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THE NECESSITY OF NARRATIVE IN WILLIAM LEAST HEAT-MOON'S *BLUE HIGHWAYS* AND *PRAIRYERTH*

PAMELA WALKER

In the essay "Journeys into Kansas," William Least Heat-Moon articulates his theory of travel writing, indicating his understanding of the purposes of travel writing in general and of his two books in particular, along with the problems inherent in achieving those purposes. A reading of *Blue Highways* and *PrairyErth* in light of "Journeys into Kansas" reveals how Heat-Moon realizes his goals more fully in *Blue Highways*, which entails a personal narrative, than in *PrairyErth*, which, unlike *Blue Highways*,

lacks a personal narrative and is as much a meditation on its own writing and Heat-Moon's theory of its writing as a realization of the goals set forth in "Journeys into Kansas."

"How do I steer away from self while depending on it almost absolutely for the discovery and formulation and presentation of the material?" Heat-Moon asks in "Journeys into Kansas," posing what he finds to be the crucial question for a travel writer. The travel writer's task, as Heat-Moon sees it, is to resolve "the perpetual problem of the writer's self in its surroundings" in a way that maintains "the primacy of fact" upon which non-fiction depends. The writer must offer a precise description of topographical and demographical features, at the same time managing neither to "annihilate the self" by effacing the personal altogether nor, worse, to probe the self so extensively as to fall "into some solipsistic hole, which, surely, is always the death of good travel writing."¹

Heat-Moon uses the terms "centripetal" and "centrifugal" to describe the dynamics of his own negotiation of the travel writer's task in *Blue Highways* and *PrairyErth*. In *Blue Highways*, the "traveler-narrator" for the first part

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of the journey moves centripetally, "more into his own interior than into the interior of the country," gradually realizing "the futility of that course" and then in the second part moving centrifugally, "toward a spiral of discovery that opens outward to other lives and new places." In *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon's course no longer involves the centripetal pull into his own interior but rather is solely centrifugal, impelling him "outward from my own small observations of a small place into something larger."²

Heat-Moon explains in "Journeys into Kansas" that his outward course in *PrairyErth* seems assured when he finds a kind of archaeological grid in the twelve U.S. Geological Survey topographical maps of Chase County, which, during his research and field work, he would spread on his office floor:

That twelve-section grid, I realized, could continually hold me in a pattern that would not ever match up with the pattern of my own perception of the place. I would, in other words, have to leave my interior to travel, as a writer, a course laid out by an arbitrary geometric pattern. Because this shape would never match my own interior pattern, it would keep me locked away from the temptation of circling lines of self-exploration. Those grids were continual reminders—invitations, actually—to excavate the territory outside my own interior topography.³

Whereas the pull inward in *Blue Highways* might have made the writer's self more salient than his surroundings, the pull outward in *PrairyErth* might have made the surroundings more salient than the writer's self:

I had to watch that the pattern did not then annihilate the self. Were I to write as a mere digger of test trenches, I would end up with a piece of archaeology perhaps, but I would not have the kind of literate evocation of the place after which I had started. So the struggle was to let the grid shape

structures that the writer's voice could form and color.⁴

"Journeys into Kansas," then, shows that Heat-Moon seeks a style that enacts a balance between a centripetal movement toward self and a centrifugal movement away from self toward other people and places, representing the traveler-narrator's experience in a way that, by incorporating relevant topographical and demographical data, maintains "primacy of fact."

Heat-Moon's goals in "Journeys into Kansas" presuppose that language has the potential to refer outside itself to particular aspects of active, or temporal, human experience. And the very language Heat-Moon uses in the essay to communicate his goals underscores the referential potential of language, especially the key terms "centrifugal" and "centripetal" and such phrases as "discovery and formulation and presentation of the material," "problem of the writer's self in its surroundings," and "primacy of fact." Heat-Moon achieves these goals in *Blue Highways* by writing in a narrative style, but works against them in *PrairyErth* by writing in a nonnarrative style.

BLUE HIGHWAYS AND THE PROBLEM OF EGOTISM SOLVED

In *Blue Highways*, Heat-Moon's struggle against solipsism, an attitude of extreme self-absorption or egocentrism, forms the plot of the personal narrative that makes the book a story about Heat-Moon. Representing not a mere chronological sequence of experiences but rather a critical assessment of his experiences, Heat-Moon discovers in the places and people he visits a great deal about himself and his connection with specific characteristics of American culture. Heat-Moon's personal narrative gives purpose to his descriptions of places and people in a way that critic Frank Kermode argues any narrative plot "purged of simple chronicity" does, by rendering the separate parts of an interval of experience meaningful in relation to "an end." There is a

culminating awareness or insight in *Blue Highways* toward which separate and otherwise seemingly disparate events coalesce.⁵

As Heat-Moon begins the *Blue Highways* journey from Columbia, Missouri, by back roads around the continental United States and back, he is not aware of his tendency toward solipsism or that his journey will entail a gradual process of recognizing such extremities of egotism as a problem in himself, in other individuals, and in American culture, which he will resolve to resist. Rather, having lost his teaching job and facing the possibility of divorce from his estranged wife, he is aware mainly of "a nearly desperate sense of isolation and a growing suspicion that I lived in an alien land" as he sets out "in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected."⁶ In the course of his travels, he comes to recognize that egotism poses the main obstacle to his own ability, in whatever place, to affirm time, the inevitability of change, and the necessity of engaging himself with his physical environment and others who share that environment. Heat-Moon's process of recognizing and then resisting his solipsistic inclination constitutes the plot of his personal narrative, and it is this narrative plot that gives purpose to his descriptions of the places he visits and the people he encounters by representing him and his experiences in relation to what emerges as the chief end of the journey: Heat-Moon's realization of the necessity to care beyond himself.

In the course of his travels and gradual recognition of egotism as a problem, certain places and some of the people Heat-Moon meets promote rather than mitigate his sense of isolation within a place undifferentiated from self. More than any other type of place, for example, a desert landscape for Heat-Moon increasingly thwarts any initial ability to experience a place distinctly and comes gradually to seem part of himself. Only briefly in the first desert of his journey is differentiation of place from himself possible. Upon arriving in the Texas desert west of the Pecos River, he

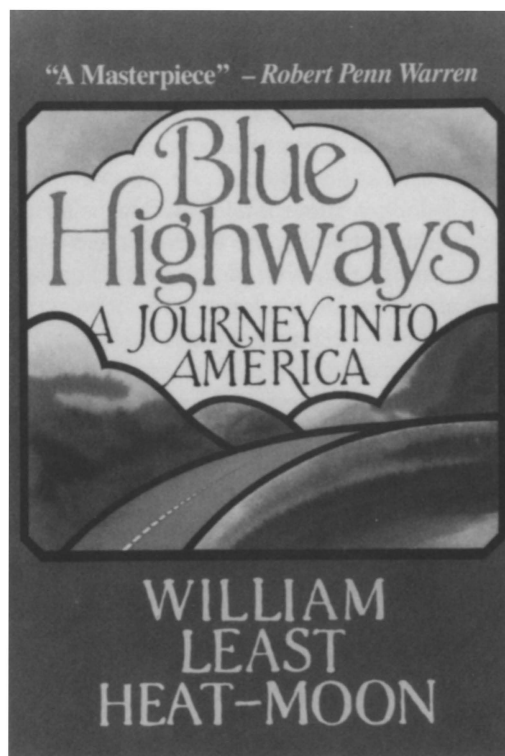


FIG. 1. Jacket design by Paul Bacon. Reproduced courtesy of Little, Brown and Company.

readily perceives the place as richly separate from himself. In fact, he finds it so rich in natural activity that to disprove those who commonly say of the desert, "There's nothing out there," he makes a list of "nothing in particular,"⁷ identifying thirty natural entities or activities.

By night, however, amid "land, wind, stars," he begins to feel "reduced to mind, to an edge of consciousness." When he later reaches the Nevada desert, he feels "as if I were evaporating," becoming one with place in a way that Walt Whitman celebrates in *Leaves of Grass* and that Heat-Moon through his quotation of Whitman also celebrates: "O to realize space!/ The plenteousness of all, that there are no bounds,/To emerge and be of the sky, of the sun and moon and flying clouds, as one with

them."⁸ The melding of place and self continues until Heat-Moon, driving farther into the desert, finds that his expansiveness gives way to a sense of entrapment not so much in desert as place but in desert as an expanse of self:

I looked out the side window. For an instant, I thought the desert looked back. Against the glass a reflection of an opaque face. I couldn't take my attention from that presence that was mostly an absence. Whitman:

*This the far-off depth and height reflecting
my own face,
This the thoughtful merge of myself, and the
outlet again.*

Other than to amuse himself, why would a man pretend to know where he's going or to understand what he sees? Hoping to catch onto things, at least for a moment, I was only following down the highways a succession of images that flashed like blue sparks. Nothing more.⁹

Any effort to differentiate self from place, "to understand" or "to catch onto things," the things of his temporal, spatial experience that might mitigate his egotism, seems futile. The image of his opaque face imposes itself on whatever he sees, making place an ephemeral expanse of an ephemeral self.

Heat-Moon's own inability to differentiate place from self is compounded by the same futility in some others whom he encounters; they, like him, exist within the confines of an egotistical, sometimes solipsistic self. Camped in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona, Heat-Moon desires to move beyond the self and its impositions upon experience into a place "never dreamed of." Yet "Boss," a man Heat-Moon meets at the campground, confronts him not only with his own difficulty in escaping egotism but also with the same difficulty as it pervades American culture. Of Boss, Heat-Moon observes that he "embraced one crisis after another because they gave him signifi-

cance . . . He had so lost belief in a world outside himself that, without crisis, he had nothing worth talking about. On and on, the tolling of words revealed his expertise in living a life that baffled him."¹⁰ By naming the man "Boss," Heat-Moon expresses at once the oppressiveness of solipsism and the necessity somehow to engage with place and people differentiated from self.

The "Boss" leads Heat-Moon to recall that Alexis de Tocqueville in his travels "came to believe that one result of democracy was a concentration of each man's attention on himself." As Heat-Moon travels and contends with his own and others' egotism, his findings accord with de Tocqueville's and perhaps enlarge upon them. Not just individual egotism but also a cultural narcissism manifests itself even in the physical arrangements of social settings. Sitting at the Oil City Bar in Browning, Montana, for example, Heat-Moon observes that in contrast to English bars, which commonly are built "in circles or horseshoes or right angles . . . to get another face in your line of sight," in American bars, a straight counter usually faces a mirror so that whatever else there may be to look at, like liquor bottles, an American also "stares into his own face."¹¹

Heat-Moon's gradual recognition of the need to resist such egotism arises not just from observing others who seem trapped within themselves but also from meeting people whose activities seem to free them from the confines of narcissism. These freer people are the ones whom Heat-Moon photographs and thus graphically as well as narratively makes prominent. Among these people is Madison Wheeler of Nameless, Tennessee. Wheeler represents for Heat-Moon a man whose life demonstrates a satisfactory accord between past and present, between self and others, and between self and surroundings that Heat-Moon himself is seeking. Wheeler explains to Heat-Moon why he has continued to farm in a place that most people left long ago: "Factory work's easier on the back, and I don't mind it, understand, but a man becomes what he does. Got to watch

that. That's why I keep at farmin', although the crops haven't ever throve. It's the doin' that's important. . . . Satisfaction is doin' what's important to yourself. A man ought to honor other people, but he's got to honor what he believes in too." When Heat-Moon subsequently comes to a crossroad where he considers, "Home was a left turn, right was who knows," he echoes Wheeler's earlier observation: "A man becomes what he does"¹² as he turns right. That is, Heat-Moon moves farther out of his habitual self-concern toward the possibility for a new, more practical consciousness and engagement with people and places. To change how he sees, he must change what he does. Perception cannot be detached from time or daily practice.

In addition to Wheeler, Kendrick Fritz, a Hopi college student in Cedar City, Utah, in his own way also represents for Heat-Moon someone who can bring seemingly conflicting parts of experience into accord. Heat-Moon speculates to Fritz, "I guess it's hard to be a Hopi in Cedar City — especially if you're studying bio-chemistry . . . I mean, difficult to carry your Hopi heritage into a world as technological as medicine is." Fritz replies, "My heritage is the Hopi Way, and that's a way of the spirit. Spirit can go anywhere. In fact it has to go places so it can change and emerge like in the migrations. That's the whole idea." Fritz's life and insights demonstrate for Heat-Moon how spirit, or consciousness, necessarily thrives upon the dynamics of engagement with others as differentiated from self, and, conversely, languishes in the stasis of the repetitive, habitual gestures of egotism. Moreover, the encounter provides Heat-Moon with an affirmative answer to a hopeful question he asked himself when he began his journey: "New ways of seeing can disclose new things. . . . But turn the question around: Do new *things* make for new ways of seeing?" When Fritz tells Heat-Moon that according to Hopi beliefs of human evolution, "A human being's greatest task is to keep from breaking with things outside himself,"¹³ Heat-Moon has

already begun to discover that this connection is mostly a matter of practice. The crux of this practice is, as Heat-Moon explains in "Journeys into Kansas," to counter the centripetal impulse to descend into self with a centrifugal impulse to move, in practice and hence in consciousness, out of self toward people and things.

About halfway through his journey, as he waits for rain to stop in Lookingglass, Oregon, Heat-Moon becomes fully, explicitly aware that this need to connect with things and people has motivated his journey. Up to now, the term "blue highways" has signified for Heat-Moon the color on old American maps of back roads "where a man can lose himself" in contrast to the major, most direct routes in red. During the rain, Heat-Moon reads *Black Elk Speaks*, John G. Neihardt's biography of the Lakota holy man who represents for Heat-Moon a practical, temporally engaged consciousness characteristic of Native American culture and in sharp contrast to the egocentric consciousness of European-American culture that Heat-Moon associates with Whitman. As the product of Anglo and Osage ancestors, Heat-Moon perceives himself as embodying the psychological and epistemological dichotomy represented by Whitman and Black Elk. Whereas early in the journey, Whitman's poetry expresses Heat-Moon's own egotism, later in the journey, understandings ascribed to Black Elk express Heat-Moon's growing awareness that egotism is the greatest hindrance to accepting change and to connecting one with things and people. Reading about Black Elk, he finds that

the blue road is the route of "one who is distracted, who is ruled by his senses, and who lives for himself rather than for his people." I was stunned. Was it racial memory that had urged me to drive seven thousand miles of blue highway, a term I thought I had coined?

That's when something opened like a windowshade unexpectedly rattling up in a dark room. A sudden new cast of light.

What need for a man to make a trip to Lookingglass, Oregon, when he's been seeing his own image across the length of the country? . . . My skewed vision was that of a man looking at himself by looking at what he looks at. A man watching himself: *that* was the simulacrum on the window in the Nevada desert.

Hadn't I even made a traveling companion of the great poet of the ego, the one who sings of himself, who promises to "effuse egotism and show it underlying all," who finds the earth in his own likeness? . . . Money half gone, I'd come up with a bit of epistemological small change.¹⁴

Although his realization amounts epistemologically to "small change," it comes to much more in the daily use he can make of what he has learned.

That is, the journey has altered Heat-Moon's habits enough that he has reached a new realization:

A man lives in things and things are moving. He stands apart in such a temporary way it is hardly worth speaking of. If that perception dims egocentrism, that illusion of what man is, then it also enlarges his self, that multiple yet whole part which he has been, will be, is. Ego, craving distinction, belongs to the narrowness of now; but self, looking for union, belongs to past and future, to the continuum, to the outside. Of all the visions of the Grandfathers the greatest is this: To seek the high concord, a man looks not deeper within — he reaches farther out.¹⁵

"Reaching farther out" sustains Heat-Moon's temporal, personal practice, including his narrative apprehension of experience in the writing of *Blue Highways*, and constitutes for him the process of resistance to his own egotism as well as a critique of cultural narcissism. Although Heat-Moon does not link narrative to the centrifugal impulse that gives primacy to

the facts, narrative writing nevertheless enables him to enact a centrifugal movement away from egocentrism toward an adaptive engagement with people and places. The narrative plot allows him to probe his relationships and the purposes and ends relationships serve. Heat-Moon's journey comes to a close, but the process of critique and resistance enacted by Heat-Moon's narrative persists in the world of human action that *Blue Highways* opens onto:

A human being[']s] . . . very form depends not on repetition but upon variation from old patterns. In response to stress, biological survival requires genetic change; it necessitates a turning away from doomed replication. And what of history? Was it different?

Etymology: *educate*, from the Latin *educare*, "lead out."¹⁶

PRAIRYERTH AND THE PROBLEM OF EGOTISM UNRESOLVED

Blue Highways leads into and out of one place after another in order to end open-endedly. It provides a journey, *in transit*, in an endless process of adaptation to people, to particular physical environments, and to the changes that time brings. In many ways this plot of Heat-Moon's personal narrative represents the process as a matter of individual and collective life and death.

The same desire to resist egotism, to adapt to change, and to connect with people and things motivates Heat-Moon's travels in Chase County, Kansas, as he explains in *PrairyErth*:

I'd come into the prairie, this place of long and circling horizons, because of a vague and undefined sense that I lived in short-sightedness; I saw how the land, like a good library, lets a fellow extend himself, stretch time, rupture the constrictions of egocentrism, slip the animal bondage of the perpetual present. . . . If a traveler can

get past the barriers of ignorance and forgetfulness, a journey into the land is a way into some things and a way out of others.¹⁷

However, in writing *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon rejects narrative. He discounts it as a means toward resolving the relation between self and surroundings. Despite what the style of *Blue Highways* demonstrates, Heat-Moon considers narrative to be an almost inevitable enactment of time and temporal relations as linear and chronological in his theory of narrative in *PrairyErth* and in his interviews upon its publication.

A chronological sense of time is antithetical to Heat-Moon's explicit understanding of time. In *PrairyErth* it is aligned with a European-American sensibility, much as in *Blue Highways*, through Walt Whitman, Heat-Moon aligns egotism with a European-American sensibility. Heat-Moon's discussions of *PrairyErth*'s nonnarrative style constitute a kind of apology for it. At the same time he suggests how, in serving a visualist aesthetics akin to painting, photography, or to modernist American poetry that often aspires to present not merely images of objects but poems themselves as objects, his nonnarrative style works against the engagement with place and people that he wants *PrairyErth* to enact.

From its earliest pages, *PrairyErth* is about style and Heat-Moon's theory of that style. In the first chapter, Heat-Moon indicates his opposition to narrative, which he implicitly conceives as chronology, and he simultaneously reveals his visualist aims. He explains that he intends his writing to "yield a landscape with figures, one that would unroll like a Chinese scroll painting or a bison-skin drawing where both beginnings and ends of an event are at once present in the conflated time of the American Indian."¹⁸ Heat-Moon's interest, he observes, in writing against narrative conceived as chronology developed from his interest in approximating an oral form of story telling common to Native Americans. Ex-

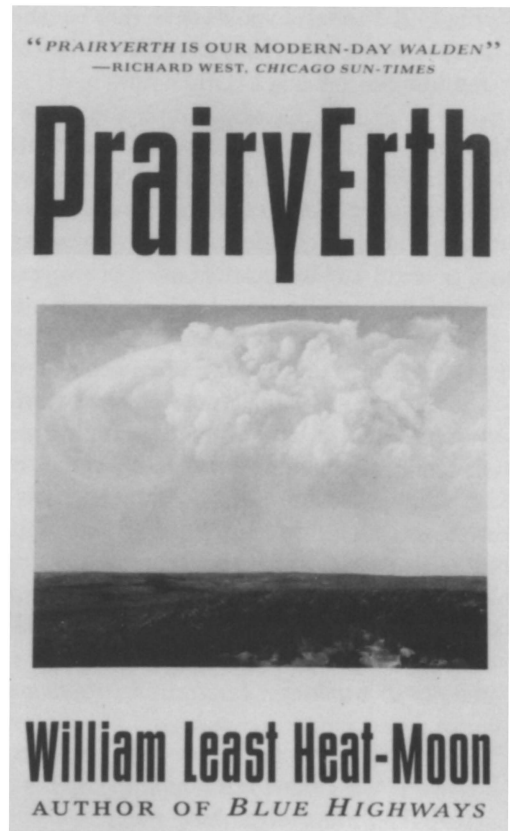


FIG. 2. Cover design by Julie Metz. Cover painting: Chase County, Kansas, by Judith Mackey. Reproduced courtesy of Houghton Mifflin Company.

plaining this interest to an interviewer who asks how the structure of *PrairyErth* came about, he casts his writing in painterly, visualist terms:

Part of the idea is built upon a notion of the way that Native Americans often tell stories. There will be a kernel of the story that the narrator wants to work around. But the tale is likely to proceed by what appears to be ramblings about other things. If we could see this central story as a hub, what happens, in a way, is that you draw one story line down to that hub and you draw another and another. They don't come

in a 1, 2, 3 order if you were to number the spokes to the hub. They come seemingly at random.¹⁹

Although *PrairyErth* is a verbal text, Heat-Moon intends it to be a kind of collage, an object made of other, randomly arranged objects, a complex composite image revealing past, present, and future all at once in any one piece.

A nonnarrative, imagistic kind of writing appeals to Heat-Moon not only because it conflates time as he imagines Native Americans experience it but also because such writing precludes explanations. In the chapter "Out of the Totem Hawk Lexicon," Heat-Moon describes how his imagistic writing method and style in that chapter and throughout the book shun verbal explanations about experiences and instead seek to create visual emblems signifying certain features of or experiences in a place:

This is a chapter about hawkness and harriers, but I must tell you straight: it's a cowlick — no matter how much I comb through it, wet it down, try to smooth it into coherence, it pops up, always insisting on standing awry. When I write, I usually try to follow the directions in the images and let details point the way so that my pencil (I always begin drafting with a lead pencil as if I were drawing) is a vehicle across the map of paper, a smudged course down parallel lines, little roads, and the best part of such a journey, the reward for the isolation necessary to it, is the unexpected encounters: travel writing is a tour twice taken, and which one is more real depends on how you value dreamtime. For me, writing is not a search for explanations but a ramble in quest of what informs a place, a hunt for equivalents. (I always envy the painter never having to ask, "Understand?" Were the choice ever offered, I'd want to be a Turner rather than a Twain.)²⁰

Implicit in this description is an opposition to narrative because of its explanatory potential. Narrative situates people, things, places, and events in complex relation to each other in order to analyze and proffer explanations of their interactions. Opposing narrative and any explanatory writing in *PrairyErth*, Heat-Moon aspires not to narrate his experiences in Chase County but like a painter to "speak only in names, in pictures — that's the primitive method," a method that links painters and other producers of images with "[p]eople not yet completely seduced by European rationalism," who "often believe something strong but beyond the comprehension of reason attaches itself to images and names."²¹

For Heat-Moon, this imagist style is commensurate with his visual mode of comprehending his experience in Chase County and with the way that he expects readers to make their own comprehensions as they read *PrairyErth*. Just as Heat-Moon can attempt to understand his life and the life of those around him "only in discontinuous fragments . . . scraps, shavings, smithereens," so he directs his readers to

start in the middle and read outward, start in the middle and read upward; it is yours to make: design, whittle, cut, snip, tie, glue, trim, rasp, paint, grow vexed, cuss, and pitch it across the room (we will then share one more thing): it is yours to show how the pieces can fit together, perhaps even to demonstrate how the job *should* be done:²²

Through other such exhortations to the reader, through commentary on his style and theory of composition in *PrairyErth*, and through the nonnarrative style itself—a compendium of textual objects, including lengthy excerpts from a commonplace book that introduce each of the book's twelve sections, lists and glossaries (of terms for hawkness, for coyote, for spellings of Kansas), inventories (one a count of two hundred items in a covered wagon), newspaper reports, interviews,

anecdotes and descriptions of encounters with people, flora, or fauna—Heat-Moon’s ultimate concern, as he explains in an interview, “is the planet.” Heat-Moon explains that “The topics are of Chase County, Kansas, but my goal wasn’t to inform readers about Chase County. My goal was to show people a deep map, in the hope of encouraging them to penetrate their own terrain a little deeper.”²³ Yet Heat-Moon’s style has a reflexive effect, referring as much to itself and to *PrairyErth* as an artifact, a kind of imagist object disengaged from time, and to Heat-Moon’s theory of its composition as to particular human activity in a particular place.

The responses of some of the book’s reviewers register this self-reflexivity. For example, although Jim Redd praises *PrairyErth* for its intelligence, stylistic diversity, and meticulous field and documentary research, he questions whether the complex structure “tends toward richness or confusion” and observes that the book “conspicuously lacks . . . a driving emotion, a feeling of involvement and love for the land, despite some wonderfully vivid and tantalizing prose in its praise.”²⁴ This is an observation that implicitly raises the issue of the role that personal narrative might have assumed in *PrairyErth*, as it does in *Blue Highways*.

Similar to Redd, Paul Theroux finds much to praise in *PrairyErth* and yet observes that factual exhaustiveness risks making a book “nothing more than a data base, something to sort and study,” rendering much of it “skippable.”²⁵ In addition, Theroux notes another effect of Heat-Moon’s style in *PrairyErth* that in *Blue Highways* the narrative averted, that of an absence of critical acuity: “If *PrairyErth* has a fault it is that it is almost entirely a celebration, even when it does not mean to be.”

And while Bill McKibben finds *PrairyErth* superlatively satisfactory—“I’m absolutely bowled over, blown away, swept off my pins by *PrairyErth*”—his review also reveals that much of his excitement comes sheerly from the book’s self-reflexive style, from the attention

it calls to its elaborate composition and to Heat-Moon’s feat in putting it together as he did: “Heat-Moon offers a glassbottomed cruise of a writer’s mind—you see him twist as he tries to half nelson his endless notes into something more.” In calling the book “the *Moby Dick* of American history,” McKibben tacitly acknowledges not only Heat-Moon’s stylistic exertions but the salience of the book as an artifactual object, a monument revealing that “Chase County is a target as universal and worthy as the white whale, and Least Heat-Moon is as inventive and as obsessive as Melville in his pursuit.”²⁶

To the extent that *PrairyErth* refers mostly to itself, Heat-Moon has produced what the semiotician and theorist Roland Barthes calls a writerly text. In contrast to a readerly text, which a reader uses or reads, a writerly text, so called because readers in effect write it by producing a variety of interpretations, lacks a narrative structure and refers not to experience outside language but rather refers to its own linguistic features.²⁷

A writerly text is informed by a postmodernist assumption which holds that all discourse is a closed system in which signifiers refer to other signifiers and from which it follows that any truth or meaning is not discovered but invented, made, constructed. By this assumption, such literature of fact as history, biography, and autobiography cannot be distinguished from fiction. Accordingly, a writerly text ostensibly about a geographical place would assume the impossibility of referring to a place as a geographical entity that exists prior to and apart from human construction and would assume instead that any reference to place is a reference to place as a product, a fabrication, a construct resulting from a process of construction, processes like writing, photography, painting, or cartography. *PrairyErth* as a writerly text, then, refers to Heat-Moon’s process of “deep map” making and to itself as “a deep map” made or written anew by readers whose various readings constitute writings of their own deep maps.

CONCLUSION

In referring as much to itself as an opening onto an experience outside itself, *PrairyErth* may work against Heat-Moon's achieving the resolution between self and surroundings that he seeks in his travel writing. This goal assumes the potential of language to refer to something other than itself, and it depends upon writing in such a way that this potential is realized. In *Blue Highways*, however, narrative enables Heat-Moon to write with greater reference beyond the text than the nonnarrative style of *PrairyErth*.

The referential capacity of narrative is perhaps best explained by theorist Paul Ricoeur. While agreeing with the postmodernist recognition that all human experience is "always already symbolically mediated," Ricoeur rejects the assumption that language refers only to itself. He proceeds from an opposite assumption that "language does not constitute a world for itself. . . . [It] is not even a world,"²⁸ and he argues that narrative is uniquely able to refer to temporal human experience because the human experience of time manifests itself in narrative and, reciprocally, is the main referent of narrative.²⁹ Narrative simultaneously analyzes and refers to extralinguistic experience because a narrative plot, far from being a sequence, a simple copy of chronology, is a configuration that instead of miming experience critically acts upon experience. It, according to Ricoeur, "construes significant wholes out of scattered events,"³⁰ metaphorically opening onto the world of human activity.³¹

What difference does such referential writing make? In Heat-Moon's terms, "primacy of fact" depends on reference, and primacy of fact matters because it is a way for the writer to insist that the physical world is real and rich. And, as the two different styles of *Blue Highways* and *PrairyErth* suggest, it may be that narrative writing serves better than nonnarrative not merely to unfold the richness of the physical world but also to investigate the role

of places in individual and collective human life. A narrative plot configures both the dependence of a place for cultural significance upon human constructions of it, and, reciprocally, the human dependence upon places, including the various conditions of life and survival.³²

NOTES

1. William Least Heat-Moon, "Journeys into Kansas," *Temperamental Journeys*, ed. Michael Kowalewski (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), pp. 22-23.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
5. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 46.
6. William Least Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 5.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 191-92.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 162, 165.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 266.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 38.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 187, 17, 186.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 220, Heat-Moon's emphasis.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 400, Heat-Moon's emphasis.
17. William Least Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth: (A Deep Map)* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), p. 269.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
19. William Least Heat-Moon, "William Least Heat-Moon," interview by Peter Gilmour, *Heartland Journal* 11 (March-April 1992): 10.
20. Heat-Moon, *PrairyErth* (note 18 above), p. 440.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 442.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 335, 327, Heat-Moon's emphasis.
23. William Least Heat-Moon, "The Archivist of Place," *The Bloomsbury Review* 12 (April-May 1992): 1.
24. Jim Redd, review of *PrairyErth: (A Deep Map)*, by William Least Heat-Moon, *The Bloomsbury Review* 12 (April-May 1992): 17.
25. Paul Theroux, "The Wizard of Kansas," review of *PrairyErth: (A Deep Map)*, by William Least Heat-Moon, *New York Times Book Review* 27 (October 1991): 27.

26. Bill McKibben, "The Deepest Map," review of *PrairieEarth: (A Deep Map)*, by William Least Heat-Moon, *Hungry Mind Review* 21 (Spring 1992): 47.

27. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 3-6.

28. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 57, 78.

29. Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in *On Narrative*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 165.

30. Ibid., p. 174.

31. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (note 28 above), p. 80.

32. The special potential of narrative to reveal and investigate the interdependence of the human and the natural is, in part, why the environmental historian William Cronon argues for the use of narrative in writing environmental history in his interesting essay, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78 (March 1992): 1347-76.