Sabbatical Report, Winter Term 2011

Ken Zimmerman

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Introductory Preface: Monkey Puzzle

Let me introduce you to the Monkey Puzzle tree. Maybe you've seen them, the short, spiky trees that look almost like a cactus—odd, decorative and slightly comical standouts in people's suburban yards. You may even know that this visitor to North America is called the Araucaria araucana and is the national tree of Chile. Perhaps you don't know that this unusual conifer is the subject of an ode by Chilean poet Pablo Neruda—one of my earliest literary and historical heroes—who wrote of it (in my own rough translation) "High over the earth you are placed, hard, beautiful Araucaria of the southern mountains, tower of Chile, promontory of the green land, winter's banner, ship of fragrance…" Or that this species is over 200 million years old; that it co-existed with—and outlasted—the dinosaurs; that it is sacred to and provides a sustaining source of food for the Mapuche people who inhabit the southern regions of South America and call the tree by its old name, Pehuen. That certain groups of Mapuche even call themselves "Pehuenche" (the people of the Pehuen tree) and make everything from bread and soup to a kind of beer from its nutritious pinones. That the Mapuche/Pehuenche successfully resisted both the Incan empire and then the Spanish empire that followed, defending the borders of the only formally recognized indigenous nation in South America for hundreds of years, until the so-called "Pacification of Araucaria" in the late 1800s. You may not have heard the rumors that male and female Pehuen trees reproduce by crossing and entwining their roots underground. You may be surprised that individuals of this species can live for 1500 years; that they can grow to a height greater than 50 meters; that they can survive in extreme mountain environments above 2000 meters where little else can live; or that their historic range covered much of South America but now, threatened by logging and arson-set wildfires, is narrowing in toward the cordillera of the southern Andes.

So, why do I begin my sabbatical report with a seemingly random collection of facts about an obscure and unusual tree? Consider, for a moment, the Pehuen trees silhouetted in the background of the photograph below (a snapshot from a street vendors'

marketplace in Santiago); compare your response to those trees with your initial response to the previous picture, to the name "Monkey Puzzle," and to the list of facts that followed. How has your response to the image of these trees changed over the short span of a page? How will you feel, what will you think of, the next time you next encounter one?

The difference between those responses points toward the center of my sabbatical experience and illuminates the profound growth in my perspective on environmental literature brought about by my work during this sabbatical term. The Pehuen represents the deep relationship between nature and human culture, the interaction of landscape with story and history, the ways language and image shape those stories, and, ultimately, how story can return full circle to re-shape the landscape itself, for better or for worse.

I want to offer the Monkey Puzzle as a symbol—not a simple metaphor that gives only a hint of understanding and then disappears like a ripple on a lake, but rather a symbol like a powerful, standing wave in a river—a real symbol in the sense that Yeats or Carl Jung might have meant it, an object from nature that insistently reminds us of multiple important truths, of the profound shaping forces that lie beneath human experience, a wave that reveals in its shape the invisible bedrock streambed of our lives.

Any object in nature, any aspect of nature, observed and studied carefully enough, can open up into an idea, a metaphor, even a truth. But it is in the context of human story that we humans can begin to really feel the relationship between nature, literature, culture, and myth. In the course of my journey through this sabbatical term, the Monkey Puzzle tree has become a personal symbol of that inter-woven relationship between human story and non-human nature, standing in my mind beside the symbols of river, water, and stone. The Pehuen and its relationship with the Mapuche/Pehuenche has also become a central image of some of the ecological themes within my writing project as that project has developed and grown. I offer it to you. Take it just for what it is: Araucaria araucana, Monkey Puzzle, Pehuen. A name. A symbol. An image. A tree.

Summary of the Sabbatical:

The goals for professional growth in my sabbatical proposal pointed in three related broad directions. 1) One was to dive more deeply into the field of environmental literature and criticism, bringing back to my teaching an expanded sense of the genre and new critical understandings about it. 2) A second goal was to re-establish and re-invigorate my own work as a creative writer, using the sabbatical to begin an environmentally-oriented creative writing project of my own focused on rivers and water. 3) The third goal, in support of the other two, was to travel widely, to visit rivers and river environments, observing and experiencing the places I would write about, practicing the nature writing I was also studying.

In all three of these directions, my sabbatical has met or exceeded my own expectations. In this summary, I'll look briefly at important outcomes in each of these areas of work.

1) The specific outcome of my review of nature literature which stands out most so far is that I've become much more interested in story, and in the prevalence and value of fiction—novels and short stories—within the nature writing, or better called "environmental literature" genre. This has actually expanded my sense of what this genre is and can be, and has helped me see it far more broadly than I had before. This new understanding will have a valuable effect on my approach to teaching this subject in the future. I can envision developing curriculum around ideas of environmental fiction or the story within the landscape. The theme of environmental fiction is also the focus of several sessions at the up-coming ASLE conference (Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment), which will help me develop and solidify my ideas.

2) In terms of the second direction—the growth of my own creative efforts in the field—the sabbatical leave provided an opportunity for me to focus on my writing as I haven't been able to in years. I've re-established habits of writing daily, of journaling, of free-writing, and of research that I hope to continue as I return to the classroom. The writing project itself has evolved in response to my review of the genre. As I (re-)discovered the value of fiction as a literary approach to issues of environment and nature, my own writing project grew and divided into two components: one piece very much like the initial idea, now tentatively re-titled "On the Way of Water," and the other something quite different that has become the slowly-developing first draft of what I'd like to call—if I can ever complete the undertaking—an "Eco-adventure Novel" set on, in, and around the rivers and waterfalls of Chile, with the working title *Salto Profundo.* My excitement in developing that idea—researching, drafting, imagining, and writing the story—is the out-standing result of the sabbatical and will carry over into all my teaching in writing and literature.

3) My third goal for the sabbatical—to travel and observe rivers and nature—has also been a powerful experience of professional growth, feeding into and shaping both the academic and creative areas of the sabbatical and my professional life more generally. The region of southern Chile where I traveled for three weeks in February has become the backdrop for my writing project, and the amazing experience of visiting Pablo

Neruda's homes and his gravesite beside the sea was a true inspiration for me as a writer. And—to conclude this summary—the experience of traveling through Chile, of navigating and negotiating for my first time in a Spanish-speaking country, was also a tremendous growth experience for me in cultural and linguistic experience that will reflect in a positive way on my future work at Lane.

All three directions of my sabbatical—study, travel and observation, and writing—continue though this Spring term's unpaid leave, with the exciting ASLE conference approaching at the end of June. I look forward to presenting the full results of both sabbatical terms in the fall.

Timeline of Activities

The timeline of my Winter term leave can be divided into three periods: before Chile, traveling in Chile, and after Chile. These periods corresponded roughly with January, February, and March.

January was largely dedicated to reading nature literature and other books relating to rivers and water (see Appendix 1), making arrangements for travel to Chile, brushing up my weak Spanish, researching Chilean history, culture, and natural history, its flora, fauna, rivers, and beginning my own observations and writing about landscapes and rivers in the Pacific Northwest. By the end of January I'd begun to direct and focus my research in environmental literature toward fiction as a form of nature writing. I re-read, in this light, Barry Lopez' *River Notes*. (More fairly to Barry, it *was* my re-reading of his early book, at least in part, that directed my thinking toward fiction as a vehicle for environmental writing.) Also important to my shift in thinking was Kathleen Dean Moore's *Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water*. This is a book of non-fiction essays and short memoirs, but even more than *River Notes* it puts human story starkly against the backdrop of nature, inter-weaving the two. Moore's book also helped me in my own writing efforts in a second, more immediate way, by forcing me to change the working title of my own evolving manuscript. My proposed title had been *Riverwards: Reflections on Water*, that is, until I got a copy of Moore's book. Titles may not be copyrighted, but that was way too close for my comfort. So I dropped my title, without an immediate replacement, and with that act I inadvertently freed my manuscript to move in new and unexpected directions.

In February, I traveled to Chile, landing in Santiago on Feb 2. Spent 5 days in Santiago, arranging, then re-arranging, travel south. During these days I also visited, in a sort of poetic pilgrimage, two of Pablo Neruda's homes, now museums in his memory—La Chascona in Santiago and Isla Negra along the coastline south of Valparaiso, which was his favorite house and is also his gravesite. I cannot over-state how inspirational these visits were, how much they awakened in me the desire to write, and reminded me of the excitement for poetry, for writing, and for literature that has always driven my teaching. Spent two days traveling by rented car to Temuco, then up into the lake district near

Pucon, under the shadow of Volcan Villarrica. Spent ten days around the Pucon area, observing the landscapes, rivers, trees, and birds, meeting people in the area. Taking notes, photos, and videos. Largely without realizing it, I was developing material, images, scenes, and characters for the writing project I was beginning to see had to become a fiction, a novel, a story that could bring human and nature together in an imaginative way, and incorporate character, plot, and voice alongside landscape. Got in two days of boating during this time, on the Rio Liucura and the Rio Trancura, the first a somewhat challenging run in a hardshell kayak, guided and given great lessons by a world-class boater from Canada named Billy Harris. The second run was on my last day before heading home, on an easier stretch of the Rio Trancura, in a half-deflated ducky (an inflatable open kayak). Rented a cabin from a local Mapuche woman, Veronica, for several days. Camped beside the Rio Liucura for several days, including through a powerful two-day wind and rain storm known in local legend as the Puelche. Photographed waterfalls. Drove up into the Parque Nacional Huerquehue, took a blurry picture of a bird that might be a condor but more likely is just an extra-large black buzzard. Learned some of the plants, the trees, the birds, including the exotic buff-necked ibis, which was beautiful, with its long curving beak like a reverse scimitar, but had the annoying habit of screeching and flapping throughout the night, ignoring the short hours of darkness completely and keeping me awake. And, of course, the Araucaria araucana. Stayed the last several days at the Pucon Kayak Hostel, run by another world-class kayaker named Dave Hughes, in a tiny cabin beside the Rio Trancura under huge Lengua and Rauli trees, where I got to meet several of the first boaters to explore Chile's rivers. (Robby Dastin and Kurt Casey) On my last day in Pucon, led a group of students from Dave's world-traveling kayaking high school in two creative writing exercises. Traveled back to Santiago for a final day before the long flight home, arriving Feb. 21.

The remainder of February and March were spent for the most part in writing and reading, pouring the images and fragments of text from my trip into the manuscript. I had begun extending my ideas, developing characters, scenes, landscapes from Chile into what has become two separate works: the untitled, non-fiction "reflections" about rivers and water that I'm currently calling "On the Ways of Water," and the quickly growing fictional ideas that have become the fragmentary draft of a novel: *Salto Profundo.* I also spent significant time continuing to review the field of environmental literature, preparing for my unpaid leave during Spring term, particularly the ASLE conference.

Changes from original proposal

The most significant travel change was the cancellation of the proposed trip to Costa Rica. The original proposal was in the hope of two terms of paid leave. With funding only available for the single term, I was forced to re-consider my financial ability to make three international trips and still attend the ASLE conference. Reality won out, and I was forced to cancel the hoped-for trip to Central America, at least for the present. However, I don't think that change undermined the essential value of the sabbatical at all. The Chile trip provided the experiences of travel, language, culture, and landscape I was hoping for. And as I continue my writing and research this spring, I can see that canceling the Costa

Rica trip actually benefited the writing projects by keeping the settings and landscapes more focused, and giving me more time in Chile to learn that area.

In Chile, some travel delays and especially a late spell of winter-like weather and high water in the far south re-directed me from my original destination of the Rio Futaleufu to the more accessible rivers of the Lake District near Pucon. This proved again to be a fruitful change, as that region has turned out to be the perfect landscape for the story I am writing.

Beyond these changes in travel plans, the other significant change from the original proposal is in the ongoing evolution of my creative writing project, the shift to a narrative, novelistic approach, rather than the sequence of non-fiction vignettes I had originally conceived. Here, the change is really an evolution of the original idea, toward a method which allows me to approach the themes and issues I'm concerned with in a broader and more flexible way. I believe that change from the proposal doesn't undermine, and actually even enhances, the professional development goals of the sabbatical in terms of creative writing.

Conclusion:

The paid sabbatical during Winter term was a great opportunity for professional growth for me, and it has succeeded beyond my own expectations. It has opened up new understandings and approaches to the study of environmental literature. The three aspects of the proposal—study, travel/observation, and writing—have interacted in very much the ways I had hoped. I'm excited to bring those ideas back to Lane, in the nature literature class as well as all my writing and literature classes. The sabbatical has also re-invigorated my own creative writing and my interest in and ideas about teaching creative writing. It has allowed me a rewarding experience of travel, observation of nature, and cultural contact in a country and area of the world I've never seen before. The sabbatical leave has given me the opportunity to grow as a teacher, as a scholar, and as a writer.

Many thanks to the Professional Development team, to the committee, the chair, and to all the others involved—including the office staff, my department dean, and the colleagues who covered for me in my absence—for this opportunity for professional growth. I believe it will enhance my contributions to Lane in the future, and I look forward to sharing the results as broadly as possible.

Appendix 1: Words on Water: A Brief Bibliography (Draft contents list only) A few book-length works with themes of rivers and water, consisting only of books I was able to acquire and review during the Winter term leave. Annotations, notes, and publication information along with additional entries are being added to the bibliography during Spring term unpaid leave.

Non-Fiction Essay/Memoir

Down the River, Edward Abbey
Rogue River Journal, John Daniel
Winter Creek, John Daniel
Riverwalking: Reflections on Moving Water, Kathleen Dean Moore
What the River Says, Jeff Wallach
Salmon on a Fly, Lee Wulff
Chronology of Water, Lidia Yuknavitch

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Non-Fiction Science

Fresh Water, E. C. Pielou

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Fiction

The River Why, James David Duncan
River Notes, Barry Lopez
Moby Dick, Herman Melville
Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain

Appendix 2: The opening pages from the first draft of *Salto Profundo: An eco-adventure novel* (excerpt from a work in progress, rough draft for this report only, please don't copy or reproduce in other contexts.)

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(from) Salto Profundo

An eco-adventure novel

by Ken Zimmerman

Prelude: Rio Profundo

"The river has an ending, but it does not end. It has a beginning, but it never began."
(from the blog of Ricky Gnarsky)

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Above mountains and under clouds a Chilean condor soars, his broad wings—three meters from tip to tip—catching the wind. He almost never flaps those great wings, but lifts instead a single finger-feather and angles his tail and turns into a rising current of air and rises with it, now diving to gain speed, now rising again in a long, slow circle above a tiny lake nestled in the midst of snow-capped peaks. Along the banks of this lake, a few stunted and tough Pehuen trees stretch their spiky trunks upward, their umbrella-curved cap of branches surviving the high altitude, the cold winds on which the condor rides, and the harsh winter snow that even now in mid-summer clings on in the shadows. Huemul deer and wild vicuna come to this lake to drink their last water. The mountain puma hunts its rocky shoreline. Good feeding here for this old, solitary buzzard.

Chilean condors mate for life, and many years ago this one's mate ate poisoned goat in the valley far below toward the coast. He himself hadn't eaten that day, troubled by the human smell of the meat. He'd lifted off on his huge wings, flapping noisily, thinking she would follow. But her hunger overcame her. He'd circled for two days over the field, long after he could smell her death, waiting for her to rise and join him, but she never did. After that, he retreated to the high cordillera of the Andes to wait out the long years of his life. He was fifty then and nears eighty now, perhaps the oldest living bird of his kind, and one of the last. The condor knows nothing of extinction, but he knows he seldom sees another like himself. The great gatherings he participated in as a young bird—fifty or more condors joyfully circling together in silent congregation—are no more. Now he always flies alone, often haunting this same piece of sky above this unnamed lake, his still-sharp eyes scanning the earth for death.

To the south, the condor can see Volcan Villarrica fuming against the sky, a perfect pyramid of white with a sharp line marking its crater summit, its missing capstone. A thin pillar of bluish smoke rises from the crater and is swept away by the wind. He flew above that smoking crater many years before, but the rising fumes were noxious and drove him away. He'll never return.

To the north and east the high snow peaks of the Andes and their deep glaciers

feed the unnamed lake this condor circles, bleeding downward a little of their water throughout the hot summer, hoarding new snow every winter. Out-flowing from the lake's southwestern lip, a tiny stream slips along rocks, over ancient polished pebbles mixed with still-jagged pumice and lava stones from more recent eruptions. The stream meanders at first through a high meadow, uncertain, but flowing generally westward, as if sensing in the far distance its ultimate goal, the Pacific Ocean. The condor could see the ocean, or at least the ocean's morning shroud of dense fog, only a hundred kilometers away, could fly there before noon if he chose to do so. But he no longer has the urge to leave his mountain retreat. The fresh-born rivulet, however, wants nothing else but to move toward that distant salty call, both its source and its grave. (The life cycle of water, after all, is the opposite of that of the salmon.) Fed by side-streams and secret springs, the stream swells to creek size, straightens as the slope gets steeper, gains power, and somewhere along a deep, isolated canyon takes on the human name, Rio Profundo. It was assigned that name by a Padre Juan Bautista, in 1575, a Spanish priest who roamed up into the southern Andes looking for native villagers to convert to Catholicism. After the squad of conquistadors he accompanied—themselves in search of gold, not souls—were killed to a man by a Mapuche ambush, Padre Bautista wandered alone through the mountains, pursuing his mission. But not speaking a word of the local language, and unwilling to learn even a syllable of "that devil's tongue," he had little luck at conversion. The Machi of the Mapuche-Pehuenche—people of the land and people of the Pehuen tree— watched him kneeling to pray, drawing constantly in his notebooks, playing with his rosary, and reading aloud words no one could understand from that black book. She found his antics hilarious and deemed him insane but harmless. And recognizing that insanity may be only a mask for holiness, she ordered all the people to cause him no harm. Occasionally, when he seemed near to starvation, kind women would leave him gifts of Pehuen nuts and llama jerky in the night. Teased by children, ignored by everyone else he encountered, the Padre fled the territory shortly after the Valdivia earthquake of 1575, leaving not a single convert nor any monument to his Lord behind.

But Padre Bautista left his mark on the land in another way, by naming a number of local landscape features including this river and its accompanying waterfall—which he marked vaguely near the source of the river—Salto Profundo. When he returned to Santiago, destitute and having failed as a missionary, he sought to make a living as a cartographer of the Mapuche nation through which he had traveled. His artistic but sometimes wildly inaccurate maps formed the basis of the first official mappings of the region. Padre Bautista's Mappa Mundi, the great undertaking of his late life, hangs in the cathedral of Santiago to this day. And so the name Rio Profundo lasted, and has been dutifully passed along to every map that followed, even while the river's course has altered and its flow has risen and fallen with changes in the glaciers above. The river drops steeply down its short, ten kilometer length, narrow and inaccessible after the road ends at the Tres Saltos—three fifteen foot waterfalls in close succession—just above the confluence where it loses its own identity into the larger Rio Liucura, which itself joins the Rio Trancura and then disappears into Lago Villarrica in just a few kilometers more.

But all these human names, this history, the earthquakes and geologic changes in river flows, these conquests and defeats—none of them matter to the old condor, who thinks of nothing but air and sky and the smell of meat. His nose, unlike that of his distantly-related North American namesake, is sharper even than his eyes. It can detect an individual molecule, recognize it, and gauge the direction from which it came. He has

retreated here to escape the world of people, all that human stench, and is even now troubled by the smell of diesel fuel and by a sound drifting up the river valley to his high hermitage—the harsh, high-pitched whining of a Toyota engine and squealing tires. Disturbed, his meditations interrupted, the old condor angles away, winging off to the east, toward the still higher peaks, the silent, sublime altitudes to which he is the only living witness, leaving our story behind.

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The Beginning