization, but there [was] a 'wilding flavor in his blood' which all the civilization in the world [could] not eradicate."⁸⁰ Known as a devoted angler, brilliant scholar, and charming poet, Van Dyke represented the pinnacle of the nineteenth century fusion of traditional piety, strong belief in a personal relationship with Christ, and an intense love of nature.

Henry Jackson, Van Dyke's father, passed on to his son what he felt was a pure relationship to nature, demonstrating "through actual living in the open, that life and comradeship close to the heart of nature will open new worlds of beauty and wonder."⁸¹ Van Dyke's connection to the natural world began early in life while joining his father on regular summer fishing trips, and by the age of eight an extraordinary passion for the outdoors became evident in the boy. "'You see that little Henry Van Dyke,' said an old maid who lived nearby and kept a sequestered watch over the neighborhood boys, 'he comes out of the house looking as if he had just been taken from a band-box. He goes back into it looking as

⁷⁹ Tertius van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1935), 261.

⁸⁰ Edwin Mims, "Introduction," *The Van Dyke Book: Selected from the Writings of Henry Van Dyke* ed. Edwin Mims (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), xii.

⁸¹ Frederick Houk Law, *Modern Great Americans: Short Biographies of Twenty Great Americans Who Won Wide Recognition for Achievements in Various Types of Activity* (New York: The Century Company, 1926), 251.

if he had been picked out of the ash-can.”⁸² He later attributed the invaluable experiences gained from those trips to a different sort of classroom, noting of himself that “among such scenes as these the boy pursued his education, learning many things that are not taught in colleges; learning to take the weather as it comes ... learning that a man can be just as happy in a log shanty as in a brownstone mansion.”⁸³ The vulgarity of the woods contrasted with the refinement of education in devout Calvinism, and in part it was the lack of civility that drew Van Dyke to the wilderness. He developed a similar passion for the modern city, but he recommended the rough country of his youth to the city-dweller for spiritual refreshment.

Nature represented both a muse for spiritual inspiration as well as an instrument of survival to Van Dyke. Highly regarded for his transcendental approach in nature-writing, he also supported utilitarian practices. On one hand, he understood the redeeming spiritual value that nature has for civilized man noting that cultivated flowers and gardens should exist solely to remind man that he was innately closer to nature than civilization.⁸⁴ On the other hand, in terms of conservation, he heartily appreciated the perspective of those whose lifestyles depended on working the land and observed that “nature fills her loving cup for man.”⁸⁵ Van Dyke marveled at “how much the expression of Nature depends on our own mood when we look at her. She is forever playing the familiar and deceptive role of the sympathetic friend.”⁸⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, conservation practices and discussions emerged on the East Coast allowing Van Dyke to promote utility of the wilderness while calling for protection of it at the same time.

⁸² Tertius Van Dyke, 20.

⁸³ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers: A Book of Essays in Profitable Idleness* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 64.

⁸⁴ Henry Van Dyke, *Camp-fires and Guide-posts: A Book of Essays and Excursions* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1921), 236.

⁸⁵ Henry Van Dyke, *Camp-fires*, 20.

⁸⁶ Henry Van Dyke, *Story of the Psalms* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1888), 174.

Like most New England intellectuals that preceded him, Van Dyke detected no conflict between his utilitarian values and his transcendental ideals of untouched nature. His poetry, regarded by some as his most important contribution to American literature, continually bounced from themes of utilization of natural resources to admiration of unspoiled wilderness and, in “Salute to the Trees,” Van Dyke displayed both perspectives:

Many a tree is found in the wood
And every tree for its use is good . . .
In the wealth of the wood since the world began
The trees have offered their gifts to man.

But the glory of trees is more than their gifts:
‘Tis a beautiful wonder of life that lifts,
From a wrinkled seed in an earth-bound clod,
A column, an arch, in the temple of God.⁸⁷

Over the course of his career, Van Dyke rarely suggested that nature existed for its own sake, and he remained certain about the purpose of the natural world. “Nature is on our side, and all God’s world is busy preparing our bread.”⁸⁸ Nature was made for man, to use for improvement of both his outward condition and that of his soul. In poems, lectures, and essays that reflect this sentiment, Van Dyke seemed like a pragmatist. His understanding of natural obstacles to the agrarian system that first turned the wheels of American industry kept him from completely dispensing with modernization. He regularly praised the labor required to create a powerhouse of commerce in the United States, yet like Beecher was often inclined to wax sentimental and mourn the loss of wilderness.⁸⁹

Van Dyke was a well-read minister and both his taste and literary talent were legendary among his contemporaries. The one-time English professor was thoroughly

⁸⁷ Henry Van Dyke, *Songs Out of Doors*, 94.

⁸⁸ Henry Van Dyke, *The Story of the Psalms*, 223.

⁸⁹ Henry Van Dyke, *The White Bees, and other Poems* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), 33.

intimate with the works of Emerson, Wordsworth, and Tennyson, and even included some of their poetry in his publication of *Companionable Books*. Their words undoubtedly influenced Van Dyke's nature philosophy, even to the point that his theology sometimes received criticism for reflecting Unitarianism and Universalism.⁹⁰ He denied the association, but he patently agreed with the transcendental proposal of God's revelation through nature, even in sermons:

Oh that the deaf ear and the dull heart might be touched and opened to the beautiful speech of the seasons, so that plenty might draw all souls to gratitude, and beauty move all spirits to worship, and every fair landscape, and every overflowing harvest, and every touch of loveliness and grace upon the face of the world, might lift all souls that live and feel from Nature up to Nature's God!⁹¹

Van Dyke regularly preached a transcendental message and asserted that developing an appreciation of nature aided man in cultivating gratefulness and proper treatment of one another. He likewise concurred that God, through nature, was impartial to class and religious distinctions, that all of creation served to sustain itself in some manner, and that "all things that God has made tell us of an impartial Father's love which ought to waken in our hearts a brother's kindness for our fellow-men."⁹²

Although Van Dyke exhibited a thorough appreciation for Transcendentalism's influence on nature writing, he offered several reasons for his own undertakings. Ostensibly, he felt that his spiritual influences led him to discover the divine in the wilderness, but another crucial paradigm of "Americanism" exerted a profound impact on Van Dyke as well. An intense student of American literature, he recognized that nature worked its way into virtually all of the best American literary works since the days of colonialism. From

⁹⁰ T. S. Childs, "Dr. Van Dyke and Union Seminary," *The Bible Champion* XVI, no. 1 (August 1913): 34.

⁹¹ Henry Van Dyke, *Straight Sermons to Young Men and Other Human Beings* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 201.

⁹² Henry Van Dyke, *Straight Sermons*, 208.

Jonathan Edwards to John Muir, American literary heroes expressed their love for nature through intimate musings, and according to Van Dyke, allowed America to produce a markedly distinct culture.⁹³ Like Bethune, he believed that the foundation of the American Dream lay in a special connection to the natural world. Although that relationship often included human conquest over nature, Americans “feel a strong affection for their great, free, untended forests, their swift rushing rivers, their wooded mountain ranges ... their snowy peaks and vast plains ... It is the expression of an inborn sympathy with nature and a real delight in her works.”⁹⁴ Ever the patriot, Van Dyke expressed the same sentiment toward the untamed American wilderness as many of his Reformed predecessors.

Like most angling ministers, Van Dyke skillfully wove allegories of nature throughout sermons and used science and reason to support his doctrines. He insisted that he emulated Christ in doing so, for “the parables which He [Jesus] used to describe the kingdom of heaven were drawn from nature. He taught his disciples to look upon the regular and steadfast ordinances of nature as the proof that their Heavenly Father was mindful of them.”⁹⁵ He similarly restated a common liberal Protestant theme that included the study of nature to support the reality of God.⁹⁶ Van Dyke also alluded to poets in the scriptures that looked outside of the Transcendentalist’s nature spirit to Christianize his admiration of the natural world. In “Poetry of the Psalms,” an essay first published in 1900, he concluded that the best nature poetry pointed to something higher than mere scenes of the sublime.

The psalmists delight in the vision of the world ... But in all these they see and hear the handwriting and the voice of God. It is His presence ... [which] makes it different from other nature-poetry. They never lose themselves, like Theocritus and

⁹³ Henry Van Dyke, *The Spirit of America* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), 268.

⁹⁴ Henry Van Dyke, *The Spirit of America*, 266.

⁹⁵ Henry Van Dyke, *The Gospel for an Age of Doubt* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1896), 256.

⁹⁶ Henry Van Dyke, *Story of the Psalms*, 257.

Wordsworth and Shelley and Tennyson, in the contemplation and description of natural beauty. They see it, but they always see beyond it.⁹⁷

That vision, according to Van Dyke, gave life and the study of nature meaning, and the image of the God of the Bible concerned with man separated his views from the pantheistic character of Transcendentalists, and allowed him to develop a Christian form of nature writing. “The moment we see God behind the face of Nature,” he preached specifically to theological students, “the moment we believe that this vast and marvelous procession of seasons and causes and changes ... is directed and controlled by a Supreme, Omniscient, Holy Spirit ... indifference becomes incomprehensible and impossible.”⁹⁸ In this way, Van Dyke created an entirely different voice that praised the transcendent character of wilderness and proclaimed that “every creature that He has made bears witness to His wisdom and power; but the Word comes to us warm and living from a Father's heart.”⁹⁹

Religious convictions ostensibly lay at the heart of Van Dyke's appreciation of nature. “Christianity is an out-of-doors religion. How shall we understand it unless we carry it under the free sky and interpret it in the companionship of nature?”¹⁰⁰ He pitied the man “that feels not the beauty and blessedness and peace of the woods and meadows that God hath bedecked with flowers for him even while he is yet a sinner.”¹⁰¹ Van Dyke famously regarded the intricacies of nature that pointed to God, but in the poem “Peace,” he succeeded in finding him in the sublime as well.

[God] Dost watch the everlasting fields grow white ...
And welcome to thy dwelling-place sublime

⁹⁷ Henry Van Dyke, *Counsels by the Way* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1908), 86-87.

⁹⁸ Henry Van Dyke, *Straight Sermons to Young Men*, 197.

⁹⁹ Henry Van Dyke, *The Reality of Religion* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1884), 92-93.

¹⁰⁰ Henry Van Dyke, *Out of Doors in the Holy Land* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), xi-xii.

¹⁰¹ Henry Van Dyke, *The Ruling Passion: Tales of Nature and Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 137.

The few strong souls that dare to climb
The slippery crags, and find thee on the height.¹⁰²

Essentially, Van Dyke's nature resembled both the Transcendentalist's and the liberalized Protestant's ideal sanctuary from commerce, greed, and the temptations of the civilized world. Because of his refined taste and ability to move in and out of different social circles, Van Dyke's escape to the wilderness was not a prolonged retreat into idleness, though lazy afternoons were a key ingredient in the recipe of spiritual satisfaction. Instead, the wilderness offered man transcendental vacation from the doldrums of city life. Just as springtime represented rebirth and renewal, he supposed that it was the best time to evade the shackles of modern problems and experience nature at her finest.

The streets all seem to lead into the country ... and on into the wood-road, on and on, until one comes to that mysterious and delightful ending ... At any rate, you will get away from the tyranny of the commonplace, the conventional, the methodical, which transforms the rhythm of life into a logarithm. Even a small variation, a taste of surprise, will give you what you need as a spring tonic: the sense of escape, a day off.¹⁰³

¹⁰² Henry Van Dyke, *Music, and other Poems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 26.

¹⁰³ Henry Van Dyke, *Days Off, and other Digressions* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 144-145.

II.

HUMAN NATURE AND DEPRAVITY IN THE MODERN CITY

Criticism of the city's influence on human nature emerged as a common theme in the earliest days of popular American Transcendentalism. As an assault on reason and compassion grew within a society increasingly focused on commerce and finance, reformers looked to nature's Universal Spirit to remedy man's materialist sickness. Several New School Protestant ministers concentrated a narrow approach to the human condition by looking to Original Sin and Total Depravity to explain the inherent wickedness of man. Affluence and avarice, products of industrialization, created a new conflict that compelled Protestant ministers to determine where temptation most often flourished. Two hundred years earlier, Puritans had settled the issue by scorning the sinister character of the wilderness as evil. According to strict Calvinist leaders of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Satan ruled the merciless wild and it became incumbent upon Christians either to remain protected within the confines of civilization, or to march defiantly into the backwoods of the New World and Christianize the savage frontier.¹⁰⁴

Urban populations expanded and the subsequent swell of pubs, brothels, crime, and poverty forced theologians like Lyman Beecher and other leaders of the Second Great Awakening to urge American Christians to focus on their inward problems in an attempt to bring society under control. Ministers detected the possibility of evil gaining a stronghold in

¹⁰⁴ Albanese, 40.

modern cities and the resulting theologies of the nineteenth century developed from two predominant ideas. First, the depravity of man, a traditional Calvinist tenet, was in part to blame for the denigration of society. Where hordes of wicked-hearted men congregated, primitive animal nature often lurked, and the shadows of the once-righteous city now became as tempestuous as any uncharted corner of the wilderness.

The second influence came from Bostonian intellectualism in the 1830s when Unitarian apostates promoted escaping the bustle and desperation of city life and encouraged communion with the Divine Spirit beyond the borders of civilization. A century earlier, Puritans like Cotton Mather warned that the Christian “Hedge,” protection from the Evil One, was “endangered more from within than without” because of the modern situation, and on the heels of the American Enlightenment, scores of New England Protestants employed fragments of both ideas and began endorsing spiritual rejuvenation that were no longer found in the city.¹⁰⁵

By the middle of the nineteenth century, commercialization and materialism became targets of criticism from both Protestant and Transcendentalist circles. In an age when “our business tags after us into the midst of our pleasures,” as Van Dyke labeled it, the tranquility of nature became a rallying cry for modern philosophers.¹⁰⁶ European Enlightenment, through Transcendentalism and Unitarianism, fostered a novel appreciation for simplicity that was absent in city life, yet appeals to reform also came brazenly from steadfast Protestant pulpits.¹⁰⁷ Yale President and Congregational minister Timothy Dwight condemned the greedy practices of speculation that affected most countries engaged in

¹⁰⁵ Stoll, 71.

¹⁰⁶ Henry Van Dyke, *Fisherman's Luck, and some other Uncertain Things* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 224.

¹⁰⁷ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 45.

modern trading in the new commercial era.¹⁰⁸ Lyman Beecher felt that “ardent commerce” violated Christ’s command to “love thy neighbor as thyself.”¹⁰⁹ Ultimately, Protestants of the era contrasted the solitude of the natural world with the commotion of modern society, blended transcendental images of the Divine in nature with those found in scripture, and forged a paradigm that advanced the Christian need for a retreat to the wilderness.

George Washington Bethune and Fallen Human Nature

*We must break away from the crowd. We must reach a spot where distance will give soberness to our view of our usual occupations, scenes where we can gather ideas, sentiments, and emotions, not from worldly dictation or even the page covered with other men's thoughts; where we can hold intercourse with our fellow-men who spend their days more simply; but, above all, where we can be alone with God among the works of His hands, and hear, answering to our own, the pulses of the Infinite Heart which fills the universe with truth and love.*¹¹⁰

The same wickedness that George Bethune observed in human nature, he also encountered in himself as a young man during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. Early Huguenot lessons of total depravity ensured that the younger Bethune would deal with the same inner turmoil that bewildered many young Protestants of the day. His father Divie, a successful French immigrant and founding member of Princeton Theological Seminary, earnestly promoted ideas like Total Depravity and other token points of Calvinism that seemed both oppressive and fatalistic. Undoubtedly, this upbringing seriously affected Bethune’s torment, but by his own admission, without a proper understanding of fallen humanity, he would have missed his life’s purpose in spreading the Gospel to unbelievers.

¹⁰⁸ Timothy Dwight, *Travels; in New-England and New-York*, Volume I (New Haven: Timothy Dwight, 1821), 218.

¹⁰⁹ Lyman Beecher, *Six Sermons on the Nature, Occasions, Signs, Evils, and Remedy of Intemperance* (New York: American Tract Society, 1827), 73.

¹¹⁰ George W. Bethune, “Piseco,” in *The Knickerbocker Gallery: A Testimonial to the Editor of the Knickerbocker Magazine from its Contributors* (New York: Samuel Hueston, 1854), 119.

Despite spending a youth in merriment and mischief, Bethune became solemn in his approach to understanding the complexities of inborn malice by the time he ascended the pulpit in Utica, New York, in the 1830s. Bethune eventually placed some of his most vigorous humanitarian efforts toward the problem of slavery and the increasing numbers of the poor. Though criticized for not supporting abolition and promoting the Colonization Movement before the Civil War, Bethune found the darkest side of humanity in the peculiar institution. He believed that because of man's inclination to greed and sin, despite the best intentions, only the "grace of God through the Gospel" could rid the country of such a repugnant practice.¹¹¹ Poverty likewise distressed the minister at an early age, and throughout his career he regularly contributed to and promoted local charities. A burden for the destitute grounded in Bethune a mistrust of the human spirit and built within him an unshakable perspective of man's depravity.

Bethune's life and preaching mimicked several creeds of Transcendentalism, and yet often directly opposed others. He recognized the divine inspiration that led to benevolent action, promoted the cleansing of the inner man, and regularly denounced the desperation that resulted from commercial pursuits. Bethune's poetry, above all of his other work, most distinctly resembled the Transcendentalist's experience with the Divine in nature, and his touching eloquence rivaled that of any contemporary Romantic. Despite connections to secularized philosophies, Bethune held fast to several Protestant principles that conflicted with Transcendentalism. He believed that man was innately wicked and disparaged man's ability to manufacture his own salvation. Though he offered parallels with the innate divinity in man, he believed that it was a remnant from God's original creation, and that man could not become "good" on his own.

¹¹¹ Van Nest, 369.

From the first days of his ministry in the 1820s until his death in 1862, Bethune consistently argued that because of Original Sin the human soul was corrupt and perpetually disposed to wickedness. In *Fruit of the Spirit*, one of his earliest published works, he outlined man's demeanor after the Fall in the Garden of Eden and established his approach to spirituality and evangelism. He admitted that modernity, in part, warranted blame for intensifying temptation, but that man succumbed to it because his nature was inclined to evil:

He may not be naturally cruel, but ... Encourage him with the prospect of gain, and he will arm the privateer or the slaver, to pay himself a rich dividend at the cost of blood and rapine and unspeakable misery. Another may not be covetous, but he is voluptuous and sensual, and he will blind his eyes to the future misery of the victims of his licentiousness; he will defraud the honest and industrious of their due, rather than deny himself indulgences.¹¹²

In breaking from traditional Calvinism, he understood the transcendental motivation behind secular philanthropic deeds conceding that “there is a sort of goodness which seems natural to human nature ... God, for wise purposes, permitted our fallen nature to retain a certain pleasure in witnessing pleasure, and a certain dislike of witnessing pain.”¹¹³ Bethune further championed examples of isolated acts of altruism like agnostic protests of slavery, but stubbornly held that no true “good” comes from man but by way of the grace of God.¹¹⁴ Bethune's model of inspiration for benevolence, however, differed dramatically from the Platonic Universal Spirit that Transcendentalists adopted.

Bethune often alluded to a Divine Spirit found in nature, but his God did not point toward the “hallucination of ungoverned fancy” that he accused Platonists of embracing. In fact, Bethune made a common practice out of castigating Plato's impressions of the transcendental divine. In a sermon entitled “Faith, Our Best Reason,” Bethune criticized the

¹¹² George W. Bethune, *Fruit of the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Harrison Hall, 1839), 120.

¹¹³ Bethune, *Fruit of the Spirit*, 119.

¹¹⁴ Van Nest, 368.

theory as having a “monstrous consequence of making the divine spirit subject to the pollutions of human sin.”¹¹⁵ He argued that Transcendentalists promoted an imperfect being because their philosophy allowed humanity, a projection of the Universal Mind, and its perversions to corrupt the divine. Indeed, nature seemed to speak to man as if both were part of a greater whole, but according to Bethune, the orator was in reality a separate being, nature’s God. He similarly recognized that moral law could be found in the natural world, but that without the direction of the Christian God and the Holy Scriptures, modern Transcendentalists simply rattled echoes of classic philosophers who “wrote much, and disputed more, about the True, the Beautiful, and the Good,” and that “the world grew worse under their teaching, and they were themselves but poor examples of their own achievements.”¹¹⁶ Though he rarely mentioned Transcendentalists by name, Bethune related the efforts of nineteenth-century “modern experimenters” to those of the ancients. He charged them with stealing the idea from the Bible’s “grand doctrine of family” without acknowledging its source and professing to have discovered a “royal road to the recovery of man.”¹¹⁷ Yet apart from God, “all the past experiments of the kind have been miserable failures, bringing contempt on their projectors, and analogy compels us to anticipate like disasters to all similar schemes.”¹¹⁸

Bethune’s fallen man held no capacity for grace, and animal passions dominated the human mind that was originally in tune with its creator. “Sin has wrought such a deplorable revolution in our natures that the mind, originally the ruler of the body, is now, unless

¹¹⁵ Bethune, *Sermons*, 129.

¹¹⁶ George W. Bethune, “A Sermon, Preached at Newark, New Jersey, October 28, 1856, Before the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, at Their Forty-Seventh Annual Meeting” (Boston: Press of T. R. Marvin, 1856), 14.

¹¹⁷ Bethune, “Sermon Before the American Board of Commissioners,” 14.

¹¹⁸ Bethune, “Sermon Before the American Board of Commissioners,” 14.

delivered by grace, its subject.”¹¹⁹ Sin, which to Bethune was both inescapable and oppressive, perverted human judgment and prohibited man’s resistance to temptation.¹²⁰ Imperfect human nature urged man to yield to temptation, and according to Bethune, flourished throughout society. The modern age of materialism exacerbated the effects of temptation through the rise of commerce and industry, and created a prevailing landscape where “everything is reduced to the mean scale of low utilitarianism.”¹²¹ Nature provided part of Bethune’s remedy for the modern disease of the soul:

Oh, for the pure and sinless wild,
Far from the city’s pother,
Where the spirit mild of Nature’s child,
On the breast of his holy mother,

In the silence sweet, may hear the beat
Of her loving heart and tender;
Nor wish to change the greenwood range
For worldly pomp and splendor.¹²²

Bethune opened his magnificent edition of the classic angling manifesto, *The Complete Angler*, with this poem. Throughout *Complete Angler*, he included thoroughly developed methods of angling and with sentimental reasons for departing the city.

Aside from definitional conflicts about the divine, Bethune wholeheartedly agreed with the Transcendentalist assertion that modernity created a cycle of spiritual deprivation and generated a need for withdrawal into the wilderness. Bethune often admired the progress of civilization but he sternly warned against the impassioned and fleeting nature of the world of flesh. Even believers could not enjoy true contentedness as long as “the Christian is in the

¹¹⁹ Bethune, *Sermons*, 145.

¹²⁰ Bethune, *Sermons*, 172.

¹²¹ Bethune, *Orations*, 46.

¹²² George W. Bethune, *The Complete Angler*, American Editor Edition (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1880), ix.

corrupt body, and exposed to the temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil.”¹²³

Bethune perhaps most thoroughly criticized the threats of the city when speaking to the business classes of New England, where he often encouraged the pursuit of rewarding activities that transcended economics. He recommended that obtaining a favorite natural haunt “far from the dust of cities, the turmoil of trade, and the frivolities of artificial life,” played a role in curing men of society.¹²⁴ In two of his most famous speeches entitled “Leisure, Its Uses and Abuses” and “Duties of Educated Men,” Bethune addressed the drawbacks of overworking, unjustified devotion to financial success, and imprudent employment of leisure time. His charge, at once both transcendental and pragmatic, justified time well spent in the outdoors.

Be content, even if you can gain nothing more, with the education of your spirit, by the cultivation of your mind and the cultivation of your heart, for that sphere where God designs it shall have its largest expansion and highest bliss.¹²⁵ He who has this habit is never alone, and never without a pleasure. If he walk abroad, the heavenly bodies as they wheel along their orbits, the winds and the storm-clouds ... the plants of the field and the trees of the wood, the rocks, the very soil on which he treads, all speak to him a language he understands, and give him lessons of profit and delight.¹²⁶

Henry Ward Beecher and the Divine within Sinful Man

*Human Nature is a poor affair- man is but a pithy, porous, flabby substance, till you put conscience into him.*¹²⁷

If George Bethune persisted as one of the last bastions of the grim side of Calvinism, Henry Ward Beecher represented the culmination of liberalized Platonic influences on modern Protestantism. A proponent of both Darwin’s theory of evolution and philosophies of universal salvation, Beecher characterized the ultimate reconciliation of stout Christian

¹²³ Bethune, “Longing for Rest,” *Sermons*, 297.

¹²⁴ Bethune, “Piseco,” 118.

¹²⁵ Bethune, “Leisure,” *Orations*, pp 69-74.

¹²⁶ Bethune, “Duties of Educated Men,” *Orations*, 291.

¹²⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *Patriotic Addresses*, 194.

dogma and the ever evolving spirituality of Transcendentalism. He never offered any path to human restoration outside of the grace of God nor did he suggest individual salvation of the living apart from the cross of Christ, but throughout his illustrious career, Beecher was branded a heretical publicity hound by traditional theologians and non-theists alike.

Unquestionably one of the greatest impacts on Beecher's philosophy was his father. As one of the foremost organizers of the Second Great Awakening, Lyman Beecher supported an important shift in New England Calvinist doctrines of agency. He vigorously defended traditional theology against the uprising of Unitarians in early nineteenth-century New England, yet his ideas on the election of man to God's grace prompted a theological shift in ideas about man's agency.¹²⁸ In the famous division between the Old School Calvinism of predestination and the New School theology of man's free agency, Lyman Beecher, who represented new and unconventional doctrines, endured condemnation from both traditional Presbyterians and Unitarians.¹²⁹ In the somber months of public controversy that culminated in the notorious synod trials in Dayton, Ohio, Henry Ward Beecher "learned ... all the theology that was current at the time," and by the end of adolescence, he "was so sick ... of the whole medley [and] despised and hated this abyss of whirling controversies."¹³⁰ In light of these experiences with traditional doctrine, Beecher shirked conventional dogma and produced his own blend of spirituality, love, and salvation.

Beecher spent a great deal of his ministry studying the essence of human nature and viewed himself an excellent judge of human character. He often taught that understanding

¹²⁸ Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of the New England Theology* (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1963), 433.

¹²⁹
¹³⁰ William Constantine Beecher *et al.*, *A Biography of Reverend Henry Ward Beecher* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1888), 605. The trials were the culmination of Old School Calvinists desperately trying to keep mainstream Reformed theology intact. Though Lyman was vindicated, the vicious rhetoric from both sides sullied any regard Beecher might have held for traditional doctrine.

the character of man proved essential “to make use of such portions of the truth as are required by the special needs of man, and for the development of the spiritual side of human nature over the animal or lower side.”¹³¹ Without a comprehension of individualism, which in Beecher’s view came as effectively from lawyers and scientists as it did from preachers, particular needs would be much more difficult to meet. This vision of individuality molded his approach to preaching throughout his ministry, and shaped his understanding of the human relation to the natural world.

Like many theologians of his day, knowledge of the divine lay at the crux of Beecher’s perception of human nature, and he believed that “the only part of the Divine nature that we can understand is that part which corresponds to ourselves.”¹³² He offered later that his father taught him that good works of the unsaved were of little merit because they were “natural affections,” and did not become “good” until the act came from “gracious affections ... qualified by the Divine Spirit.”¹³³ Beecher added that because of the universality of the Divine Spirit, a direct influence of Transcendentalism, every act that comes from the sinful man is born from the same source that affects the righteous man. This reliance on the universal spirit led the younger Beecher to believe that all men were capable of goodness and that salvation came to all men, either in life or after.

Beecher’s complicated account of the nature of man mirrored several aspects of Transcendentalism, yet, instead of a singular Platonic impression of a spiritual man, he embraced both the visible and invisible, or real and philosophical realms of both the natural

¹³¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures on Preaching* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1881), 77.

¹³² Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures*, 83.

¹³³ Henry Ward Beecher, *Yale Lectures*, 198.

world and the human heart.¹³⁴ For Beecher, human nature embodied a twofold existence of animal and spiritual nature. Half of the human soul resided in his animal or lower state, a sphere ruled by passion and worldly emotion. The transcendental quality of Beecher's belief system led him to perceive the other half of human nature as a direct spiritual association with God. In regards to the spiritual, he endorsed portions of the emanation theory that Bethune so readily castigated, and suggested that beauty which repulsed the animal side likely led to an enhancement of the spirit.¹³⁵ Beecher's only hope of peace and rest for the world was that "human nature must be changed ... away from the animal and toward the spiritual."¹³⁶ He agreed with the Calvinism of his youth that man was sinful, but maintained that every man in some fashion exhibited tendencies of the Universal Spirit that governed his "other" being. Beecher's assertion that man must first be grounded in the real or carnal side of nature allowed him to promote sublime experiences in the natural world.

Sin was real for Beecher, but in opposition to traditional Calvinism, it did not descend from the original fall of man. Instead, he believed that sin emerged not from a corrupt nature, but from a nature "not unfolded or harmoniously developed."¹³⁷ An enthusiastic proponent of Darwinism, Beecher felt that both evolution and the New Testament demonstrated his theory of conflict between the animal and spiritual natures of man. The evolution of morality seemed obvious to him in light of the strides society made in matters of slavery, equality, and human rights, and the development of morals improved as God further revealed himself to man.¹³⁸ Whether through scientific study or naturalist amusement, for

¹³⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *Sermons in Plymouth Church, Brooklyn: September 1873-March 1874*, ed. T. J. Ellinwood (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1882), 167.

¹³⁵ Henry Ward Beecher, *Sermons in Plymouth Church*, 179.

¹³⁶ Henry Ward Beecher, *Plymouth Pulpit*, Volume I, 208.

¹³⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution and Religion Part I*, 86.

¹³⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution*, 41.

Beecher revelation often occurred outside of the sphere of men and in the realm of nature.¹³⁹ He also believed that man's evolution included a process that led to an improved human nature, but he disagreed with many Transcendentalists that man's capability to progress existed wholly in man alone, insisting that "when left in the most favourable conditions, man does not, and will not, so develop himself."¹⁴⁰

Beecher surmised that if man was inherently wicked then society produced inevitable immorality, and wherever men congregated, temptation materialized. The city was full of men who "are badly born and worse reared ... Vices and crimes haunt them ... it is the life that is lived here, that walks up and down your streets, that shows itself in every form of neglect, and embraces, perhaps, the majority of the population."¹⁴¹ This understanding allowed him to forsake animal passions that governed modern societal interests, and to seek the very real and tangible natural world in an effort to repair man's relationship with the ethereal, spiritual God of nature. Likewise, if nature also repeated cycles of devastation because of its appeal to animal passions, human society fashioned similar results, and he observed "that combativeness and destructiveness which are found throughout the whole of physical nature reproduce themselves, and carry on their analogies, in the bosom of society."¹⁴² The danger that this sinful element posed to civilization was that "men in society are producing more effects upon each other than the sun, than the showers, than the whole world of nature."¹⁴³ Understanding the threat that the company of modern man created, Beecher firmly asserted that while the companionship of good men was essential for a

¹³⁹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution*, 256.

¹⁴⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, *Royal Truths* (Edinburgh: Alexander Strahan and Company, 1862), 229.

¹⁴¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Evolution*, 256.

¹⁴² Henry Ward Beecher, *Plymouth Pulpit*, Volume I, 30.

¹⁴³ Henry Ward Beecher, *Plymouth Pulpit*, Volume I, 30.

healthy life, frequent withdrawals from prevailing society were similarly necessary, “for it is solitude that gives zest to society.”¹⁴⁴

Beecher frequently lamented the magnification of man’s inner wickedness as society grew larger, and the increasing unrighteousness of the city that resulted from the influx of commerce and industry weighed heavily in his natural philosophy. He noted that “there is connected with the business of the city so much competition, so much rivalry, so much necessity for industry, that I think it is a perpetual, chronic, wholesale violation of natural law.”¹⁴⁵ Cities likewise fostered societal distinctions and the “commerce of the world is conducted by the strong; and usually it operates against the weak.”¹⁴⁶ The gilded walls of the city enticed men to commit grave acts, and the rise of financial prospect was often more than sinful man could resist. With humanity so inescapably connected to wealth, minor infractions of morality produced a cumulative effect and, “where everybody sins together, men fondly think that their concord is a law of nature. Little by little success domineers over conscience. The permission of custom, the sole condition of accomplishing, the fact of accruing wealth, with its praise, and influence, and power, these overrule moral considerations, and men do not hesitate to violate rectitude by ranks and multitudes.”¹⁴⁷ Beecher did exhibit a remarkable tendency to express some measure of faith in the ultimate triumph of Christian goodwill in society, but part of his solution involved sessions of retreat and reflection. In “Peace of God,” a sermon that described the ideal Christian experience, he mimicked Thoreau’s charge to refute the temptations of materialism.

¹⁴⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *Norwood; or, Village Life in New England* (New York: Charles Scribner and Company, 1868), 84.

¹⁴⁵ Henry Ward Beecher, *Royal Truths*, 40.

¹⁴⁶ Henry Ward Beecher, *Freedom and War* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 422.

¹⁴⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *Summer in the Soul; or Views and Experiences* (Edinburgh: Alexander Strahan and Company, 1859), 70.

Society requires wealth ... As men rise higher and higher in the Christian development, they are less and less dependent upon the physical conditions for their enjoyment ... It is simply the recognition that material experiences and enjoyments are wise and beneficial for the lower forms of life, but that every man ought, by their very use, to have risen so high as to open for himself yet higher ones, that are not dependent upon the mutations of physical things.¹⁴⁸

Beecher was an ardent supporter of a strong work ethic, but like Bethune, he assumed that financial gain imparted responsibility to the destitute, not outright materialism.

To Beecher, no other man displayed the proper use of solitude and withdrawal from the city like Jesus did. The controversial minister often cited Christ's example of withdrawing to the wilderness as a time of earnest prayer and meditation. "No longer drawn by the wants of the crowd," men, like Jesus, find the utmost "communion of the soul with God" in solitude.¹⁴⁹ Beecher argued that while surrounded by throngs of listeners, Christ found a way to remain separated from the multitudes. He found companionship, grieved with, and sympathized for men, yet he did not allow himself to become consumed by the sin of the society that he kept. Part of the separation was built on renewal apart from the world of men. After Jesus ministered to the masses, "every period of intense fervor was followed by some tranquil seclusion."¹⁵⁰ Jesus, Beecher argued, found not only rest, but wholesome communion with the Father in the wilderness. The city offered Beecher little in the way of spiritual vitality, and frequent withdrawal became a necessity for the modern believer in the same manner that it had for Christ. Beecher authored *The Life of Jesus the Christ*, an unfinished *magnum opus*, in which he suggested that his model for wilderness withdrawal lay in Christ:

¹⁴⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, *Plymouth Pulpit: The Sermons of Henry Ward Beecher*, First Series (New York: J. B. Ford and Company, 1869), 301.

¹⁴⁹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Summer in the Soul*, 31.

¹⁵⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, *The Life of Jesus, the Christ*, Volume II, Completed Edition (New York: Bromfield and Company, 1891), 2.

He said to his disciples, *Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest awhile.* It is not good to live too much among men. Solitude is as needful as sleep. In ardent society men are giving forth or receiving influence incessantly. Like trees blown out of shape by unmannerly winds, the human spirit needs stillness in which to regain its equipoise and proper shape.¹⁵¹

He understood that Satan also dwelled in the wilderness where he tempted the Savior, but that angels tended to the Master there as well. Beecher likewise found strength to resist temptation in nature.

Beecher's escape to nature rested on the idea that too much living in society kept the spirit dull. Evolution promised him that man's inner condition was improving and that society as a whole would progress in due time; however, he recognized a damaging influence from modern approach to commercial gain. Chasing wealth induced exhaustion, corruption, and a neglect of the heart as well as fellow men. Beecher reasoned that a little time spent outside the confines of the city and in the great God-given wilderness was conducive to spiritual renewal cultivated by transcendental experiences. For this reason, he implored listeners to join him in the country where "we shall forget the city and lay aside its excitements, and bathe with a perpetual lavation in the bright, cool mountain air."¹⁵²

Henry Van Dyke and Hope for Fallen Man

*Human nature. It is fallen, it is disordered, it is guilty, but the capacity of reconciliation, of love to God, still dwells in it.*¹⁵³

As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, Romantic optimism in human nature faltered. In the previous hundred years, popular theology softened from ascetics to aesthetics and the descriptions of wilderness changed from sinister to sublime. But at the

¹⁵¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *The Life of Jesus, the Christ*, Volume II, 38-39.

¹⁵² Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 143.

¹⁵³ Henry Van Dyke, *Straight Sermons*, 16.

dawn of the First World War and at the height of the Industrial Revolution, praise of modern man turned to scorn, and by the 1920s, the human situation looked as dismal as it seemed bright a half-century earlier. In the middle of the transition from confidence to cynicism, a mild-mannered Presbyterian emerged out of Brooklyn hoping to restore the civilized American with hope that the remedies for modernity lay in faith in a supernatural being and a very natural world. Henry Van Dyke's call to "consider the lilies" reverberated across the nation, and he introduced a novel religion-based appreciation for the American wilderness despite the intrusion of human malevolence.

Van Dyke's perspective on humanity blended Bethune's fallen human nature with Beecher's remnant of the Divine, and like both ministers, an element of his theology was imparted to him by his father. Henry Jackson Van Dyke, who in the late 1850s took an Old School Presbyterian church in the "Dutch village [that was] just coming under the influence of the New England invasion," exerted an acute impact on the boy.¹⁵⁴ In his years at Princeton Theological Seminary in the mid-1870s, the younger Van Dyke grew accustomed to defending both his father's work and his father's faith. Though conservative in nature, Van Dyke grew up in a climate wrought with religious turmoil between traditional Calvinists like his father and the liberal revivalism of Beecher and DeWitt Talmage. His early study of human nature cemented in him the idea that corrupt, fallen man was almost always a slave to self, and the repercussions of selfish transgressions were grave.¹⁵⁵

Transcendentalism gave birth to a new perspective on human nature, a view that offered Van Dyke a positive twist on the human condition. He was an ardent admirer of several transcendental authors, and studied poetry and prose intently. He adopted some of

¹⁵⁴ Tertius Van Dyke, *Henry Van Dyke*, 15.

¹⁵⁵ Tertius Van Dyke, *Henry Van Dyke*, 61.

the Divine Reason philosophy but rejected the idea that “Man is his own star.”¹⁵⁶ Van Dyke disagreed with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s assertion that Christ’s atonement was metaphorical, but concurred that the divine inspiration of the Bible to the inner life “found man,” where man did not necessarily find it.¹⁵⁷ Stirred by impressions of the divine in the works of Emerson and Tennyson, Van Dyke espoused the supernatural aspects of Transcendentalism, yet he remained distinctly Christian and less optimistic of human ability to find God apart from revelation or the scriptures.

In *The Gospel for a World of Sin*, Van Dyke illustrated a perspective on human nature that prompted his emphasis on evangelism. He insisted that there was “a common ground of evil in human nature,” and suggested that neither science nor philosophy has “reduced or weakened the evidence of” that fact.¹⁵⁸ He assented to Beecher’s opinion that the essence of man contained a dichotomy of animal and spiritual affections, but believed that even man’s supernatural side was inclined to wickedness. The animal part of man was degraded and further tempted in Van Dyke’s age because of “monstrous and evil vices in society.”¹⁵⁹ These vices were as evident to the nonbeliever as the Christian, yet the “secular spirit” failed to recognize that “nine-tenths of human misery comes from sin.”¹⁶⁰ Evolution promised God’s continuing revelation and an ultimate triumph over evil, but Van Dyke believed that day remained in the future.¹⁶¹ For the present, an understanding of human nature lay in an understanding of man’s inclination to sin. In what he would later call upon to support his conservation efforts, Van Dyke offered a profound assessment of what he viewed as a

¹⁵⁶ Henry Van Dyke, *Select Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: American Book Company, 1907), 63.

¹⁵⁷ Henry Van Dyke, *Companionable Books* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 29.

¹⁵⁸ Henry Van Dyke, *The Gospel for a World of Sin* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1899), 14.

¹⁵⁹ Henry Van Dyke, *The Battle of Life* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1907), 22.

¹⁶⁰ Henry Van Dyke, *The Battle of Life*, 9.

¹⁶¹ Henry Van Dyke, *The Gospel for an Age of Doubt*, 116.

material fact about humanity, exclaiming that “foolish is the man who tries to build a life, or a theory of life, in forgetfulness of the steady downward thrust of human nature, or in denial of the reality and universality of the evil that is in the world.”¹⁶²

From his theories of the sinful nature of man Van Dyke constructed numerous reasons for departing from the temptations of the city and searching for amends for human nature in the wilderness. He never relinquished his taste for culture nor his appreciation for the ingenuity of industrious men, yet Van Dyke believed that where humanity gathered, be they intelligent or otherwise, evil was invariably present. He regularly blamed the animal character of humanity for the wickedness that ravaged the modern city while surmising that this side of man drew the soul to the wild unknown. In Van Dyke’s modern world, “the characteristics of city life intensify the necessity of religion.”¹⁶³ For numerous reasons that included the way mankind treated its own, that same city life also induced a turn to nature.¹⁶⁴ Sensing a call to point lost souls to the path of righteousness, Van Dyke’s attempts at evangelism in the city sprang from human nature’s effect on modern culture. Society of industry and commerce placed excessive value on man’s assets, commodified human life, and led to the immoral doctrine of materialism.¹⁶⁵

Van Dyke commonly targeted materialism as a poor result of turn-of-the-century commercialization. Both Bethune and Beecher roundly rejected accumulation of wealth to increase societal status, but in Van Dyke’s day affluence increased at a much more rapid pace, and in his eyes the wicked influence of wealth lurked everywhere. The remedy for

¹⁶² Henry Van Dyke, *The Gospel for a World of Sin*, 18-19.

¹⁶³ Henry Van Dyke, *Essays in Application* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 174.

¹⁶⁴ Henry Van Dyke, *Straight Sermons*, 90.

¹⁶⁵ Henry Van Dyke, *Straight Sermons*, 8.

temptation, as he suggested in his anecdotal angling book *Little Rivers*, lay beyond the city walls:

Half of the secular unrest and dismal, profane sadness of modern society ... comes from the greedy notion that a man's life does consist ... in the abundance of things he possesses ... and that it is somehow or other more respectable and pious to be always at work making a larger living, than it is to lie on your back in the green pastures and beside the still waters, and thank God that you are alive.¹⁶⁶

As a youth, Van Dyke took great pleasure in strolling through the quaint, friendly city, but under the influence of commerce, it became an oppressive, caustic environment. “To-day, if duty compels, you plunge through that same mile-and-a-half, shut in by man-made cliffs of varying degrees of ugliness, stifled by fumes of gasolene [*sic*] from the conglomerate motor-cars.”¹⁶⁷ In modern society, spiritual needs ended where hubris began “so that there are multitudes of men at present to whom it makes but little difference where or how they live, provided they are in outward comfort.”¹⁶⁸

While he regularly promoted seeking refuge from the city, Van Dyke appreciated the advancements civilization brought, and in an essay entitled “Is the World Growing Better,” he outlines hope mixed with frustration of the human condition. Not “highly ethereal and supercilious” enough to disregard the development of science and education, Van Dyke regarded the evolution of man as part of God’s design for the perpetual improvement of the human condition.¹⁶⁹ Proud that in certain regards American prosperity created a “swollen sense of importance,” he was just as excited that several voices from the press and pulpit advised against the dangers of commercialism and became “consecrated to ideals in religion

¹⁶⁶ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers*, 35.

¹⁶⁷ Henry Van Dyke, *Camp-fires*, 7.

¹⁶⁸ Henry Van Dyke, *Story of the Psalms*, 176-177.

¹⁶⁹ Henry Van Dyke, *Essays*, 2.

and philanthropy, in the service of man's intellectual and moral needs."¹⁷⁰ In several ways, he embodied the optimism in man that dominated the nineteenth century. Until the outbreak of World War I, when he was dispatched as U. S. ambassador to the Netherlands, he maintained confidence that man valiantly tried to prohibit and mitigate the brutality of widespread war which began to feel "the restraining touch of mercy."¹⁷¹

Despite the compassion and sympathy promulgated in the previous fifty years, Van Dyke remained cynical about man's capacity for self-restraint, and the twentieth century promised to continue a few disturbing trends. He lamented that "speed is glorified, regardless of direction. Strength is worshipped at the expense of reason. Success is deified as the power to do what one likes. Gilding covers a multitude of sins."¹⁷² Van Dyke scarcely found morality in the denizens of modern society, but a turn to nature would instruct man to righteousness, and he believed that "if we are wise and teachable, we walk with Nature, and let her breathe into our hearts those lessons of humility, and patience, and confidence, and good cheer, and tranquil resignation, and temperate joy, which are her 'moral lore.'"¹⁷³

For Van Dyke, though nature was not the sole solution for the hostility of the city, following Christ's example of retreating from the confines of society played a large part in the recovery of the human soul. In Van Dyke's mind, Christ's withdrawal to the wilderness was predicated on his "ultimate mission to the inner heart of man."¹⁷⁴ Jesus rejected the idea that a man's life amounted to that which he possessed, and Van Dyke believed that the "confusion ... the self-interest, the clashing prejudices" of the city in Christ's time mirrored

¹⁷⁰ Henry Van Dyke, *The Spirit of America*, 117-118.

¹⁷¹ Henry Van Dyke, *Essays*, 30.

¹⁷² Henry Van Dyke, *Essays*, 33.

¹⁷³ Henry Van Dyke, *The School of Life* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 29.

¹⁷⁴ Henry Van Dyke, "The Message of Christ to the Inner Life," *The Message of Christ to Manhood: Being the William Belden Noble Lectures for 1898* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1899), 149. **147-182.**

modern society.¹⁷⁵ Van Dyke argued enthusiastically that the New Testament furnished an image of Jesus reaching man in the cities but offered intimate pictures of him seeking restoration for himself “in the big out-of-doors, where the sky opens free above us, and the landscapes roll away far to the horizons.”¹⁷⁶ By the time that Van Dyke encouraged listeners to “break the habit of being so busy that we know not how or when to break it off,” his call to nature was no longer unique.¹⁷⁷ He did, however, seem to embody the man that his forebears envisioned as a Christian gentleman who perceived that God was readily found in nature, and that the city on the hill required periods of rest away from its own savagery.

¹⁷⁵ Henry Van Dyke, *Out of Doors in the Holy Land*, 62.

¹⁷⁶ Henry Van Dyke, *Out of Doors in the Holy Land*, 63.

¹⁷⁷ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers*, 224.

III.

RECONCILING MAN AND NATURE THROUGH ANGLING

As many historians of American sport have noted, recreational anglers became a driving force in the turn-of-the-century conservation movement and helped usher in a new respect for the American wilderness. Influential men of the nineteenth century, though perhaps not always noted primarily for fishing prowess, understood the reverence in which gentlemen anglers held nature. From nature writers and social reformers such as Washington Irving and Henry David Thoreau to politicians like Daniel Webster and U. S. Presidents Chester A. Arthur and Theodore Roosevelt, scores of American heroes at one time or another experienced New England trout fishing first-hand. Outside of random notes in journals and several defenses of the sport, few piscatorial works existed in America prior to the 1800s, but when the genre took off after the turn of the century, it sparked an important trend in the modern withdrawal to the wilderness.

By the 1870s, angling literature flew off American presses and resulted in notable increases in participation in the sport as hordes of city-dwellers flocked to backwoods to practice the “gentle art.”¹⁷⁸ While American intelligentsia discovered countryside fishing’s benefits of fresh air and exercise combined with contemplation and meditation, disciples of the Enlightenment began to develop a maxim of modern commercialization: Materialism affected humanity’s morality, and industrialization often disturbed the purity of the

¹⁷⁸ Stan L. Ulanski, *The Science of Fly Fishing* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 8.

wilderness. With the future of society's principles and the American frontier hanging in the balance, a source of unity to temper both effects emerged in the increasing popularity of "truehearted" angling.¹⁷⁹

Initially, though there is some evidence that nearly all males in seventeenth-century New England fished, Puritan culture did not readily associate angling with righteousness like genteel British society often did in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁸⁰ Although sport fishing probably did not reach its zenith in the United States until the last few decades of the nineteenth century, by the 1850s even polite New England society became immersed in trout-lore. The emergence of sporting periodicals such as *Spirit of the Times* and *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine* began relating the joys of angling to cosmopolitan readers by the 1830s.¹⁸¹ Washington Irving, who was once "completely bitten with the angling mania," and other Romantics helped further erase some of the stigma of incivility associated with sport-fishing.¹⁸² Moral justification in express response to Puritan concerns, however, appeared most often in the works of Puritan descendants themselves.

Protestant ministers represented the most visible vanguard of popular angling for gentlemen in America and forged a new image of the respectable, masculine, and above all pious fisherman. The first significant American dialogue on fishing for recreation is found in the sermon "A Discourse at Amoskeag Fall" published in 1743, in which Anglican missionary Reverend Joseph Seccombe tendered a religious vindication of angling that

¹⁷⁹ William A. Gleason, *The Leisure Ethic: Work and Play in American Literature, 1840-1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.

¹⁸⁰ Daniels, 169.

¹⁸¹ Schullery, 26-27.

¹⁸² Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (London: John Murray, 1820), 324.

emphasized the way that fishing “enlivens Nature [and] recruits our Spirits.”¹⁸³ Historian Charles Goodspeed asserted that this was likely a direct response to the Puritan disapproval of amusements that prevented Christians from doing good works, suggesting that fishing was popular enough among ministers to warrant censure.¹⁸⁴ John Keese, an innovator in black bass angling, offered that “as a Christian I certainly say that, in some of my solitary rambles, or boat-excursions, with my rod, I have been favored with the most devout and grateful emotions of the heart in contemplating the beauties of creation; and, looking up from the works of my Maker around me to Him who made them all, my meditations on the divine goodness have been most sweet.”¹⁸⁵

An 1847 *Christian Inquirer* editorial comment stating that “angling is, without contravention, a highly honorable calling, promoting good health and spirits, just what Americans need” signaled that by mid-century, prevalent religious crowds had recognized the meditative nature of the sport.¹⁸⁶ Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, well-known Protestant ministers and theologians actively continued advocating the benefits of angling and outdoor adventures. William Cowper Prime, editor of New York’s *Journal of Commerce* and a devout Presbyterian, observed that angling above all other outdoor recreation was where “men go for relief in weariness, for rest after labor, for solace in sorrow,” and he famously referenced Christ’s encouragement of his disciples’

¹⁸³ Joseph Seccombe, “Business and Diversion Inoffensive to God and Necessary for the Comfort and Support of Human Society: A Discourse Utter’d in Part as Ammauskeeg-Falls, in the Fishing Season, 1739,” in *Manchester Historic Association Collections* Volume IV, Part One (Manchester, N. H.: Manchester Historic Association, 1908), 97.

¹⁸⁴ Goodspeed, 65.

¹⁸⁵ John Keese, “Concluding Remarks,” in *An American Angler’s Guide*, 2nd edition, ed. John J. Brown (New York: Burgess, Stringer, and Company, 1846), 223.

¹⁸⁶ “Notices of Books,” *Christian Inquirer*, July 3, 1847, 1, 38.

fishing.¹⁸⁷ Ultimately, the history of angling and religion generally confirms the adage that among its adherents, “angling was a sign of grace, of membership of a ‘brotherhood’ of pious and peaceable men.”¹⁸⁸ The works of Bethune, Beecher, and Van Dyke make plain that through the pursuit of the contemplative man’s recreation, each preacher discovered more than simply fishing through experiencing God in nature, and wholly embodied the essence of “the complete angler.”

Angling as a moral and quasi-religious practice emerged most conspicuously in Britain with the seventeenth-century publication of Izaak Walton’s *Compleat Angler*. Few if any historical works on angling in popular culture fail to mention the impact that Walton bore on the reputation of recreational fishermen, and the book remains behind only the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress* as the most widely printed manuscript in the English language. On the heels of Cromwell’s marginalization of England’s Anglicans in the 1650s, Walton’s “parable of his particular version of Christianity” through pastoral reflections on “the contemplative man’s recreation” appealed to many religious allies who, like Walton, were forced to leave the comforts of London for the English countryside.¹⁸⁹ His “complete angler” represented the religious piety of Christians who rejected materialism and embraced a “contemplation of all things divine,” and thus began the western tradition of intermingling Christian virtues and angling in literature.¹⁹⁰ From the earliest seventeenth-century disciples

¹⁸⁷ W. C. Prime, *I Go A-fishing* (New York: Harper, and Brothers Publishers, 1873), 20.

¹⁸⁸ B.D. Greenslade, “The Compleat Angler and the Sequestered Clergy,” *The Review of English Studies* 5, no. 20 (October, 1954): 364. (361-366)

¹⁸⁹ Historians have uncovered that Walton not only “borrowed,” from angling texts from as early as Dame Juliana Berners’ *Treatyse of Fysshynge Wyth an Angle* (1496) and William Samuel’s *The Arte of Angling* (1577), but also plagiarized the political characters and dialogue of the book. Historical descriptions of the pilfering and political commentary are too plentiful to highlight even the best. But for the purposes of this paper, since much of the true story remained hidden until the 1950s, most American anglers in the nineteenth century pointed to Walton as the model for the pious angler.

¹⁹⁰ Samuel Snyder, “Casting for Conservation: Religion, Popular Culture, and the Politics of River Restoration,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 2008), 69.

of Walton through the 1970s and Maclean's *A River Runs through It*, which famously noted that "there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing," Christianity has been inexorably connected with angling in the most sentimental literature.¹⁹¹

George Washington Bethune: Modest Angler

*Among out-door recreations, none has been a greater favorite with studious men ... because none is more suited to quiet habits, fondness for retirement, and love of nature, than angling, not in the sea, but in brooks or rivers, where the genus Salmo abounds.*¹⁹²

Few angling ministers of the nineteenth century enjoyed the same widespread literary success as Reverend George Washington Bethune. He was regarded as an outdoor pioneer in the "golden age of clerical etiquette" who shook off "its choking cravats, imperious black coats, and long faces" and created an image of rugged, masculine piety "years before the muscular school of Christians came into vogue."¹⁹³ Possessing what he considered the most complete collection of angling literature in the world, Bethune's passion for fishing was perhaps superseded only by the pursuit of its knowledge. Widely regarded as one of the foremost American authorities on fly fishing, the reverend's name appeared as frequently in angling literature as any other in the nineteenth century, except perhaps Father Izaak Walton himself. Bethune edited one of the most celebrated editions of Walton's *Compleat Angler* and became one of the earliest American theorists on designing flies.¹⁹⁴ Though he insisted that he was only a "modest angler" despite a deep interest in the sport's history, he remains a

¹⁹¹ Norman Maclean, *A River Runs through It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 1.

¹⁹² Bethune, *Orations*, 375.

¹⁹³ Reverend Samuel Osgood, "Tribute to Dr. Bethune," *Christian Advocate and Journal*, 37, no. 30 (July 24, 1862), 235.

¹⁹⁴ Schullery, 84.

pioneer in the chronicles of American fly fishing and symbolized the enormous change wrought in mainstream Calvinistic nature attitudes in the nineteenth century.¹⁹⁵

Like most anglers, Bethune developed an affinity for angling during his youth, though not because of family tradition. At age eleven, his parents transferred him from New York City to Salem, New York, and sent with him high hopes that an education “removed from the temptations of town life” at the feet of the Green Mountains might draw the boy out of depravity.¹⁹⁶ Along with “country manners,” Salem had a jail that became the occasional home of one Fisher Billy. Billy, a miscreant who found himself in debt because he was inclined to chase trout rather than work, plied the waters where Bethune first fished.¹⁹⁷ Local tales described Billy’s children who “went about ragged and slip-shod, and that his wife found much ado to supply their table even scantily” because an “invincible love of angling drove every other consideration from his mind.”¹⁹⁸ Bethune “fell into his company, and was then and there inspired with love of this gentle art.”¹⁹⁹ Learning the sport from such an irresponsibly devoted man left a considerable imprint on the aspiring merchant. Years later, Bethune stated his reason for returning to the passion of his adolescence to escape the vexations he experienced in industrializing society in the speech “A Plea for Study”:

He, who is pent up in a town, vexed by the excitements of the day, and driven, in spite of himself, to late and irregular hours, could get profit every way, if at times he would seek the purer air, free from the city's smoke, and with his rod as a staff, climb the hills, and ply his quiet art in the brooks that wash the mountain side, or wander through the green valleys, shaded by the willow and the tasseled alders.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ Charles Lanman, *Haphazard Personalities; Chiefly of Noted Americans* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1886), 252.

¹⁹⁶ Van Nest, 6.

¹⁹⁷ Samuel I. Prime, *Under the Trees* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1874), 111

¹⁹⁸ “Fisher Billy,” *The New England Magazine* VII, no. 55 (December, 1834), 445.

¹⁹⁹ Prime, *Under the Trees*, 111.

²⁰⁰ Bethune, *Orations*, 376.

The modern cleric's rigorous duties demanded energy and stamina, and Bethune's manner of angling required invigoration that keep the body in tune with a righteous spirit. The reverend emphasized the energizing effects that fishing produced, and he was certain that "their being obliged to rise early is a chief reason of the good health anglers generally enjoy."²⁰¹ Bethune highlighted the importance of health because for Christians, the body was the "temple of God," and in matters of temptation, the condition of the body seriously affected the habits of the mind. He once told a group of businessmen that "occasions should be sought to put every muscle into full action. It has been remarked, that they, who avail themselves of this exercise [angling] moderately and are temperate, attain, generally, an unusual age. Walton died upwards of ninety; Nowell at ninety-five, and Mackenzie at eighty-six."²⁰² The reverend endured his share of mishaps, but remained convinced that human nature demanded the invigoration of an exercise like angling to uplift the heart and sharpen the mind.

The "gentle art" afforded Bethune much more than mere toleration of suffering to secure an evening's supper for it allowed escape from the city and the rigorous obligations of a clerical profession. Upon returning to the city, the minister resumed his duties "sturdy in body and happy in spirit."²⁰³ Every activity of the present life was preparation for spiritual immortality and business, science, and even leisure time could be virtuous if used correctly. When pursuits of life turned to a "hum of anxious voices," and a "clamor of incessant toil," a break was often required.²⁰⁴ Respite, however, could not be found in "the crowded saloons of water places ... or the haunts of hackneyed resorts," but rather in a breaking away from

²⁰¹ Bethune, *Complete Angler*, 83.

²⁰² Bethune, *Orations*, 375-376.

²⁰³ Bethune, *Orations*, 375.

²⁰⁴ Bethune, *Orations*, 59.

crowds and a turning to the birthplace of man “amidst trees, and herbage, and flowing waters,” where “there are the works of God.”²⁰⁵ As a minister in a period of immense immigration to the city, Bethune found his clerical responsibilities more demanding and thus his leisure time more important.

At the time that Bethune’s edition of Izaak Walton’s *Compleat Angler* was published, popular American nature-writing, influenced heavily by Transcendentalism, was in its infancy. Calvinistic suspicions of the wilderness, though slowly being eroded by Boston intellectuals and the success of the Second Great Awakening, lingered in many reformed congregations, and remnants of religious austerity hindered Bethune’s forthright promotion of the sport. In the 1730s, the great Anglican George Whitefield roundly chastised Christian men for engaging in activities that he referred to as “diversions” which distracted efforts to build God’s kingdom.²⁰⁶ Though Whitefield did not mention fishing specifically, the directive seemed clear to many American Protestants, and some Puritans like Cotton Mather, who fished sometimes himself, publicly disapproved of clergymen who spent too much time angling for trout instead of souls.²⁰⁷ Bethune’s visit to the opera in Naples in the mid-1840s forced the dissension of several parishioners and biographer Abraham Van Nest suggested that the incident created another cause for concern about endorsing non-edifying activities.²⁰⁸ Uneasy over potential congregation backlash, Bethune published his version of Walton under the pseudonym “American Editor,” and perhaps because of the same apprehension, occasionally went fishing *incognito*.²⁰⁹ Nevertheless, Bethune often boldly preached and

²⁰⁵ Bethune, “Piseco,” 119.

²⁰⁶ Goodspeed, 9.

²⁰⁷ Ulanski, 7.

²⁰⁸ Van Nest, 172.

²⁰⁹ Van Nest, 210.

wrote about the edifying benefits of the natural world and became one of the first popular ministers of the nineteenth century to promote the advantages of angling.

Bethune's additions to *The Complete Angler*, which bore "the impress of the Christian and the scholar," perhaps best displays the holiness that he associated with fly fishing.²¹⁰ His admiration for the spiritual tones of ancient angling authors is as apparent as his respect for piscatorial knowledge. Bethune applauded Walton's "cheerful piety which filled his heart with love to God and man," and he readily supplied biblical references to several of Walton's quotes about nature.²¹¹ He completely understood the meaning of Walton's virtuous legacy, and from the tenor of his praise, it seems as though the minister could not have been more pleased in inquiring "who, with his opportunities, has done more for religion and literature, or who has left a dearer and better name for every meek grace of Christianity behind him?"²¹²

Along with suggestions of improved health, Bethune frequently used images of the lake and the stream to encourage natural intellectual stimulation. He wondered when birds, "refreshed by the streams near which they dwell," uttered appreciation to the Creator, "how ought Christians to blush, who, besides the comforts and conveniences of this world, are indulged with copious draughts of the water of eternal life."²¹³ An enthusiastic student of poetry, he noted that the frontier's "noble rivers, rushing streams, limpid lakes, [and] wild cascades" inspired the most imaginative lines.²¹⁴ His "Song of the Teetotaler" contrasted intemperance with the natural blessing of God:

²¹⁰ D. E. N., "Izaak Walton's Complete Angler," *Spirit of the Times* 17, no. 42 (December 11, 1847): 492.

²¹¹ Bethune, *Complete Angler*, lxxiii.

²¹² Bethune, *Complete Angler*, lxxii.

²¹³ Bethune, *Complete Angler*, 12.

²¹⁴ Bethune, *Orations*, 183.

The feet of earthly men have trod
 The juice from the bleeding vine,
 But the stream comes pure from the hand of God,
 To fill this cup of mine.

The brook goes forth with a cheerful voice,
 To gladden the vale along;
 And the bending trees on her banks rejoice
 To listen to her quiet song.²¹⁵

Water represented baptism and renewal, and became the most recognizable source of contemplation for Bethune.

In Bethune's America, nature motivated morality and genius amidst "the majesty of its rivers ... the thunder of its cataracts, the clear crystal of its thousand lakes."²¹⁶ The reverend admitted that even at Piseco Lake, a favorite fishing hole during his ministry, "if the truth be told, many a finny prowler escaped the fate due to his murderous appetite, because the thoughts of the angler were wandering in delicious day-dreams, or aspiring gratefully to God, who has made our way to heaven lie through a world so beautiful."²¹⁷ Just as importantly, the trout-brook represented the antithesis to the city-street, and supplied a reprieve from society, which he noted in his preface to Walton:

The stream side is ever dear to me, and I love to think of the times when I have trudged merrily along it, finding again in the fresh air and moderate exercise and devout looks upon nature, the strength of nerve, the buoyancy of heart and health of mind, which I had lost in my pent library and town duties.²¹⁸

Even as he neared death, Bethune looked to the river, "calm as a mirror," to soothe anxiety and remind himself of the tranquility that was to come.²¹⁹ Wilderness waters offered serenity, often appeared "bathed in holy light," and held a special place in the minister's

²¹⁵ Bethune, *Lays of Love and Faith*, 101.

²¹⁶ Bethune, *Orations*, 30.

²¹⁷ Bethune, "Piseco," 122.

²¹⁸ Bethune, *The Complete Angler*, i.

²¹⁹ Van Nest, 388.

heart because they allowed him to ply his favorite pastime and spoke to him as from the intimate spirit of God.²²⁰

Bethune often retreated to the trout-brook in search of beauty, revelation from God, and – like a true evangelist – a chance to win souls. Stories of his wilderness ministry are found nearly as often as tales of his “trouting,” and he utilized angling figures of speech in his approach to preaching. He criticized coarse preaching methods that used scare tactics and force with a presumptuous “large cod line, and a great hook, and twice as much bait as the fish can swallow” when a humble minister should instead “get a little switching pole, a small line, and just such a hook and bait as the fish can swallow.”²²¹ Frontiersmen were grateful for his leadership on the banks of Lake Piseco where he formed one of the first American angling associations, and he regularly ministered to his angling club and to the locals.²²² Fishing partner and fellow minister Reverend Joshua Cooke noted that “rude boatmen of the St. Lawrence speak to this day of his Christian interest and benevolent actions on their behalf ... and on the extreme confines of the Canadian wilderness, men tell feelingly of the tenderness, the simplicity, the earnestness of his prayers.”²²³ Bethune certainly displayed the Puritan desire to Christianize the wilderness, but his evangelism hinged not on civilizing wilderness, but rather on delivering a sound way to enjoy God through nature.

The reverend was responsible for creating churches and schools in the Thousand Islands area of New York after learning from fishing guides about the lack of religious instruction in the area.²²⁴ He also regularly preached to angling clubs and locals in the

²²⁰ Bethune, “Piseco,” 129.

²²¹ James H. Hoadley, “The Recreations of a Country Parson,” *Forest and Stream*, 17, no. 4 (August 25, 1881): 67.

²²² Bethune, “Piseco,” 127.

²²³ Van Nest, 206

²²⁴ Van Nest, 213.

Adirondacks. His example of the righteous angler was apparent in his demeanor as well. A fisherman who boarded Bethune one evening reportedly marveled at the minister's virtue, exclaiming, "Who are you? You have been with me in my boat all day fishing, skillfully, not swearing once, and now you have sung like an angel and prayed like a saint."²²⁵ In the midst of evangelical opportunities, poetic reminiscences, and of course testing his skills against nature, Bethune made it clear that his retreat to the woods focused on his own experiences and those of others whom he encouraged to enter into "communion with his Savior, without which no scenes were lovely, and no day was bright."²²⁶

In outdoor recreation, the pursuit of trout might have consumed much of Bethune's mind, but not nearly so much of his heart. Evidence of God was everywhere in nature, and it was man's duty to embrace natural spoils in an attempt at spiritual union with the Creator through the glad "voices of nature ... for they speak of God."²²⁷ In a widely acclaimed speech entitled "A Plea for Study," Bethune summarized both his fishing and nature ethos as a development of a closer connection to the Almighty declaring that "after a few days of such communion, *sibi et Deo*, among the pleasant works of his Maker ... he will go home a more healthy man in mind, body and heart."²²⁸ This philosophy that brought nature to life, he insisted in an article detailing the origins of the Piseco Lake Trout Club, did not develop from sheer imagination, but was a direct and tangible blessing from God to anglers who sought an intimate relationship with the creator alone in the wilderness.

It is the blessing of Jesus, who sought the wilderness, the shore, and the mountain-side to gain strength from communion with his Father. It was in such solitudes that our Example and Forerunner found courage for his trial and suffering. Religion is eminently social, but its seat is the heart of the individual believer, and, whatever be

²²⁵ A. N. Cheney, "Angling Notes," *Forest and Stream* 39, no. 5 (August 4, 1892): 94.

²²⁶ Van Nest, 207.

²²⁷ Bethune, *Fruit of the Spirit*, 57.

²²⁸ Bethune, *Orations*, 377.

the advantage of Christian fellowship, the flame must be fed in private, personal converse with the Father of our spirits. He, who has not been alone with God, can seldom find him in the crowded church.²²⁹

Henry Ward Beecher: Transcendental Angler

*Perhaps one's experience of "fancy tackle" and of fly-fishing might not be without some profit in moral analogies; perhaps a mountain stream and good luck in real trout may afford some easy side-thoughts not altogether unprofitable for a summer vacation.*²³⁰

The 1840s provided a boon to American literature, not only in nature writing, but in fly fishing literature as well. Reverend John J. Brown published *An American Angler's Guide*, a seminal work on American angling, in 1845, Bethune's edition of Walton gained notoriety after 1847, and Charles Lanman produced *An Angler in Canada, Nova Scotia, and the United States* in 1848. By the following decade, when Henry Ward Beecher encouraged readers to join him "a-fishing," the brand of the vulgar fisherman had been erased to a small but significant extent.²³¹ Transcendentalists supported the escape to the woods and even Thoreau posited that fishermen were "often in a more favorable mood" for observing nature than "philosophers and poets even, who approach her with expectation."²³² Beecher likewise sought nature with high hopes but agreed that the sport placed the angler in both mental and spiritual states conducive to experiencing the sublime in the wilderness.

Beecher most vividly portrays his attraction to the outdoors through angling reminiscences, many of which he first enjoyed while fishing with his father in the clear

²²⁹ Bethune, "Piseco," 124.

²³⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 151.

²³¹ Schullery, 127. Schullery insists that not until 1880 "was it easy enough to be a sportsman and a leading citizen," but according to this author, Protestants in the 1840s and – 50s laid the foundations of respectability.

²³² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*, ed. Francis A. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1910), 232-233.

streams of northwestern Connecticut. Lyman Beecher confessed of his own youth that he often “fished all day till dark, and felt sorry when night came,” because he “couldn’t leave off until the bullheads were done biting.”²³³ The organizer of the Second Great Awakening regularly took his children fishing, and during these excursions, the eminent reformer talked often of religion and nature.²³⁴ Theology was more earnestly broached later in life, but in his earliest days as a novice angler, Henry Ward Beecher developed a keen, transcendental connection to the natural world and its inherent divinity.

He offered endorsements of angling that centered on three ideals frequently associated with the sport, one of which was the healthful effects it produced. According to Beecher, well-being was a Christian grace that assisted man in the spreading of the Gospel and the resistance of temptation.²³⁵ It represented the pinnacle of a devout life, and was “the platform on which all happiness must be built.”²³⁶ A healthy Christian was in position for benevolence and labor in God’s work, and Beecher regularly prayed for “health and strength, that we may work for Christ and the kingdom of the Savior in this world.”²³⁷ Angling provided the most enjoyable form of exercise for Beecher, not least because it encouraged waking early in the day: “The early rising, the freshness of those early morning hours preceding the sun,” and the “the exertion of one’s own faculties,” all common experiences in angling, amounted to a “greater sum” than the actual fishing in his encounters.²³⁸ Getting up early to fish discouraged idleness throughout the day, and in the essay “Dry Fishing,” he

²³³ Lyman Beecher, *Autobiography, Correspondence, Etc. of Lyman Beecher, D.D.* ed. Charles Beecher (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1864), 28.

²³⁴ John Henry Barrows, *Henry Ward Beecher: The Shakespeare of the Pulpit* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1893), 23.

²³⁵ Henry Ward Beecher, *One Thousand Gems from the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher*, ed. Rev. G. D. Evans (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1870), 67.

²³⁶ Henry Ward Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men, on Various Important Subjects* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1849), 24.

²³⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *Sermons*, Volume II (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1868), 34.

²³⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 233-234.

mocked indolence that kept men from witnessing the finest experiences in nature, scornfully proclaiming, “sleep on lazy folks yet in bed; God reserves these royalties of the morning for honest work-folk that rise early, for birds that never sing as they do before sunrise.”²³⁹

Beecher led a group of romantically inclined authors in suggesting that angling inexorably drew men into a transcendental relationship to the natural world. The angler rose before daybreak, delighted in the early morning songs of birds of the field, and “as soon as the meadow was crossed, the fence scaled, and a descent begun, all familiar objects were gone.”²⁴⁰ The minister often caught himself so charmed by nature that he claimed to have nearly forgotten to make the first cast, and he summarized these encounters with nature through angling in the last few lines of “Morals of Fishing,” reflecting that his “excursions usually turn out to be little of fishing, a good deal of wandering dreamily about, yet more of lying under trees, or of being perched up in some notch of a rock, or of silent sitting on the edge of ravines and trumpeting waterfalls.”²⁴¹ Beecher’s angling outings often found him resigned to laying aside the rod and enjoying the solitude of the wilderness, and he claimed that his most memorable excursions included plenty of lying down.²⁴² The river, which afforded Beecher “the greatest amount of enjoyment among all natural objects,” set the angling experience apart from other wilderness adventures and distinct from every other event in life.²⁴³

Like so many anglers, his focus on flowing waters revealed part of the aesthetic attraction for Beecher, and through his descriptions of trout streams, he became almost

²³⁹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Eyes and Ears* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Company, 1862), 304.

²⁴⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, “First Fishing,” in *Beecher as a Humorist*, ed. Eleanor Kirk (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1887), 191.

²⁴¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 239.

²⁴² Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 235.

²⁴³ Henry Ward Beecher, *Eyes and Ears*, 68.

transcendental in his approach to nature. Central to Beecher's awe for the river was its power to shock the angler from the comfort of fishing and bring him into a wholesome being as *part* of nature, a position he defended in the essay "The Mountain Stream":

This rush of wild waters about your feet; this utter lawlessness of power and beauty, so solitary, with such instant contrasts, with the sound of waters beneath and of leaves above, and you, alone and solitary, standing in the fascination until you seem to become a part of the scene. A strange sensation steals over you, as if you were exhaling, as if you were passing out of yourself, and going into diffusive alliance with the whole scene!²⁴⁴

The river itself was alive and he heard it whisper songs of both gladness and melancholy. He perceived its enticing call to the angler and rejoiced in its babbling paeans to the creator, wondering if there was "ever a better closet" for prayer.²⁴⁵ Waterfalls became scenes of "raging power covered all over with a robe of perfect beauty ... down below there is a suppressed thunder, as of an organ playing beneath the uplifted song of a thousand voices."²⁴⁶

Perhaps because of his magnified role in the anti-slavery movement, Beecher's dexterity as an angler has appeared as little more than a footnote in history, but two amusing stories reveal the minister's intimate knowledge of the sorrows of a sincere fisherman. In "The Deacon's Trout" from his only proper novel, *Norwood*, he tells the story of a parson so fond of the sport that he was forced to alter his path to church to avoid potentially violating the Sabbath by chasing a large trout in a stream that followed his regular Sunday route. This scene was probably all too familiar to Beecher, and he described it with all the emotion of a seasoned angler: "Jist as I was sayin': 'What is required in the Fourth Commandment?' I heard a splash, and there was the trout, and, afore I could think I said: 'Gracious, Polly, I

²⁴⁴ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 167.

²⁴⁵ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 150.

²⁴⁶ Henry Ward Beecher, *Eyes and Ears*, 169.

must have that trout.”²⁴⁷ Likewise, in the article “Trouting,” Beecher humorously described how catching bait can be every bit as frustrating as angling, and he approached the ordeal as only a true fisherman might:

If any tender-hearted person ever wondered how a humane man could bring himself to such a cruelty as the impaling of an insect, let him hunt for a grasshopper in a hot day among tall grass; and when at length he secures one, the affixing him upon the hook will be done ... as a mere matter of penal justice.²⁴⁸

He, like Bethune, presented himself as only a humble fisherman, inclined to forget the trout and fall into a daydream, but even a cursory read of Beecher’s honest familiarity with the peaks and valleys of sport reveals a genuine sportsman possessing intimate knowledge of and sincere affection for the gentle art.

Beecher took from angling one of his most effective uses of metaphor in evangelism. Christ, who “had a peculiar habit of drawing instruction and knowledge from the symbolisms of nature,” taught his disciples to “fish for men,” and Beecher enthusiastically employed the knowledge of angling to forge his own style of preaching.²⁴⁹ The imagery of angling was twofold. When Christians angled for lost souls, Beecher surmised the preacher “must make himself a servant of the trout if he will catch the trout.”²⁵⁰ He focused on reaching the individual in the same manner that each fish must be approached in relationship to its surrounding, seasons, and temperament. The devil likewise angled for desperate souls, and the danger of diversions that seemed “in themselves harmless” was that the imperceptible evil hook was often attached to a much graver sin. “When he [Satan] wants to catch trout that will not bite where it can see the line, he spins a line so small that it cannot be seen, and

²⁴⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *Norwood*, 85.

²⁴⁸ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 148.

²⁴⁹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Sermons* (Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1870), 312.

²⁵⁰ Henry Ward Beecher, *Sermons*, 316.

puts bait upon it, and the fish is caught.”²⁵¹ Nature taught Beecher how to pray, but angling taught him how to preach.

Indeed, intimacy with God in nature proved the best explanation for why Beecher went fishing. He offered supplementary justifications of health, knowledge of the world, and sublime experiences, but in his response to a letter that publicly condemned his promotion of fishing, his defense was simple. Angling reminded Beecher that he was a child of God, and that his Heavenly Father spoke to him frequently on the banks of the mountain stream:

There is that incomparable sense of freedom which one has in remote fields, in forests, and along the streams. One who believes that God made the world, and clearly developed to us his own tastes and thoughts in the making, cannot express what feelings those are which speak music through his heart, in solitary communions with Nature. Nature becomes to the soul a perpetual letter from God, freshly written every day and each hour.²⁵²

Henry Van Dyke: True-hearted Angler

*‘Tis not a proud desire of mine; I ask for nothing superfine;
No heavy weight, no salmon great, To break the record or my line.*

*Only an idle little stream, Whose amber waters softly gleam,
Where I may wade through woodland shade, And cast the fly and loaf and dream:*

*Only a trout, or two, to dart From foaming pools, and try my art:
‘Tis all I’m wishing – old fashioned fishing, And just a day on Nature’s heart.*²⁵³

After George Perkins Marsh published the classic conservationist manifesto *Man and Nature* in the 1860s, Americans merged the emotional aspects of transcendental natural awe with the practical temperance of science. Scores of influential men associated with the roots of late nineteenth-century environmentalism solidified the righteousness that they found in the wilderness. John Burroughs demanded the preservation of nature, William H. H. Murray

²⁵¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Sermons*, 68.

²⁵² Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 234.

²⁵³ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers*, 5.

endorsed the benefits of retreating to it, and Gifford Pinchot praised the economic profit of using it wisely. All three were notably skilled anglers. In several instances, like the push for the preservation of the Adirondacks in the 1880s, lesser-known fishermen represented a large division of Americans interested in preserving wilderness.²⁵⁴ In the midst of the emerging popularity of nature, Henry Van Dyke, the country's consummate angling sentimentalist, combined aspects of conservation with an endorsement of going a-fishing to reconcile modern man to nature. He authored several anecdotal fishing books like *Fisherman's Luck* and *Little Rivers*, held various positions in conservation clubs, and preached that connections with nature led to spiritual rebirth and that angling provided the quintessential vehicle to experience the divine in the wilderness. His approach hailed the physical benefits of time spent in the woods, with a dash of Beecher's transcendental experience of the divine.

Van Dyke garnered perhaps more recognition by relating his outdoor adventures than he did through his theology and statements on social reform which were also widely acclaimed. His prowess as a hunter and fisherman landed him on *The Illustrated Outdoors News* top ten sportsmen list of 1906 that included both Charles Hallock and Theodore Roosevelt. He was also lauded as an excellent shot with the rifle, but Van Dyke eventually shelved his firearms for the exclusive pursuit of fish with the fly rod.²⁵⁵ At the height of his fame, he chose to focus his mettle in brooks and streams and penned popular expositions on the discovery of nature's God and the deliverance of humanity through angling.

Van Dyke's father, who was as earnest in fishing as he was in preaching, ensured that the boy assumed a life deeply attached to the woods and the trout-stream. In "Recollection of a Boy and a Rod," an excerpt from *Little Rivers*, Van Dyke illustrated the passion he

²⁵⁴ Reiger, 42.

²⁵⁵ Henry Van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke*, 299.

developed for nature and angling by telling of the wilderness romance that captivated him early on and insisting that fishing allowed him action instead of just daydreaming. The boy's father "preferred to educate his child by encouraging him in pursuits which were harmless and wholesome," and the young man's favorite Bible verse described Simon Peter catching a fish "at the first cast."²⁵⁶ An upbringing "in the strictest sect of trout fishermen" preceded Van Dyke's inevitable life of a fisher of both dappled trout and depraved souls.²⁵⁷

Ultimately Van Dyke offered four impulses that drove him in pursuit of fish: "First, because I like it: second, because it does no harm to anybody: third, because it brings me in touch with Nature, and with all sorts and conditions of men: fourth, because it helps me to keep fit for work and duty."²⁵⁸ These rewards that fishing encouraged, both to body and soul, echoed the same benefits that his angling predecessors promoted. Human nature in the modern city demanded "intervals of rest and relaxation."²⁵⁹ Van Dyke celebrated the vigorous pursuit for good health and exercise, and the setting of angling supplied him with the sport's greatest joy, intimacy with nature. To him, the true angler was "ever on the lookout for all the various pleasant things that nature has to bestow upon you."²⁶⁰

Much like other romantically-inclined sentimentalists, Van Dyke expounded eloquently on the joys of experiencing God through nature, and his 1895 creation of *Little Rivers* placed him in a flourishing group of American nature writers that included John Burroughs, Charles Dudley Warner and John Muir. Throughout the book he movingly contemplated the wonders of the wilderness and its flowing waters. The river offered insights to the mysteries of nature, and he marveled at how cheerfully angling "lures you on

²⁵⁶ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers*, 26.

²⁵⁷ Henry Van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke*, 298.

²⁵⁸ Henry Van Dyke, *Camp-fires*, 141.

²⁵⁹ Henry Van Dyke, *Camp-fires*, 8.

²⁶⁰ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers*, 24.

into the secrets of field and wood, and brings you acquainted with the birds and the flowers.”²⁶¹ To illustrate the point, he began the book quoting Robert Louis Stevenson, agreeing with him that rivers quiet a man down “like saying his prayers” and that “there is, after all, no place like God’s out-of-doors.”²⁶² With the publication of *Little Rivers*, Van Dyke solidified angling as a muse for what would be one of the most highly respected literary careers in American history.

Like Bethune and Beecher, Van Dyke made it clear that he understood that the best part of fishing relied on its surroundings. He suggested to Boy Scouts that a good fisherman “should remember that it is not all of fishing to fish, but that the pleasant memories and close observations of nature which he brings home with him from a day’s outing are really his best reward.”²⁶³ Nature offered him proof of God’s grace, and as he drew closer to nature, Van Dyke felt he became more like Christ, who was more sensitive to “the rhythmic element in nature” than any other man.²⁶⁴ Van Dyke also related stories from his own childhood in which nature’s scenes became more vivid “when the ... boy who walks among them carries a rod over his shoulder.”²⁶⁵ He recognized that man’s experience of those wild scenes demanded treks from the city to visit the “God of the Open Air”:

For men have dulled their eyes with sin,
And dimmed the light of heaven with doubt,
And built their temple walls to shut thee in,
And framed their iron creeds to shut thee out ...
And thou hast wooed thy children, to restore their fellowship with thee,
In peace of soul and simpleness of mind.²⁶⁶

²⁶¹ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers*, 23.

²⁶² Robert Louis Stevenson, “Prince Otto,” in *Little Rivers*, 8.

²⁶³ Henry van Dyke, “The Scout Merit Badge of Angling: A Famous Fisherman Writes Some Things All Boys Should Know about this Fascinating Sport,” *Boys Life* 4 no. 6 (August 1914): 12.

²⁶⁴ Henry Van Dyke, *The Gospel for an Age of Doubt*, 256.

²⁶⁵ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers*, 42.

²⁶⁶ Henry Van Dyke, *Music and Other Poems by Henry Van Dyke* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 35.

The recurring theme of nearly all American angling literature of the period required the experience away from modern cities. Van Dyke supported the charge in frequent condemnation of the ways in which modern man habitually turned away from nature to commerce and materialism. The key, however, was to look beyond the soothing enchantments of nature and “see and hear the handwriting and the voice of God.”²⁶⁷ Van Dyke felt that the restoration of man lay in fellowship that was best experienced beside the flowing waters of the trout-stream.

“The stream can show you, better than any other teacher, how nature works her enchantments with colour and music,” and it was the brook that ultimately drew Van Dyke to angling.²⁶⁸ Like Beecher, Van Dyke’s eloquence regarding the rivers in which he fished approached a distinctly transcendental air, yet he sounded a more mature tone that seemed as practical as it did emotional. Waters called men from lives of toil to moments of rest, from politics and markets to quiet interludes of meditation. His favorite streams seemed to always lure him “away from an artificial life into restful companionship with nature.”²⁶⁹ Religious imagery shrouded the idyllic trout-brook, and like his angling forebears, Van Dyke devoted scores of lines to the spiritual nature of flowing water. He cherished the “rivers of God” for their image of renewed strength, and he believed that swift waters, emblems of “violent and sudden change, of irrevocable parting, of death itself,” symbolized baptism, repentance, and restoration of fallen humanity.²⁷⁰ The connection to nature was important, but separation from civilization and rehabilitated energy played an equally pleasant role predicated on the cheerful surprises of streamside fly fishing.

²⁶⁷ Henry Van Dyke, *Poetry of the Psalms*, 23.

²⁶⁸ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers*, 23.

²⁶⁹ Henry Van Dyke, *Fisherman’s Luck*, 227.

²⁷⁰ Henry Van Dyke, *Out-of-doors in the Holy Land*, 146-148.

Van Dyke believed that “the earth, as God created it,” was “full of comfort for all who have a quiet mind and a thankful heart,” which angling helped to cultivate.²⁷¹ In *The Ruling Passion*, Van Dyke suggested that fishing developed the quiet mind and promoted patience, a vanishing trait in the modern world, and assured readers that “there is no surer method” to “unlearn” haste.²⁷² As modernization put pressure on sincere relationships, friendships “formed beside flowing streams by men who study to be quiet and go a-fishing” were forged as the sturdiest of all connections.²⁷³ In *Little Rivers*, Van Dyke assured readers that frequent nature experiences beside soft waters aided greatly in relieving the tensions of the modern world:

If we can only come back to nature together every year, and consider the flowers and the birds, and confess our faults and mistakes and our unbelief under these silent stars, and hear the river murmuring our absolution, we shall die young, even though we live long ... and carry with us into the unseen world something which will make it worthwhile to be immortal.²⁷⁴

Van Dyke found the uncertainty in angling appealing as modern life became predictable and the calm temperament that it encouraged lured him from his city-dwelling. In *Fisherman's Luck*, Van Dyke addressed a revelation of human nature that suggested an important reason that contemplative men go a-fishing: “The attraction of angling for all the ages of man, from the cradle to the grave, lies in its uncertainty... There is nothing that attracts human nature more powerfully than the sport of tempting the unknown with a fishing-line.”²⁷⁵ The appeal of the unknown in fishing might have descended from Adam, whom Van Dyke mused might have lived in the savage wild before God placed him in the

²⁷¹ Henry Van Dyke, *Fisherman's Luck*, 92.

²⁷² Henry Van Dyke, *The Ruling Passion*, 129.

²⁷³ Henry Van Dyke, *Companionable Books* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 296.

²⁷⁴ Henry Van Dyke, *Little Rivers*, 334.

²⁷⁵ Henry Van Dyke, *Fisherman's Luck*, 5-6, 9.

Garden of Eden.²⁷⁶ He labeled that fate “Fisherman’s Luck,” but recognized that good or ill fortune constituted part of “distributions of a Wisdom higher, and a Kindness greater” than man, and that purpose and meaning lay in the blessings of God.²⁷⁷

The natural setting, the observances of nature, and the spiritual tug of the wilderness prompted Van Dyke to promote the wise and proper use of the natural resources of which he was so fond. Neither Bethune nor Beecher promoted conservation outright, but they did endorse temperance in all activities. Van Dyke, however, earnestly petitioned for the preservation of fish and game populations and natural habitat. As early as 1883, and in the same vein as Reverend W.H.H. Murray, he pleaded with the public through the *New York Tribune* to promote the preservation of the Adirondacks.²⁷⁸ Memberships throughout his life included the North American Association of Honest Anglers and the Advisory Board on Educational and Inspirational Functions of National Parks, and he is credited with influencing the foundation of the Izaak Walton League of America.²⁷⁹ Van Dyke never undermined the anthropocentric nature of Christianity, yet he consistently maintained that faith fashioned his passion and reverence for the outdoors:

There is more of God in the peaceable beauty of this little wood-violet than in all the angry disputations of the sects. We are nearer heaven when we listen to the birds than when we quarrel with our fellow-men. For since his blessed kingdom was first established in the green fields, by the lakeside, with humble fishermen for its subjects, the easiest way into it hath ever been through the wicket-gate of a lowly and grateful fellowship with nature.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ Henry Van Dyke, *Fisherman’s Luck*, 98.

²⁷⁷ Henry Van Dyke, *Fisherman’s Luck*, 36.

²⁷⁸ Henry Van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke*, 308.

²⁷⁹ Henry Van Dyke, *Henry van Dyke*, 308-310.

²⁸⁰ Henry Van Dyke, *The Ruling Passion*, 137.

CONCLUSION

Roderick Nash once claimed that “the literary man with the pen, not the pioneer with his axe” initiated the American obsession with the wilderness.²⁸¹ Perhaps nowhere is that sentiment demonstrated better than in the works of these three clergymen. The works of early Protestants like Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather proclaimed the evidence of God in nature, but seldom did church leaders promote withdrawal to the wilderness prior to Bethune’s suggestion that Christians “gather the incense-cups of nature.”²⁸² These were literary men indeed, and undoubtedly they shared the Transcendentalists’ appreciation for nature because none were economically attached to it. Since the days of John Calvin, Protestants believed that nature revealed divine purpose and viewed the study of nature as a unique manner of worship, initially only available to the upper classes to which Bethune, Beecher, and Van Dyke belonged.²⁸³ Without the time and resources to take the recommended frequent intervals from town duties, ostensibly none of them could have held nature in the regard that they did. Nevertheless, as affluence came to new classes with the onset of the American Industrial Revolution, ministers like these *did* in fact promote the retreat from commercialism into the frontier to help modern man keep morality in perspective.

Even as early as Bethune’s days at the pulpit with American industrialization still finding its roots, modern commerce and materialism became objects of scorn from both

²⁸¹ Nash, 44.

²⁸² Bethune, *Sermons*, 141.

²⁸³ Amanda Porterfield, *The Protestant Experience in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 135.

secular and religious reformers. The elimination of poverty and destitution and the spreading of the gospel to un-Christianized peoples had generally been considered worthy goals in most American Christian societies, but by the middle of the nineteenth century, concerned Protestant ministers recognized a dearth of morality in the increasingly flourishing city. All three ministers in this study understood the importance of returning to the wilderness in search of spiritual reconnection with the creator in the same manner that Christ did.

Throughout the history of the sport, promoters of fishing have been forced to justify the morality of the “gentle art,” and invariably they concurred with Walton’s estimation that “God never did make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation, than angling.”²⁸⁴ Reverend Seccombe argued that Christ encouraged his disciples to seek rest before embarking upon their mission to spread the gospel and encouraged them to go fishing.²⁸⁵ In *The American Angler’s Guide*, Reverend Brown supported Walton’s association of angling with a content heart and a meditative spirit.²⁸⁶ James Hoadley, the “Fishing Parson,” poetically quipped “And as for myself, I can boldly say /I preach the better from day to day, /For the strength I gain in my walks about, /While casting my fly for the speckled trout.”²⁸⁷ Ultimately, most justifications of fishing rested on the idea that it promoted the Christian virtue of health for the body and rejuvenation of the soul through a turn to nature as practiced by Christ. The escape from society, the contemplative nature of the sport, and the strengthening of spiritual and physical muscle allowed Bethune, Beecher and Van Dyke to attempt a reconciliation of fallen humanity with the perfection that nature’s God intended.

²⁸⁴ Isaac Walton, *The Complete Angler or, the Contemplative Man’s Recreation*, American Editor Edition (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1847), 106.

²⁸⁵ Seccombe, “A Discourse,” 83-84.

²⁸⁶ John J. Brown, *The American Angler’s Guide*, 16.

²⁸⁷ Hoadley, 67.

Bethune's outright promotion of natural spoils marked a sea-change of natural awe from rather conventional pulpits. Although ex-Unitarians opened the floodgates for reexamining traditional theology, Bethune was still forced to reckon with austerity and Puritan wilderness contempt from long-established orthodoxies. He intentionally addressed the resurrection of the Platonic emanation theory to promote the study of and return to "real" created nature. His honest and effective association with Walton and the contemplative character of pious anglers merged with the respect he garnered as a minister to help forge a successful transition of a religion offended by nature to one enamored with it.

Beecher's popularity was more than enough to authorize his sanctioning of both angling and the outdoors. Commanding large salaries and drawing massive crowds that often included celebrities like Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, he remained at liberty to say what he felt about human nature and the natural world with disregard for traditional theology. Beecher seemed much more aligned with the current of Transcendentalism in the mid-century, confiding to Emerson that he had been "feeding" off of his theology, but he nonetheless remained steadfast in his approach to salvation.²⁸⁸ Without Christ, the natural world held little value and angling was just an amusement, but according to Beecher, sinful man gained a reprieve from temptation of the modern city if in his streamside recreation he was at peace with his creator.

Henry Van Dyke's coming of age late in the nineteenth century meant that he did not have to deal with the same early-century disdain for his beloved art. In commercial matters, he remained conservative and utilitarian, but when the discourse turned to protection and enjoyment of nature, he displayed a sentimental tone. He felt that nature came alive to the observant angler and that God spoke to the spiritual fisherman who was willing to rejoice

²⁸⁸ Applegate, 274.

alongside the brook that worshipped its Maker. City duties were not to be so neglected that the laborer or the merchant fell into indolence, but every so often, a “touch of Nature” was required to redeem modern man.²⁸⁹

Despite theological differences, all three ministers agreed on the paramount wilderness activity that provided the best retreat from modernity. Bethune surmised modern man could “get profit in every way” by finding sanctuary and “putting every muscle into full action” into an outing on the trout-stream.²⁹⁰ Beecher admitted that when he was forced home from angling, he was always full of “a certain sadness” that he was leaving the friends that he found in solace, silence, and communion with God.²⁹¹ Van Dyke built from the transcendental qualities of both and found that almost all pleasures associated with the sport had an unplanned and sublime characteristic attached to a day’s fishing. Above all, each understood that fishing put the angler in a meditative disposition that was at once ready to experience God in nature.

The same spiritual benefits experienced in angling were championed by Transcendentalist reformers of the nineteenth century. Numerous aspects of angling likewise appealed to contemplative clergymen concerned with improving the human condition. The setting, the sound and feel of flowing water, the meditative nature of the sport and the connection with God in nature prompted hosts of ministers like Bethune, Beecher and Van Dyke to seek the reconciliation of humanity in a world of chaos. These three Protestants emerge unmistakably in line with progressive efforts at promoting a return to wilderness as a catharsis for modern society, and ultimately make a strong case for establishing the origins of the modern American nature ethic.

²⁸⁹ Henry Van Dyke, *Music, and Other Poems*, 108.

²⁹⁰ Bethune, *Orations*, 375-376.

²⁹¹ Henry Ward Beecher, *Star Papers*, 236.

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