# *Hewing to Experience* by Sherman Paul (review)

John Tallmadge


Western American Literature, Volume 26, Number 4, Winter 1992, pp. 357-358 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
*DOI:* *https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.1992.0048*

# Essay Review

*Hewing to Experience.* By Sherman Paul. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989. 389 pages, $32.50.)

Sherman Paul stands in the critical landscape like Thoreau in the Concord woods: resolutely emplaced, erudite, opinionated, and always interesting. His Walden is a cabin on Wolf Lake in northern Minnesota, where he practices retirement in the classic sense. The present collection, an omnibus of essays and reviews from the past two decades, offers abundant insights for the specialist and, for the general reader, exemplifies an original and provocative method of ecological criticism.

Paul concentrates on writing in the American grain, where the poem is the cry of its occasion and the form emerges from the poet's experience of the world. He is interested in the "open forms" of writing that emerged in response to Emerson's call for an "original relation to the universe," rather than in the academic forms that arose, in both Europe and America, from a studied preoccupation with tradition. In his view, the most vital stream in American literature begins with Emerson and Whitman and proceeds through Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams (rather than T. S. Eliot) through the experimental poetry of the 1950s (Creeley, Olson, and Snyder) to contemporary ethnopoetics and natural history. "Hewing to experience" (Olson's phrase) is the chief characteristic of this movement, and, since our national experience is largely an encounter with nature, Paul ends with nature writing, today's most vital genre.

In his keynote essay, Paul argues for an "open criticism" appropriate to these works. The open critic cultivates an attitude of receptive admiration akin to Keats' "negative capability" or the "naturalist's trance" of E. O. Wilson. His task is to bear witness to the experience of the work of art, which he discovers "as an explorer discovers a coast, enters a new terrain." The critic is concerned with "finding, not fault-finding," says Paul. "Necessarily tentative, he reports only what he himself experiences in the encounter." By preferring narration and witness to judgment—by "hewing to experience" himself—the open critic avoids the false objectivity of New Criticism and the hieratic nihilism of Deconstruction. The result is a form of autobiography that deals in facts and universals while remaining personal, a "natural history" of reading.

Paul exemplifies his method in provocative interpretations of the Creeley-Olson correspondence (here treated *in toto* for the first time), the essays of

William Carlos Williams, and (most stimulating in my view) the recent work of Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, and Barry Lopez. It is wonderful to see a mature mind engaging so gracefully with pithy and difficult works. Paul writes in a periodic, allusive style that is well-suited to his approach. The narrative proceeds resolutely along the main line of argument, but it also loops downward and outward continually to reveal the abundant connections and relationships that enrich this well-composted tradition. Thus the critic, like an astute naturalist, "unpacks" the literary landscape to reveal its evolutionary and ecological dimensions, the complex, layered relationships that sustain artistic life.

It is not possible to do such a thing without engagement on the same ground as that chosen by the writers themselves. Mary Austin wrote that the subject of her work was not the land or herself, but "a third thing, that which passed between me and the land." Barry Lopez imagines an inner and an outer landscape that are brought together in storytelling by native hunters and modern nature writers; he finds the basis of culture in this combination of encounter and bearing witness. To understand such a process, it helps to practice it oneself. Hence, Paul's work of becoming emplaced at Wolf Lake (his "descendentalism" or "worlding") feeds his critical endeavors. Nor is he concerned solely with the past. Because he is so well-informed, he can sight down the fruitful path marked out by these works, like cottonwoods following a buried stream in the desert.

Thus, he sees the future in ethnopoetics, which answers Tristan Tzara's challenge to make poetry "a way of life rather than a subsidiary manifestation of intelligence and will." Ethnopoetics, he says, "would restore the outcast poet-trickster-shaman and the full range of communal uses that oral poetry had in preliterate cultures." In a similar vein, nature writing has the potential to create an ecologically viable culture through storytelling, to produce, as Barry Lopez has said, "the foundation for a reorganization of American political thought." For Paul, who, like Thoreau, began at Harvard, the descent from ivory tower to north woods cabin has proven rich beyond expectation. He has achieved a coincident view of nature, culture, art, and character, and from that mature, privileged place he delights and instructs his readers.

JOHN TALLMADGE *The Union Institute*