臺大文史哲學報　第七十二期
2010年05月　　頁153~180
臺　灣　大　學　文　學　院

Writing Natural History: Alexander Wilson's Delineation of Early America's "Lovely Face of Nature"

Lu, Li-ru*

Abstract

Alexander Wilson is an early voice in the tradition of American natural history writing. He composes many nature essays and poetic works of natural history, such as *American Ornithology* and *The Forester*. In his works, Wilson closely describes the beauty of the pristine environment and innumerable birds in America and was recognized as America's foremost authority on birds in his time. However, it is surprising that for a long time Wilson played a significant but largely unexamined role in American literature and in American nature writing tradition. Today he is remembered only as the "Father of American Ornithology" by most people.

Exploring Wilson's delineation of Early America's "Lovely face of Nature," this essay examines Wilson's effectiveness as a writer of literary natural history. In this essay, I contend that Wilson's works of natural history should be regarded as significant pieces of American literature because, introducing the scientific knowledge about America's birds into American prose and poetry to educate the American public about their own land, these works define a uniquely American subject. Also, Wilson's verses and nature essays should be deemed important pieces of American literature because they introduce many proto-ecological ideas, thereby initiating a tradition of proto-environmental ethics for early America.

Keywords: Alexander Wilson, natural history writing, national culture, proto-ecological thinking, *American Ornithology*, *The Foresters*

98.8.16 收稿，99.03.29 通過刊登。

* Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Huafan University.

I long most ardently to breathe once more the fresh air of the country, and gaze on the lovely face of Nature.[1]

—Alexander Wilson

I. Prologue

Nature writing, broadly speaking, refers to all nonfiction texts that represent the natural environment and personal experience in nature (Murphy 2000: 45). When examining the nature writings in American literary history, most critical studies focus their attention on works written since the mid-nineteenth century, frequently citing Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) as the precursor of the American nature writing tradition (Cooley 5-6, Fritzell 80, Paul 3, Slovic 5, Stewart xvi). Different from these critical studies, this essay inquires into an early nature writer who is a forerunner of Thoreau, who is a pioneering figure in American natural writing, and who plays a crucial but still largely unexamined part in American literature: Alexander Wilson (1766-1813).

In his lifetime, Wilson had been a weaver, peddler, teacher, poet,[2] artist,

1 Wilson wrote those words in a letter to his mentor William Bartram (1739-1823) on April 21, 1813. This letter is collected in a book entitled The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson (Philadelphia: American Philosophy Society, 1983) 405.These quoted lines are placed at the beginning of this article because it contains a part of the title of this essay—the "lovely face of nature." America's "face of nature," most late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century American nature writers (especially Bartram and Wilson) believed, should be studied, explored, and described because it functioned as a means of expressing American cultural and literary prospects (Looby 255-56). In other words, turn-of-the-century America looked increasingly to the writings about America's "face of nature"—natural history writing—as an index of American possibilities. Writing and publishing natural history in America, therefore, was essential to nurturing the emergence of American culture and literature.

In this essay, the following abbreviations will be used throughout to refer to sources of quotations from Wilson's writings:

P: Poems: By Alexander Wilson

AO: American Ornithology, or, the Natural History of the Birds of the United States

F: The Foresters: A Poem, Descriptive of a Pedestrian Journey to the Falls of Niagara in the Autumn of 1804, by the Author of American Ornithology

Letters: The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson

2 In his early years, Wilson wrote a long poem entitled "Watty and Meg; or, the Wife Reformed. A True Tale"; it was published anonymously in 1796. Today, the full text of

traveler, pioneering ornithologist,[3] and remarkable natural history writer. He was born ten years before the American Revolution in Paisley, Scotland. At the age of twenty-eight, Wilson emigrated from Scotland to the United States;[4] he eventually settled in the Philadelphia area (Hunter 1). In Philadelphia, Wilson met William Bartram,[5] a celebrated naturalist who developed Wilson's interest in ornithological literature and from whom Wilson received encouragement and instruction in drawing and in the study of natural history (Branch 1996: 1069).[6] Inspired by vast, magnificent, unsettled territory in New England and by the beauty and diversity of American birds, Wilson soon devoted his life to the study of birds, traveling many thousands of miles in search of undiscovered species.[7] By the time of his death, Wilson had completed nearly all nine volumes of his monumental *American Ornithology*; or, *The Natural History of the Birds of the United States* (1808-1814),[8] and had become America's foremost authority on birds. This book earned Wilson the title "Father of American Ornithology" (Fishman 112).

Although Wilson's study and writings of natural history were well recognized

---

"Watty and Meg" is collected by a database entitled ECCO (Eighteenth Century Collections Online) and it can be found in the Library of National Taiwan University.

3 As a pioneering naturalist who studies "young" America, Wilson is proficient in ornithology. His descriptions of American birds unlock nature's secrets.

4 Wilson emigrated from Scotland to America with his nephew William Duncan in 1794, and he became an American citizen on June 9, 1804 (Welch 23).

5 William Bartram is the son of John Bartram (1699-1777)—a notable natural historian who collected plants and established one of America's first botanical gardens outside of Philadelphia. He is famous for his botanical and ornithological drawings and for his book entitled *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, etc.*, which was considered at the time to be one of the foremost writings on American natural history (Irmscher 37).

6 Bartram is one of the earliest American ornithologists, and his work is believed to be the source of Wilson's interest in birds. After Wilson became an American citizen, he had grown fond of Bartram's works, deciding that he would become an apprentice to Bartram, and hoped to learn as much about his knowledge of ornithology as possible.

7 Wilson traveled more than 10,000 miles in ten years, mostly on foot or horseback to gather information for his book about the scientific and literary study of birds (Fishman 123-24). The result was the nine-volume *American Ornithology.*

8 In 1813, Wilson died during the writing of the ninth volume (Hunter 113), which was completed and published after his death by his friend George Ord (Hunter 6 and Welch 22). Today, the original full text of *American Ornithology* is reproduced and collected by a database entitled EAI (Early American Imprints); it can be found in the Library of National Taiwan University.

in his lifetime, yet he seldom receives critical attention in the history of American literature and in American environmental literature. It is worth noting that regarding Wilson's natural history writings neither the mainstream *Norton Anthology of America Literature* (2007), nor the much-touted, revisionist *Heath Anthology of American Literature* (2006), contain any passages of Wilson's works. For anyone with more than a passing acquaintance with Wilson's works or his prodigious literary and ornithological accomplishments, this exclusion is astonishing. In addition, Wilson does not receive much critical attention in the tradition of nature writing and in many anthologies of nature writing. In John Elder's *American Nature Writers* (1996) and Bridget Keegan's *Literature and Nature: Four Centuries of Nature Writing* (2001), Wilson's name and works are not included. In an essay entitled "Early American Natural Histories" (1998),[9] Wilson's writings and name are not mentioned, either. He has become a neglected author in American environmental literature.[10]

Generally speaking, Wilson is often considered and remembered only as the "Father of American Ornithology"; he receives little recognition beyond natural history circles. However, Wilson is more than an ornithologist. To think of Wilson as "the Father of American Ornithology" who merely presents the science of birds is to miss the crucial fact that he is a significant natural history writer (also called natural historian or naturalist) who composes literary natural history for early America. In actuality, Wilson precisely records his observation of and reflection on nature not merely in *American Ornithology*, but also in many poems collected in a book entitled *Poems: By Alexander Wilson* (1790) and in another book entitled *The Foresters: A Poem, Descriptive of a Pedestrian Journey to the Falls of Niagara in the Autumn of 1804, by the Author of American Ornithology* (1818).[11] *The*

9 Written by Paul Lindholt, this essay is collected in a book entitled *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* (1998); it is edited by Patrick D. Murphy, an established eco-critic.

10 After the emergence of ecocriticism in the 1980s, Wilson's works were gradually noticed by a few scholars in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. In 1989, a few passages of Wilson's *American Ornithology* were collected and appeared in Thomas J. Lyon's *This Incomperable Lande: A Book of American Nature Writing* (120-25). In 2002, an essay selected from Wilson's *American Ornithology*—"Ivory-Billed Woodpecker"—appeared in Robert Finch and John Elder's *Nature Writing* (77-81). Although a few critics—such as Lyon and Finch—noticed the existence of Wilson's works of natural history, yet Wilson's writings, on the whole, still have received little attention from contemporary eco-critics. In a database entitled *MLA International Bibliography*, there are only four journal articles and two books about Alexander Wilson.

11 Today, the original full text of *Poems: By Alexander Wilson* is collected by a database

Foresters is an exceedingly long, descriptive poem that recounts his expedition to and the magnificent beauty of Niagara (Hunter 74).

Arguing that Wilson is more than "the Father of American Ornithology," this essay examines Wilson's effectiveness as a writer of literary natural history. Exploring Wilson's delineation of early America's "lovely Face of Nature" (Letters 405), this essay contends that Wilson's works of natural history should be regarded as significant pieces of American literature because, introducing the scientific knowledge about America's birds into American prose and poetry to educate the American public about their own land, these works define a uniquely American subject. Also, Wilson's verses and nature essays should be deemed to be important pieces of American literature because they express an implicitly environmentalist critique of human pretensions to dominate nature and because they introduce many proto-ecological ideas, thereby initiating a tradition of proto-environmental ethics for early America.

II. Alexander Wilson and Natural History Writing

A. The Definition of Natural History Writing

Nature is a resource for both science and literature. Natural history is a broad area of scientific and literary inquiry; it records the information and facts relating to all natural productions, such as earth's flora and fauna; it represents a picture of untouched nature; and it documents a world captured by human observers in a particular cultural frame. The writing about natural history draws on scientific information and knowledge about the natural world, but at the same time, it is frequently written in the first person and incorporates personal observations of and philosophical reflections upon nature. Natural history writing, in other words, combines the qualities of scientific objectivity and literary subjectivity. In an essay entitled "Writing about Nature in Early America: From Discovery to 1850," Johnson and Patterson define natural history writings as "texts in which authors, in representing the natural world in language, deliberately bring together science and literature, and description and meditation, in order to effect some artful end" (3).

The term "natural history," according to Frank Bergon in his essay entitled "Wilderness Aesthetics," is rooted in the double meaning of the word "history" as it

entitled ECCO (Eighteenth Century Collections Online) and the full text of *The Foresters* is collected by another database entitled EAI (Early American Imprints). Both ECCO and EAI can be found in the Library of National Taiwan University.

has evolved from Aristotle. History, to the Greeks, means "an inquiry" or "an account of one's inquiries," so that natural history comes to mean an inquiry into the natural world and an account of its observable forms. However, the word "history" in the Aristotelian sense also means "a narrative or tale or story" in time (Bergon 130). Since many natural historians combine their "inquiry into nature" with a narrative of their travels or expeditions, it comes to be accepted that natural history is an eyewitness account of nature encountered on one's travels. In *American Ornithology* and *The Foresters*, for instance, Wilson closely describes America's landscape features, the beauty of American natural environment, and the intricate lives or habits of birds he has observed in his travels and expeditions.

On the whole, natural history as a term is used to refer to all descriptive aspects of the study of nature; it encompasses not only "the aggregate of facts relating to the natural objects, etc. of a place, or the characteristics of . . . things" (Regis 5), but also a mode of representation of personal experience in the world of nature. In their writings, natural historians often report their observations, perceptions, and interpretations of the natural world (Tallmadge 291-92). Natural history writing devotes much of its energy to representation of the world of nature and to considerations of the relationship between the natural world and its human inhabitants, exemplifying and envisioning new possibilities for human relation with the rest of the living world.

In America, natural history became a flourishing genre and discipline around the turn of the nineteenth century (Branch 1996: 1059). Believing that the species of America were unique and distinct from European counterparts, celebrating the beautiful and notable features of the New England's terrain and introducing American readers to scientific knowledge about nature, early American natural historians introduced a fit subject for America's national literature -- the vast and unexplored wilderness of the American continent and its nonhuman inhabitants. In other words, late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century natural history writings helped nurture awareness of an emergent American culture's unique dependency upon the land. Early natural history literature, as Branch suggests, "turned American attention toward the cultural and literary possibilities of the land" (1996: 1059).[12]

Being the root of modern nature writing,[13] natural history writing is slightly

12 This point will be elaborated and examined in the third section of this essay.

13 In America, modern nature writing traces its roots to the works of natural history that flourished in the late eighteenth century, including works by Wilson, William Bartram, John James Audubon (1785-1851), and other naturalists. Thoreau is generally considered the father of modern American nature writing (Paul 13 and Branch 2004: xvi). Other canonical figures include Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82), John Muir (1838-1914), Aldo

distinct from nature writing. In America, nature writing appeared in the mid-nineteenth century; it places primary emphasis on personal meditations and philosophical interpretations of nature. On the other hand, American natural history writing flourished in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century; it encompasses both natural history facts and a mode of representation of personal observation and experience in nature. Wilson's *American Ornithology* and *The Foresters* belong to natural history literature because these works are the belletristic, scientific and imaginative presentation of America's natural history, because in these works Wilson includes not only natural history sketches but also long poems, because these works help define a distinctively American subject, and because these works convey a vision of the human relationship with nature.[14]

B. Wilson and the Circle of Natural History in Early America

As an ardent natural historian, Wilson made close contact with the members of natural history circle in America, including William Bartram, Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827), and Thomas Jefferson (1745-1826).[15] In 1802, Wilson accepted a teaching job at the Union School of Kingsessing, just down the road from Bartram's famous botanical garden (Hunter 71). As a result, Wilson became acquainted with Bartram, who gave Wilson the run of his library and brought to him almost a century of disciplined observation of the American wilds (Hamilton 20). Through Bartram, Wilson got to know Peale, the founder of the first natural history museum in America. Wilson used Peale's museum as a studio and as a repository for his bird specimens (Hunter 4).[16] Peale's museum greatly benefited Wilson and in turn would be augmented by Wilson's collecting efforts.

In addition to Bartram and Peale, Wilson was in contact with Thomas Jefferson, who was a supporter and early subscriber to Wilson's *American Ornithology*; Jefferson subscribed to Wilson's unprecedented volumes in 1808 (Hamilton 25). On Bartram's recommendation, Wilson and Jefferson became correspondents (Porter 49). To Wilson, both Jefferson and Bartram were his literary predecessors in

Leopold (1887-1948), Rachel Carson (1907-64), and Edward Abbey (1927-89).

14 This point will be examined and analyzed in the fourth section of this essay.

15 In the Revolutionary period, Jefferson composed *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787). This book is a significant contribution to American natural history writing and it distinguishes Jefferson as a man well versed in the field of natural history.

16 Wilson spent a few years studying the collections in Peale's Philadelphia Museum (Irmscher 191). In addition to travelling, Wilson relied on others for information about his birds: some of his information came from Peale's Museum, some from Bartram's library and Gardens, and some from the people he met in his travels.

the task of writing American natural history.[17] In *American Ornithology*, Wilson mentions that Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* contains the first ornithological account in America (AO I: 8-9).[18]

C. Wilson as Natural Historian: His Unique Literary and Naturalist Qualities

Wilson is not only the Father of American Ornithology, but also a writer of literary natural history. His natural history writings are characterized by the accurate, vivid, and poetic description of nature. In *American Ornithology*, many passages display Wilson's command of natural history and his command of literary language in service of bird portrayal. In the following lines, for instance, Wilson presents "a short poetical epitome of the King-bird's history" of life:

> Lo! High in air, above those trackless wastes,
> With Spring's return the King-birds hither hastes;
> Coasts the fam'd Gulf, and from his height explores.
> Its thousand streams, its long indented shores, . . .
> All tempt not him; till, gazing from on high,
> COLUMBIA's regions wide below him lie;
> There end his wand'rings and his wish to roam,
> There lie his native woods, his fields, his *home*;

17 In Bartram's and Jefferson's natural history writings, the natural history about birds is not their principal focus; their writings also portray the plants and many other creatures—such as elk, snakes, alligators, turtles, beetles, and spiders—in New England. By contrast, Wilson's *American Ornithology* only focuses on the natural history of the birds in America.

18 In the "Introduction" of his first volume of *American Ornithology*, Wilson describes the state of ornithological records in America when he commenced his all-absorbing task:

> From the writers of our country the author has derived but little advantage. The first considerable list of our birds was published in 1787, by Mr. Jefferson, in his . . . "Notes on Virginia," and contains the names of 109 species . . . The next, and by far the most complete that has yet appeared, was published in 1791, by Mr. William Bartram, in his "Travels through North and South Carolina," etc, in which 215 different species are enumerated, and concise descriptions and characteristics of each added in Latin and English. (AO I: 8-9)

As the introduction to Wilson's *American Ornithology*, this passage reveals that Wilson

Down, circling, he descends, from azure heights,

And on a full-blown sassafras alights. (AO II: 70)

After describing the appearance and flying of kingbirds, Wilson immediately portrays the birds' coming home, wooing, and building nests:

Fatigues and silent, for a while he views

His old frequented haunts, and shades recluse,

See brothers, comrades, every hour arrive—. . .

Love fires his breast, he wooes; and soon is blest;

And in the blooming orchard builds his nest. (AO II: 70)

But later on Wilson calls these kingbirds "cowards," for when they encounter dangerous situations, they fly away and abandon their own babies:

Come now ye cowards! Ye whom heav'n disdains, . . .

On whom, perchance, a wife, an infant's eye

Hang as their hope, and on your arm rely;

Yet, when the hour of danger and dismay

Comes on that country, sneak in holes away,

Shrink from the perils ye were bound to face,

And leave those babes and country to disgrace. (AO II: 71)

These lines are Wilson's poetic representation of the natural history of American birds. Closely reporting the life of the kingbirds in America, Wilson conveys the scientific knowledge and information about American avian species in the form of verse. In this way, Wilson combines science and literature, making "American natural history available in elegant form for the first time" (Porter 48).[19] Displaying Wilson's careful observation and close description of kingbirds, the above-quoted passages also display Wilson's reactions to these birds. Wilson's representation of the kingbirds does not merely include the details that are rendered with interesting, detailed, and orderly observation, but also displays his distinctive naturalist and literary qualities.

In *American Ornithology*, American birds are richly represented in prose and in poetry. Wilson's ornithological opus is itself a literary accomplishment, for in

acknowledges both Jefferson and Bartram as his ornithological and literary predecessors.

19 Consequently, Porter in *The Eagle's Nest* asserts that Wilson's "*American Ornithology* is a book that heralded a new era of natural history in the United States" (2).

addition to eloquent prose describing the appearance and habits of American avian species, it interpolates birds lyrics of his own composition. Wilson inserts poems he has written himself in his prose description about bluebirds:

> When winter's cold tempests and snows are no more,
>
> Green meadows and brown furrow'd fields re-appearing, . . .
>
> When first the lone butterfly flits on the wing;
>
> When red glow the maples, so fresh and so pleasing,
>
> O then comes the Blue-bird, the HERALD of SPRING!
>
> And hails with his warblings the charms of the season. (AO I: 59)

After introducing the coming of "the Blue-bird" in spring, Wilson immediately notes the habitats and habits of the bird (AO I: 56):

> He flits through the orchard, he visits each tree,
>
> The red flowering peach and the apple's sweet blossoms:
>
> He snaps up destroyers wherever they be,
>
> And seizes the caitiffs that lurk in their bosoms;
>
> He drags the vile grub from the corn he devours; . . . .[20] (AO I: 59)

Using the form of poetry to offer readers the scientific fact and knowledge about the bluebird, Wilson believes that his bird portraits -- his own "transcript from living Nature" (AO I: 6) -- are meant to "speak not to the eye alone," but also "to the heart" (AO IV: vi). Wilson's works of natural history, in short, are literary artworks.

The most distinctive quality in Wilson's works of literary natural history is perhaps the combination of a mode of representing personal observation (and experience) in nature and the scientific form of life history. The development of life history has received the most attention from Margaret Welch. In *The Book of Nature: Natural History in the United States, 1825-1875* (1998), Welch identifies the nineteenth-century changes to life history as one of the important transformation in natural history; she contends that the writings of life history are "virtual biographies containing every scrap of available evidence on appearance, reproduction, communication, habitat, life stages, and geographical distribution of a species" (5). Welch identifies the catalyst for this change as being an increased emphasis on looking at plants and animals within their habitats, not as isolated creatures.[21] Of the

20 All the italicized words in this quoted passage are used by Wilson.

21 This is a proto-ecological vision of the world, for life history allows focus to be placed on a natural object and all its connections.

nineteen-century American naturalists who compose life histories, Welch credits Wilson with having the most significant impact on the development of life history. His illustrated *American Ornithology* contains three hundred and twenty figures on seventy-six color plates, accompanying these plates are written expositions on the life history of the various birds.

In *American Ornithology*, Wilson's natural historical discourse provides a fuller account of each bird; his contribution is "the quantifiable aspect of length and qualitative aspects of content and quality" (Welch 28). But in addition to the use of the scientific form of life history, it is Wilson's experience of observing the birds in the wild that adds the content and quality that makes his natural history unique. Wilson's account of the blue jay's life history offers an excellent example. After a lengthy paragraph of physical description, Wilson discusses the range of the blue jay, its song, its nest, and its dietary habits. Immediately following that, he describes how the blue jay is "the most bitter enemy to the Owl," moving on from there to offer examples of how the blue jay is at times a "tyrant" to other birds (AO I: 13):

> . . . when he sneaks through the woods, as he frequently does, and among the thickets and hedge-rows, plundering every nest he can find of its eggs, tearing up the callow young by piecemeal, and spreading alarm and sorrow around him. The cries of distressed parents soon bring a number of interested spectators, (for birds, in such circumstances, seem truly to sympathize with each other,) and he is sometimes attacked with such spirit as to be under the necessity of making a speedy retreat. (AO I: 13-14)

After portraying the blue jay's bad behavior, Wilson's account continues by covering the blue jay's talent for mimicry, its general intelligence, and its flocking habits. All in all, Wilson's description of the blue jay's life history occupies six pages, written in a controlled and stately prose.

In *American Ornithology*, the chapter on the ivory-billed woodpecker displays the unique literary and naturalist qualities in Wilson's natural history writings, too. This chapter starts with an emotionally charged description of the woodpecker. In Wilson's eyes, the ivory-billed woodpecker is "majestic" and "formidable" (AO IV: 20), the king of his tribe:

> Nature seems to have designed him a distinguished characteristic in the superb carmine crest and bill of polished ivory with which she has ornamented him. His eye is brilliant and daring; and his whole frame so admirably adapted for his mode of life, and method of procuring subsistence, as to impress on the mind of the examiner the most reverential ideas of the Creator. (AO IV: 20)

In accordance with his “majestic” appearance, Wilson’s ivory-billed woodpecker displays distinct class prejudice, in the form of a “dignity . . . superior to the common herd of woodpeckers” because the bird shuns the shrubbery, fence posts, orchards, rails, and prostrate logs where his poor relations congregate, preferring instead the “most towering trees of the forest” or the “solitary savages wilds” of the cypress swamps, where, amidst “piles of impending timber” (AO IV: 20). This woodpecker seems the “sole lord and inhabitant”. Wilson goes on to stress the usefulness of the woodpecker: in an instant, he kills the insects that can lay waste to “thousands of acres” of healthy pine trees (AO IV: 20). Then Wilson tells an anecdote of how he actually found the woodpecker portrayed in the accompanying plate. Wandering through the woods, twelve miles north of Wilmington, North Carolina, he had picked up the “slightly wounded” bird and taken it with him, “under cover,” to Wilmington. Unfortunately, the bird kept uttering the most pitiful cries, “exactly resembling the violent crying of a young child,” which promptly attracted the attention of everyone out on the streets. Enjoying the looks of “alarm and anxiety” given him especially by the women of Wilmington, Wilson marched into a hotel, asking for “accommodations for myself and my baby,” before revealing, amid general laughter, the actual source of the distressing cries (AO IV: 22). In the hotel room, the bird continued to show its “unconquerable” spirit, plotting routes of escape, wrecking a mahogany table to which it was tied, and biting Wilson while he attempted to paint its portrait. “He lived with me nearly three days, but refused all sustenance, and I,” Wilson writes, “witnessed his death with regret” (AO IV: 23).

The above-mentioned description of the life history of ivory-billed woodpecker, which is now believed to be extinct, demonstrates the primary elements of Wilson’s engaging approach to literary natural history: he combines careful description of species’ appearance, habits, and habitat with personal, anecdotal, sometimes humorous accounts of his own experiences studying it. And while Wilson frequently uses scientific evidence to correct common errors regarding his subjects, his sensibility is that of an enthusiastic admirer of the beauty, behavior, and life history of America’s birds.

III. The Construction of National Culture in Wilson’s Natural History Writings

Wilson’s prodigious literary and ornithological accomplishments are motivated

largely by his desire to help ground American national culture upon the land. In *American Ornithology* and *The Foresters*, Wilson closely records the intricate lives and habits of America's birds as well as the landscape features and the beauty of American natural environment; through his poems and descriptive essays, Wilson exemplifies the practice of natural history. Simply stated, introducing generations of American readers to the life and physical character of America's wild landscape, communicating scientific knowledge about nature accessibly and eloquently, and celebrating the beauty and power of nature in America,[22] Wilson's natural history writings turn American attention toward the literary and cultural possibilities of the land.

In addition, Wilson's natural history writings introduce the scientific knowledge and fact about New England's birds into American prose and poetry, and thereby help define a uniquely American subject. *American Ornithology* becomes the first comprehensive work of literary natural history published on the subject of birds; and it is the first bird guide in America. In it, Wilson painstakingly describes and carefully illustrates all the birds of America for the first time,[23] depicting and illustrating about 268 species of birds (twenty-six of which had not previously been described) (Fishman 112). Hoping that "the figures and descriptions may mutually corroborate each other" (AO I: 2), Wilson intends to construct an independent and distinctive national culture for early America.

What is more, Wilson's natural historical discourse joins Jefferson's and Bartram's arguments in refuting Count Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon's theory of degeneration.[24] This theory (also called the "degeneracy theory") contends that the

22 This point will be elaborated and analyzed later in this section.

23 In the "Introduction" to his first volume of *American Ornithology*, Wilson explicates his "design" of writing literary natural history for American birds:

> It is also my design to enter . . . into the manners and disposition of each respective species; to become, as it were, their faithful biographer, and to delineate their various peculiarities, in character, song, building, economy, &c. as far as my own observations have extended, or the kindness of others may furnish me with materials. (AO I: 2)

What these lines reveal is Wilson's intention to record his own observations of bird species and to offer readers the scientific fact and information about the life history of "each respective species"; in this way, Wilson establishes himself as distinctive natural historian.

24 To refute Buffon's theory of degeneration, Jefferson composed *Notes on the State of Virginia.* In this book, Jefferson describes such large animals as the elk to disprove Buffon's charge, and he points to such scenes as the Natural Bridge and the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers as examples of the scenic magnificence in which

animal species in Europe are larger, stronger, more diverse, and greater in number than their American counterparts. Wilson finds Buffon's claim that animals are doomed to inferiority by residence in the inhospitable climate of the New World to be "ridiculous and astonishing."[25] In *American Ornithology*, he vehemently claims that "Buffon is mistaken" and asserts that Buffon's theory of degeneration is a "fanciful theory" (AO II: 112 and I: 34).

In actuality, during the Revolutionary era and early nineteenth century, natural history writing in America did not shy away from political engagement; some important works of natural history during this period of time were related to politics. Part of the agenda of natural historians -- such as Jefferson, Bartram, Peale, and Wilson—was to forward their program of cultural nationalism and celebrate the natural world and its wild inhabitants in New England.[26] In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, for instance, Jefferson's natural history emerges in response to Buffon's theory of degeneration. Jefferson loudly refutes Buffon's contention that American mammals are smaller and less robust than their European counterparts; he refutes Buffon's European chauvinism by using empirical proof, supplying detailed lists demonstrating the superiority in size and diversity of American animals and quadrupeds. In this way, Jefferson links American national identity to natural history (Semonin 9).[27]

Americans live (Jefferson 43-72).

25 As court naturalist to Louis XV in France, Comte de Buffon (1707-88) was the premier natural historian of the eighteenth century. The forty-four volumes of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière* (1787-1804) has given him nearly unassailable authority in the field of natural history.

26 By the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, many Americans had concluded that indigenous species should be studied and housed in America and that "funding for conducting surveys, creating permanent collections, and publishing natural history at home was essential to nurturing the emergence of American culture" (Branch 1996: 1063). Efforts to establish American natural history were successfully carried forward on a wave of cultural nationalism, and the opinion that the American wilderness environment and its inhabitants were both natural and cultural resources finally took root in the literary imagination of the young republic (Branch 1996: 1063). The writings of Bartram, Jefferson, Peale, and Wilson illustrated the important contributions made by natural history writers during the Revolutionary era and the early nineteenth century. Their works of natural history helped define a uniquely American subject; to construct "distinctively American" culture, these writers observed and studied the impressive geography, flora, and fauna of the young nation.

27 Also, Jefferson links natural history to cultural nationalism by commissioning the expedition of Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809) and William Clark (1770-1838) into the

Like Jefferson, Wilson finds Buffon's degeneracy theory repellent. What most offends Wilson is the European imputation (often attributed to Buffon's and his followers' "theory of degeneracy") that American birds have degenerated over time from European prototypes. The proposition outrages both Wilson's patriotism and his admiration for the creatures he studies. The Creator, asserts Wilson in the first volume of *American Ornithology*, has not mistakenly made any creature "rude, defective, or deformed" (AO I: 61). The noted American songsters, such as the cardinal, "were not inferior" to the nightingale (AO I: 50), he claims, who has "listened a thousand times to both" (AO II: 39-40). In response to the degeneracy theory, Wilson reasons that God has created similar species on different continents just as he has similar species living in the same locale: "[Is it], therefore surprising, that two different species . . . should have certain near resemblance to one another without being bastards?" (AO I: 104). In this way, Wilson's natural history writings echo late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century nationalistic natural history texts written by Jefferson and other naturalists who share his essential belief that the writings about nature can be counted on to help Americans recognize the literary and cultural possibilities of the natural environment. For Wilson, America's natural landscape with its flora and fauna can be the cultural resources requisite for constructing national identity.[28] As a matter of fact, during the early national period

---

Louisiana Territory to write natural history for the virtually unknown prairie, species, and desert wilderness of the American West. When Jefferson became president in 1801, the territory between the Mississippi and the Rockies was little-known. To explore this *terra incognita* west to the Pacific, Jefferson chose Lewis and Clark to lead the expedition of the Corps of Discovery. During their voyage from 1804 to 1806, Lewis and Clark kept the sort of thorough, daily, and descriptive diary that Jefferson had specifically requested of them. The result, *The Journals of Lewis and Clark*, is a great narrative of natural history that portrays hundreds of species (including avian species, animal species, and so forth) new to science and documents the unknown mountains, rivers, and landscape features of the American West.

Conveniently for Wilson, Jefferson ordered the animal specimens collected by the Corps of Discovery to be sent to Peale's museum in Philadelphia: volume three of *American Ornithology*, therefore, exhibits some of the new western species gathered by Lewis and Clark, such as Lewis's woodpecker and Clark's crow (Rigal 241). In fact, Wilson explicitly imitated Lewis as well; Wilson became acquainted with Lewis in 1803 (Fishman 119), and a few years later, Lewis had authorized Wilson to make full use of any of the ornithological specimens that he required (Fishman 123).

28 Wilson assumes that his momentous study of the birds is a contribution not only to natural history but also to the cultural identity of the nation. According to historian Robert Elman's *First in the Field: America's Pioneering Naturalist* (1977), Wilson expresses a "somewhat mystical belief . . . that the living riches of America's wilderness formed a

of New England, the discourse of the wilderness environment constituted not only a specifically American nature, but also a distinct concept of an American nation (Mazel xviii). Wild nature, as William Cronon points out in his *Uncommon Ground* (1995), is both a "self-conscious cultural construction" and "thoroughly contested terrain" (39 and 51). For Wilson, representing the natural environment and the birds in America is a conscious discursive construction indeed.

Wilson saw the publication of his works of natural history—especially *American Ornithology*—as a deeply American venture, an act of patriotism that asserts the greatness and scope of his new country's cultural resources. In April of 1807, Wilson wrote a letter to Bartram:

> The more I read and reflect on the subject, the more dissatisfied I am with the *specific* names which have been used by almost every writer. A name should, if possible, be expressive of some peculiarity in color, conformation, or habit; if it will equally apply to two different species, it is certainly an improper one. Is *migratorious* an epithet peculiarly applicable to the robin? Is it not equally so to almost every species of *turdus* we have? *Europea* has been applied by Pennant to our large *sitta* or nuthatch, which is certainly a different species from the European, the latter being destitute of the black head, neck, and shoulders of ours. Latham calls it *carolinensis*, but it is as much an inhabitant of Pennsylvania and New York as Carolina. The small red-bellied *sitta* is called *canadensis* by Latham, a name equally objectionable with the other. Turdus *minor* seems also improper; in short I consider this part of the business as peculiarly perplexing; and I beg to have your opinion on the matter, particularly with respect to the birds I have mentioned, whether I shall hazard a new nomenclature, or, by copying, sanction what I do not approve of.[29] (Letters 262)

It is worthwhile to note that the phrase "what I do not approve of" claimed by

common heritage—a kind of natural unifying fabric—linking all the peoples of diverse ancestry and background to a single destiny in a young, vigorous nation" (65). Wilson has asserted that if the "generous hand of patriotism be stretched forth to assist and cherish the rising arts and literature of our country . . . [they will] increase and flourish with a vigor, a splendor and usefulness inferior to no other on earth" (qtd. in Porter 47).

29 All the italicized words in this quoted passage are used by Wilson.

Wilson at the end of this passage is almost entirely the work of European naturalists (Letters 262); in renaming the American birds he sees, Wilson claims a sphere of nature that is neither repetitive nor inferior to Europe's, as has often been claimed by many Europeans, and eagerly refuted by such notables as Jefferson.

Throughout *American Ornithology*, Wilson expresses his love for the pristine environment and the birds in his country that encourages him to compose works of natural history, and his natural history writings play an important role in American cultural achievements.[30] To document the wild and primitive nature in America, Wilson traveled extensively; in one of his trips in 1812, Wilson described the scene he observes as "the most sublime and astonishing view that was ever afforded" him (qtd. in Hunter 110). In the following passage, Wilson portrays the pristine and magnificent quality of the American landscape he observes in his journey:

> The general features of North Carolina, where I crossed it, are immense, solitary, pine savannahs, through which the road winds among stagnant ponds, swarming with alligators; sluggish creeks, of the colour of brandy, over which are thrown high wooden bridges, without railings, and so crazy and rotten as not only to alarm the horse, but his rider, and to make it a matter of thanksgiving with both when they get fairly over, without going through or being precipitated into the gulf below as food for the alligators. Enormous cypress swamps, which, to a stranger, have a striking, desolate, and ruinous appearance. Picture to yourself a forest of prodigious trees, rising, as thick as they can grow, from a vast flat and impenetrable morass, covered for ten feet from the ground with reeds, The leafless limbs of the cypresses are clothed with an extraordinary kind of moss, from two to 10 feet long, in such quantities that 50 men might conceal themselves in one tree. Nothing in this country struck me with such surprise as the prospect of

30 It was not until the early nineteenth century that the Americans finally discovered a fit subject for their national literature. It was "a subject endemic to the United States, one that Europe lacked and could never procure" (Branch 1996: 1061). The subject was the vast and pristine wilderness of the American continent. And during this time, American natural history writers—such as Wilson -- were urged to construct cultural monuments that would "rise beautifully as our hills, imperishable, and lofty as their summits, which tower . . . above the clouds" (1063). Recording and describing the unexplored wilderness for America, Wilson's natural history writings play a significant role in American national literature.

> several thousand acres of such timber, hanging, as it were, with many million tons of tow, waving in the wind.[31] (Letters 299-300)

Recording his observation of the immense savannahs and the vast, untamed wilderness of the New World in these lines (Letters 299), Wilson presents the distinctive and unique charm of nature in America. Indeed, his writings of natural history confirm the amazing variety, vigor, and unspoiled beauty of the land that is to support the immense weight of American faith.

In effect, Wilson's "poetics of natural history" is most evident in *The Foresters*: *A Poem, Descriptive of a Pedestrian Journey to the Falls of Niagara in the Autumn of 1804, by the Author of American Ornithology,* a narrative poem describing his 1,200-mile journey on foot to Niagara Falls.[32] Over 2,200 lines long, this poem was published serially from July 1809 through March 1810 in the leading Philadelphia literary magazine, *The Port Folio*, and was well received (Hunter 3, 74-76). Although literary history ignores Wilson's natural history writings, *The Foresters* is an excellent example of how thoroughly enmeshed are his impulses as a writer of literary natural history. This poem's exordium invites readers to explore "scenes new to song, and paths untrod before" (F 2):

> To Europe's shores renowned in deathless song,
> Must all the honors of the bard belong? . . .
> What though profuse in many a patriot's praise,
> We boast Barlow's soul-exalting lays; . . .
> And Freedom's friend and champion in Freneau;
> Yet Nature's charms that bloom so lovely here,
> Unhailed arrive, unheeded disappear;
> While bare bleak heaths, and brooks of half a mile
> Can rouse the thousand bards of Britain's Isle. . . .
> Our western world, with all its matchless floods,
> Our vast transparent lakes and boundless woods . . .
> Spared their wild grandeur to the unconscious sky,
> In sweetest seasons pass unheeded by;

31 The quotation is from Wilson's letter to Daniel H. Miller on February 22, 1809.

32 In the fall of 1804, Wilson walked from Philadelphia to Niagara Falls with two companions (Hamilton 24).

While scarce one Muse returns the songs they gave,

Or seeks to snatch their glories from the grave. (F 6)

These lines express Wilson's deeper appreciation of Nature's charms and of the physical environment in America.[33] Also, this passage mentions the names of Wilson's cotemporaries—Joel Barlow (1754-1812) and Philip Freneau (1752-1832) –because they wrote plenty of poems to celebrate the indigenous and spectacular beauty of nature in America and because Wilson tried to suggest that the major impulses behind *The Foresters*, just like the main impulses behind Barlow's and Freneau's verses, are patriotic. *The Foresters* reaches its crescendo at Niagara, where the travelers gaze with "holy awe," "a flood of rapture," and "awful joy" upon the magnificent falls (F 75-76). As a natural historian, Wilson responds to the spectacular beauty of the American wilderness by leading his compatriots on a pilgrimage into the heart of their own country. Wilson seeks to alert his fellow citizens to the wonder and the beauty of nature in America, to cultivate public appreciation for the beauty of the American environment, and to inspire his American compatriots a new faith in the viability of their natural environment as a source for national culture.

IV. The Proto-environmental Ethics in Wilson's Natural History Writings

In his natural history writings, Wilson endeavors to do more than just presents the scientific knowledge and information about the birds in America and more than just glorifies America's wild landscape as a cultural resource: he also weaves an articulation of humanity's relationship with nature among the descriptions of the American wilderness and birds. Represented in verse and in prose, Wilson's works of natural history devote much of their energy to critiquing the culture' predominately anthropocentric and exploitative relationship to the natural environment, to considerations of the relationship between land and its human inhabitants, and to envisioning new possibilities for human relation with the rest of the living world. Through his poetry and nature essays, Wilson suggests the

33 Wilson's literary natural history occupies an important place in the development of an American literary approach to nature. Samuel Marion Tucker, a critic of American studies, cites *The Foresters* as a point at which American poetry begins to turn to the actuality of American nature, rather than to the conventions of English poetry, and further claims that Wilson's poems are among the few "original strains in America's early lighter verse" (qtd. in Hamilton 33).

potential harmony between humanity and nature and conveys many proto-ecological ideas—such as the idea of conservation, and so forth.

To broaden the appeal of his natural history writings, Wilson uses every means at his command. He puts his verse to another use in the volumes of his great bird book, the cause of conservation. In his treatment of "the Blue-bird" in *American Ornithology* (AO I: 56-63), for instance, Wilson composes a six-stanza poem to stress the crucial role each species plays in the economy of nature, explaining to readers that the bird "drags the vile grub from the corn he devours" and should therefore be suffered to visit their crops unmolested (AO I: 59). In this way, Wilson's poetic works of natural history display an incipient ecological sensibility. Near the end of this poem, Wilson celebrates the singing "voice" of "the Blue-bird":

> While spring's lovely season, serene, dewy, warm,
>
> The green face of earth, and the pure blue of heav'n,
>
> Or love's native music have influence to charm,
>
> Or sympathy's glow to our feelings are giv'n,
>
> Still dear to each bosom the Blue-bird shall be;
>
> His voice, like the thrillings of hope, is a treasure;
>
> For, thro bleakest storms if a calm he but see,
>
> He comes to remind us of sunshine and pleasure! (AO I: 60)

This poem mainly intends to defend bluebirds against the guns of farmers, whose ignorant and excessive destruction deeply alarmed him. Asserting that the Blue-bird's voice "is a treasure" (AO I: 60), Wilson evinces his sympathy, appreciation and admiration toward nonhuman creatures in America.

Throughout his life, Wilson wondered why his American compatriots paid so little attention to the nature they professed to be so fond of. In 1812 (the year before his death), Wilson wrote a letter to his friend George Ord from Boston and pointed out the answer in its strongest terms:

> In New England the rage of war, the virulence of politics, and the pursuit of commercial speculations engross every faculty. The voice of Science and the charms of Nature, . . . are treated with contempt. (Letters 405)

Asserting the contemptuous way in which science and Nature are viewed in New England, Wilson argues that the Americans ought to pay more attention to the study and understanding of nature; and his attempt to render a full account of American birds in *The American Ornithology* was for the purpose of educating the American public about "the charms of Nature" and to deepen his compatriots' knowledge of

the birds.

Believing that science's voice and the understanding of nature are the keys to admiring and appreciating the natural environment and would increase people's interest and fascination with Nature, Wilson in the second volume of *American Ornithology* contends that "those who have paid the most minute attention to their [the American birds'] manners are uniformly their advocates and admirers" (AO II: 87). In the preface to the fourth volume of *American Ornithology*, Wilson expresses the similar idea:

> It is not sufficient that a work of this kind [to collect and portray the feathered tribes of the United States] should speak to the eye alone, its portraits should reach the heart, particularly of our youth, who are generally much interested with subjects of this kind. By entering minutely into the manners of this beautiful portion of the animate creation, and faithfully exhibiting them as they are, sentiments of esteem, humanity and admiration will necessarily result. It is chiefly owing to ignorance of their true character, that some of our thoughtless youth delight in wantonly tormenting and destroying those innocent warblers; for who can either respect, pity or admire what they are totally unacquainted with? I am persuaded that no child would injure and abuse even a harmless worm, with whose economy and mode of life he was intimately acquainted. (AO IV: vi)

In this passage, Wilson remarks on the American republic's lack of the knowledge and understanding about birds and claims that it is such ignorance that has caused the destruction of nature (especially the innocent warblers) by "thoughtless youth." Also, Wilson advocates the importance of understanding nature (especially "the feathered tribes of the United States") by heart. In addition, Wilson's confidence that by "entering minutely into the manners of this beautiful portion of the animate creation . . . sentiments of esteem, humanity and admiration will necessarily result" reflects his profound environmental concern and proto-ecological sensibility. Expressing his attitude of sympathy and concern toward nature, Wilson clearly evinces his attitude of respect for nonhuman creatures, such as birds and harmless worms. Most important of all, claiming that no people (including children and youth) can injure and abuse nonhuman nature—down to the very least of natural creatures, Wilson advocates the idea of protecting and conserving nature.

In addition to his nature essays, Wilson's poetic works of natural history are frequently informed by an implicitly environmentalist critique of human pretentions to dominate nature. In a long poem entitled "Verses, Occasioned by Seeing Two Men Sawing Timber in the Open Field, in Defiance of a Furious Storm," for

instance, Wilson denounces and criticizes the seemingly indefatigable human urge to destroy nature, regardless of the consequences. The speaker of this poem tries in vain to save two sawyers who, bent upon their work and the harvest they have come to reap, refuse to desist from their labors during a mounting gale. Heedless of the speaker's warnings and of the force of the nature they believe they can dominate, the men are crushed beneath the falling tree:

> Now fee, ye misbelieving sinners,
>
> Your bloody shins -- your saw in flinners,
>
> An' roun' about your lugs and ruin,
>
> That your demented folly drew on. (P 185)

In these lines, Wilson's objection to the sawyers' self-destructive and demented folly is patent: rather than walking with humility in the world of nature, these men—or sinners, as Wilson described them—have been literally crippled by the sin of their arrogant determination to destroy the natural world.

Through the form of a long poem, Wilson often presents his proto-ecological sensibility and conservationist idea, too; the rattlesnake passage in *The Foresters* is an interesting example. In this poem, Wilson and his companions find a snake on the way to Niagara Falls, but do not kill it. Wilson's friend's urging that the snake not be killed and Wilson's acquiescence are significant; certainly the usual fate of American snakes encountered by armed men is death. However, Wilson's friend argues that the snake is on his home ground, occupying his fit place in nature, while the travelers themselves are clearly the aggressors and that the snake never attacks except to defend itself. Such reason falls on the sympathetic ear of the naturalist. Wilson is employing his verse towards sound conservationist ends. This passage in, in a word, introduces an idea that is important in much of Wilson's natural historical discourse. Mankind has a place in nature, but to some extent that place can only be understood by recognizing the place of other creatures. The presence of the rattlesnake in *the Foresters*, alongside other more attractive creatures, exemplifies Wilson's close observation and sympathetic attitude toward nonhuman nature. *The Foresters*, all in all, cites the beauty of nature: rattlesnakes, songbirds, "quails," "hawks," "wolves," "bears," "wildcats," "deer," "dull owls," splendid mountains, as well as trackless swamps (See F 44, 47, 51, 62, 73). Even the magnificent landscape of Niagara Falls has as one element of its composition the refuse of its destructiveness:

> Fragments of boats, oars, carcasses unclean,
>
> Of what had bears, deer, fowls and fishes been. (F 78)

The Foresters as a whole suggests that the American wilderness and its inhabitants

are magnificent and need people's protection.

As an early conservationist,[34] Wilson makes pioneering studies of wildlife populations and suggests the importance of protecting the ornithological species in New England. Represented in poetry and in prose, Wilson's works frequently voice a lament for the thoughtless destruction of the birds in America:

> Upon the whole, I am of opinion, that a person who should undertake the destruction of these birds [Brown-Headed Nuthatch], at even a dollar a head for all he knocked down with his cane, would run a fair chance of starving by his profession. (AO II: 106)

Expressing his concern about the destruction of nonhuman creatures, Wilson's nature history writings introduce an ethical sensibility to nonhuman nature: he attempts to convince his compatriots of a moral obligation to protect their natural environment and to save other living creatures from death, chains and imprisonment:

> And I could not refrain saying to myself—If such sweet sensations can be derived from a simple circumstance of this kind, how exquisite, how unspeakably rapturous must the delight of those individuals have been, who have rescued their fellow beings from death, chains and imprisonment, and restored them to the arms of their friends and relations! Surely in such godlike actions virtue is its own most abundant reward. (AO II: 47)

In these lines, Wilson makes a powerful use of the philosophical implications of man's relationship with nature on his continent. By claiming that "how unspeakably rapturous must the delight of those individuals . . . who have rescued their fellow beings from death, chains and imprisonment," Wilson emphasizes a feeling of membership in a natural community, and thus introduces a tradition of environmental concern into American intellectual history. Through his natural historical discourse, Wilson presciently and prophetically suggests the necessity and importance of protecting other living creatures on earth. Because Wilson deeply understands nature study to be the "contemplation and worship of the Great First Cause," he regards natural history writing as a devout mission and protection of fellow creatures as an article of faith (AO I: 3). Believing that what he studies would

34 Wilson is also capable of activism on behalf of the American birds. In 1807, when good sense would not prevail upon merchants who were killing thousands of robins to satisfy the palates of genteel Philadelphia, he sent an unsigned article to city newspapers explaining that robin flesh was unhealthy because of the birds' heavy diet of pokeberries; though Wilson knew the claim to be entirely false, it effectively curtailed the slaughter of robins for the Philadelphia market (Branch 1996: 1071).

inspire America and its poetry because it is inspired by God, Wilson devotes both his scientific and his literary talents to recording the national treasure of America's birds.

V. Epilogue

For a very long time, Wilson has been a neglected and mostly unexamined author in American literary history. Today, he is still largely remembered only as the Father of American Ornithology. This essay establishes Wilson as natural history writer in early America and examines his effectiveness as a literary natural historian. This essay reminds people that Wilson's works of natural history should be regarded as important pieces of American literature because introducing the scientific knowledge about New England's indigenous birds and landscape into American prose and poetry to educate the Americans about their own land, these works define a uniquely American subject and help ground American national culture upon the land. Also, Wilson's writings of natural history should be deemed to be significant pieces of American literature because they express an implicitly environmentalist critique of human pretensions to control nature and initiate a tradition of proto-environmental ethics for young America.

Through his natural historical discourse, Wilson precisely records scientific information about the variety of "natural productions" in the territory he has traveled, such as the "grandeur" and "magnificence" of Falls of Niagara (F 75), "Blue Jay" (AO I: 11-19), "Blue-bird" (AO I: 56-63), " Lewis's Woodpecker" (AO III: 31-32), and "Red-headed Duck" (AO VIII:111). Applying natural historical methods to observe and document America's natural history, Wilson seeks to awaken his compatriots' interest and fascination with America's natural environment and to inspire his fellow citizens a new faith in the viability of their natural landscape as well as its wild inhabitants—especially birds—as a source for national culture.

Through his natural historical discourse, Wilson also voices an implicitly environmentalist critique of mankind's pretensions to control nature and presciently conveys many proto-ecological ideas, such as the notion of conservation, the attitude of sympathy and respect for nonhuman creatures, and so forth. Ahead of his time, Wilson laments mankind's ruthless destruction of birds and suggests the importance of protecting nature. In this way, Wilson's natural history writings lead toward an ecological understanding of the natural world, cultivate a new ethical sensitivity to nonhuman creatures, and successfully introduce a tradition of proto-environmental ethics for young America.

Works Cited

Baym, Nina, et al., eds. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 7th ed. 5 vols. New York: Norton, 2007.

Bergon, Frank. "Wilderness Aesthetics." *American Literary History* 9.1 (1997): 128-61.

Branch, Michael P. "Early Romantic Natural History Literature." *American Nature Writers*. Ed. John Elder. 2 vols. New York: Scribner's, 1996. 1059－77.

---, ed. *Reading the Roots: American Nature Writing before Walden*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2004.

Cooley, John, ed. *Earthly Words: Essays on Contemporary American Nature and Environmental Writers*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994.

Cronon, William, ed. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: Norton, 1996.

Elder, John, ed. *American Nature Writers*. 2 vols. New York: Scribner's, 1996.

Elman, Robert. *First in the Field: America's Pioneering Naturalists*. New York: Mason, 1977.

Finch, Robert, and John Elder, eds. *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English*. New York: Norton, 2002

Fishman, Gail. *Journeys through Paradise: Pioneering Naturalists in the Southeast*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2000.

Fritzell, Peter A. *Nature Writing and American: Essays upon a Cultural Type*. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1990.

Hamilton, William Thornley. *Alexander Wilson's America.* Diss. U of Minnesota, 1970. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1971. Print.

Hunter, Clark. *The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson. By Alexander Wilson*. Philadelphia: American Philosophy Society, 1983.

Irmscher, Christoph. *The Poetics of Natural History: From John Bartram to William James*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1999.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. New York: Norton, 1982.

Johnson, Rochelle, and Daniel Patterson. "Writing About Nature in Early America: From Discovery to 1850." *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*. Ed. Patrick D. Murphy. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998. 3-12.

Keegan, Bridget, and James C. Mckusick, eds. *Literature and Nature: Four*

Centuries of Nature Writing. Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, 2001..

Lauter, Paul, et al., eds. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. 5th ed. 5 vols. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Lindholdt, Paul. "Early American Natural Histories." *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*. Ed. Patrick D. Murphy. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998. 13-25

Looby, Christopher. "The Constitution of Nature: Taxonomy as Politics in Jefferson, Peale and Bartram." *Early American Literature* 22.3（1987）: 252-73.

Lyon, Thomas J., ed. *This Incomperable Lande: A Book of American Nature Writing*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989.

Mazel, David. *American Literary Environmentalism*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2000.

Murphy, Patrick D., ed. *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998.

---. *Farther Afield in the Study of Nature-Oriented Literature*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 2000.

Paul, Sherman. *For Love of the World: Essays on Nature Writers*. Iowa City：U of Iowa P, 1992.

Porter, Charlotte M. *The Eagle's Nest: Natural History and American Ideas, 1812-1842*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1986.

Regis, Pamela. *Bartram, Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, and the Influence of Natural History*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1992.

Rigal, Laura. "Empire of Birds: Alexander Wilson's *American Ornithology*." *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 59 (1998): 233-68.

Semonin, Paul. "Nature's Nation: Natural History as Nationalism in the New Republic." *Northwest Review* 30 (1992): 6-41.

Slovic, Scott. *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing: Henry David Thoreau, Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Barry Lopez*. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1992.

Stewart, Frank. *A Natural History of Nature Writing*. Covelo: Island, 1995.

Tallmadge, John. "Towards a Natural History of Reading." Ed. Michael P. Branch and Scott Slovic. *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003*. Athens : U of Georgia P, 2003. 282-95.

Welch, Margaret. *The Book of Nature: Natural History in the United States 1825-1875*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1998.

Wilson, Alexander. *Poems: By Alexander Wilson* [electronic resource]. Paisley: J.

Neilson, 1790.

---. "Watty and Meg; or, the Wife Reformed. A True Tale" [electronic resource]. Glasgow: Brash &Reid, 1796.

---. *American Ornithology, or, the Natural History of the Birds of the United States.* [electronic resource] 9 vols. Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1808-1814.

---. *The Foresters: A Poem, Descriptive of a Pedestrian Journey to the Falls of Niagara in the Autumn of 1804, by the Author of* American Ornithology. [electronic resource] Newtown: S. Siegfried and J. Wilson, 1818.

---. *The Life and Letters of Alexander Wilson*. Ed. Clark Hunter. Philadelphia: American Philosophy Society, 1983.

書寫自然史
——威爾遜為早期美國境內「自然的可愛之臉」所做的刻畫*

盧 莉 茹*

摘 要

威爾遜是一位書寫自然史的早期美國作家。他寫了《美國鳥類學》及《住在山林的人：一部描述在一八零四年秋天的尼加拉瓜瀑布之旅的詩歌，由〈美國鳥類學〉的作者所撰》等自然史作品。在其作品中，威爾遜以詩歌及散文的形式刻劃了他對美國境內原始自然美景以及本土鳥類的詳細觀察。可惜的是，長久以來威爾遜的自然史書寫不但被多數的美國文學史選集和自然書寫選集所忽略，而且威爾遜本人僅被多數後人視為「美國鳥類學之父」，而非自然作家。不同於上述觀點，本文聚焦於威爾遜的自然史作品，分析其詩歌及散文中的自然史論述，並探究威爾遜為早期美國境內「自然的可愛之臉」所做的描寫與刻劃。本文欲指出，威爾遜的自然史書寫實乃美國文學中不容忽視的重要文本，因為其作品一方面詳實記錄了有關美國本土鳥類及大地美景的自然史知識，藉此為美國詩歌及散文引介了斬新題材、增進讀者對本土自然的了解，進而為建國初期的美國建構一套獨特而獨立的國族文化；另一方面，威爾遜亦透過詩歌及散文傳達了他對自然萬物的肯定與欣賞態度，進而為早期美國引進一套初期的生態思維與環境保護倫理。

關鍵詞：威爾遜　自然史書寫　國族文化建構　初期生態觀念與環境關懷　《美國鳥類學》　《住在山林的人：一部描述在一八零四年秋天的尼加拉瓜瀑布之旅的詩歌，由〈美國鳥類學〉的作者所撰》　《威爾遜的詩歌集》

---

* 本文為國科會計畫編號 NSC 96-2411-H-211-005-MY3 之部份研究成果。

* 華梵大學外國語文學系（所）副教授