

Henry David Thoreau's Environmental Humanism

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While Thoreau's early call for nature preservation in *The Maine Woods* is well-known and has been a cornerstone of the environmental movement, paradoxically less attention has been paid to the companion call that is introduced in the penultimate chapter of *Walden*:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic and wildness,—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. (317-18)

This call appears as the conclusion of the last two chapters of the book before the "Conclusion," and I would like to show how it is the logical outcome of Thoreau's thinking in these last two chapters ("The Pond in Winter" and "Spring"), which foreground three different modes of environmental consciousness or awareness. These chapters have often been seen as less "ambitious," because they seem to adhere to the conventions of seasonal literature. But, as Lawrence Buell warns us, "from now until spring, seasonality dominates. To some extent this change makes the latter third of *Walden* a more conventional logbook. In other ways,

the appearance of straightforwardness increases the opportunities for deviance” (*The Environmental Imagination* 244). And I would like to suggest that they actually offer a sustained, if not systematic, exploration of three competing modes of environmental awareness. By this notion, I mean three different ways of approaching, if not bridging, the gap between matter and consciousness.¹

These three different modes correspond to the three highlights of these chapters: Thoreau’s charting of Walden Pond (“sequence 1”), the ice-cutters’ harvest of the Walden ice (“sequence 2”), both from “The Pond in Winter,” and the famous flowing sandbank passage from the “Spring” chapter (“sequence 3”). My contention is that these passages should be read in conjunction—not as merely seasonal narrative, but as rhetorical argument—and that, to put things in a nutshell, they exemplify a move from a denial of materiality in the name of commonly conceived humanism, through misguided, all-too-human materialism, to true materialism. The latter, which may ultimately matter more than idealism, is premised on a double awareness of the concreteness of one’s environment and of the materiality of language, thus amounting to a more fully realized form of humanism. I would also like to propose that the three passages correspond to three different rhetorical modes—allegorical, literal, symbolic—and that Thoreau’s environmental awareness, in *Walden*, is eventually grounded in symbolism: although emphasizing *Walden*’s reliance on the symbolic mode is hardly news, this has usually been understood through the New Critical focus on purely formal features.

1. Nature and the Ethical Translation: The Rhetoric of the Ideal

In January 1846, Thoreau, who was a professional surveyor, carried his surveyor’s tools—“compass and chain and sounding line” (*Walden* 285)—to the ice-locked pond and drew a careful map of its shoreline, with more than a hundred soundings of its depths, an experience he reported in *Walden*’s antepenultimate chapter, “The Pond in Winter,” which also includes a copy of the map itself (286). Thoreau’s extended passage on drawing a map of Walden Pond is fundamentally divided into two parts: the cartography of the lake, on the one hand, and its translation into an ethical lesson, on the other. This two-part structure reflects the tension between two contradictory approaches to transcendence: put briefly, cartography is meant to de-transcendentalize, as

1 This exploration of varieties of awareness in *Walden* will thus extend Scott Slovic’s foundational discussion of the notion of “awareness” in *Seeking Awareness*, whose chapter on Thoreau is devoted to the Journal.

Thoreau's purpose is to disprove legends about the lake's bottomlessness; then the ethical translation appears as a way of re-transcendentalizing.

Mapmaking appears as a Humboldtian activity—answering Humboldt's call for the “delineation” of “nature's physiognomy” (*Cosmos* I:81). As Laura Dassow Walls notes, “Thoreau's local would always speak to the cosmic: *Walden*, like *Eureka*, was a response to Humboldt's *Cosmos*” (*Passage to Cosmos* 264).² And we will here remember that the opening page of *Walden* (evoking Thoreau's desire to write as if “from a distant land” [3]), echoed Humboldt's notion of the equivalence between experiment and the infinity of the world: “The study of a science that promises to lead us through the vast range of creation may be compared to a journey in a far-distant land” (*Cosmos* I:50). Within that tradition, the map represents the synthesizing power of knowledge. The most central aspect of the mapmaking process, in the rhetorical economy of Thoreau's text, is that the lake is objectified: it becomes an object of rational knowledge, undergoing an ontological transformation by being experienced as a site of measurement rather than imagination, which is here dismissed as fancy: “The amount of it is, the imagination, give it the least license, dives deeper and soars higher than Nature goes” (288). Through this process of imaging—as distinct from and opposed to imagining—the otherness of nature is denied, or rather reduced, as it is bent to our frames or to our reason (as advocated by Humboldt : “the traveler . . . is guided by reason in his researches” [*Cosmos* I:51]), if not to our will. Mapmaking relies on a disjunction between matter and consciousness, and on the simultaneous belief in the possibility of bridging the gap intellectually: although the mapmaking process is not entirely devoid of sensory perception, the otherness of nature is eventually subsumed.

The map is a spatial construct intent on communicating meaning in a “linear” fashion, drawing on such principles as logical progression, deduction, progress—hence its possible enrolment in the banner of expansion, as suggested by Humboldt:

... so ought we likewise, in our pursuit of science, to strive after a knowledge of the laws and the principles of unity that pervade the vital forces of the universe; and it is by such a course that physical studies may be made subservient to the progress of industry, which is a conquest of mind over matter. (*Cosmos* I: 53-54)

2 I believe that Laura Dassow Walls's parallel invites further consideration, to which this article would like to contribute, although a full analysis goes beyond its scope.

The beautifully scalloped shape of the outlying, asymmetrical body of water called Walden Pond, however, may be read as an oblique comment on the American passion for the dehumanization of space by geometry—which goes as far back as William Penn’s gridiron plan for Philadelphia (1681), and, even more dramatically, the US Congress’s Land Ordinance of 1785, that divided the Northwest Territory (West and North of the Ohio River) into uniform sections and enabled surveyors to impose a rectangular grid pattern on the landscape obsession—and more particularly on westward expansion and Manifest Destiny.

In the rhetorical economy of the text, however, the map primarily assumes that it is possible for the perceiver to transpose the physical world into a different order of reality: it is, strictly speaking, a process of *translation* (i.e., a removal or transference from one condition to another)—“What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics” (291). The associated claim is that it is thus logically possible to subject the physical world to another kind of translation (almost in the old religious sense of removal from earth to heaven), that results in its appearing as an allegory of man’s moral physiognomy. Thoreau here seems to echo Emerson’s famous maxim in *Nature*: “The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics” (*Emerson’s Prose and Poetry* 38). In this version of environmental awareness, the material world is not just matter, but almost immediately endowed or imbued with allegorical meaning, if we agree on defining allegory as an illustration of the general by the particular, a particular which may be circumscribed. It is predicated on the idea that it is possible to apprehend the correspondences through rational thought (vs. the imagination or even the “folly” that is later at the heart of Thoreau’s sandbank passage in the “Spring” chapter). Allegory is imagination in the service of discursive meaning—i.e., based on logical sequence rather than substitution or symbolic equivalence. Making sense of the world in this way thus involves, not only imposing limits, but erasing (“translating”) its material dimension.

In spite of the strong humorous undercurrents, which may invite us not to take the narrator’s statements too seriously, mapmaking, *in the economy of Thoreau’s text*, essentially enacts an idealizing of nature, which desubstantializes and produces closure (or enclosure) of the real, and seems to be governed by a desire to escape contingency (thus following Humboldt’s call for “trac[ing] the *stable* amid the vacillating, ever-recurring alternation of physical metamorphoses” [*Cosmos* I:xli]): however playfully, mapmaking seems to deny or resolve the mutability of things, thus enforcing or supporting a rhetoric of the ideal.

But, one may again wonder, is the narrator's allegorical reading of the lake to be taken seriously? Or is he only paying lip-service to conventional allegorizing in the Emersonian manner or in the typological tradition? In my view, Thoreau only toys with the idea of allegory, and the last two chapters of *Walden* are meant to celebrate symbolism at the expense of allegory, which will eventually be dismissed as too rational, discursive, and linear. Buell argues that in the mapmaking passage Thoreau "completely suspends the 'poetic' dimension of *Walden* for the nonce and lets geometry take over" (*The Environmental Imagination* 276). It would be too reductive, however, to think that the map just blocks vision: mapmaking opens up vision, precisely because it is the first time we have had a way of figuring what the lake looks like. And what kind of geometry it foregrounds! If the narrator seems to reject fancy's vagaries ("the imagination, give it the least license, dives deeper and soars higher than Nature goes" [*Walden* 288]), it is only to let fancy (or is it imagination?) hold sway again later in the "Spring" chapter. Thoreau pokes fun at the reader, when he dismisses the free play of the imagination. But, I think that Buell is also right when he points to one of the undercurrents of the passage as testifying to Thoreau's anxiety about the possibility of reconciling poetry with science (*Environmental Imagination* 276).

To be sure, Thoreau's surveying of Walden Pond is mock-serious, and it seems to be meant as a parodic version of the individual's necessary contribution to socially accepted endeavors. Thoreau draws on and half-ironically bows to the figure of the Humboldtian explorer and his humanist focus on knowledge, the better to give it a twist subsequently. To the extent that it represents socially acceptable work, mapmaking, as intellectual appropriation of the pond, anticipates and parodies the exploitation—i.e., the economic appropriation—of the Walden ice, which immediately follows, as the second part of "a diptych of 'enterprise' scenes" (*Environmental Imagination* 277). It thus contributes, if examined carefully, to a questioning of all those conventions and standards by which most human beings hope to define and attain normality or comfortable stability.

2. Ice-Cutting or the Law of Substraction

The middle sequence is devoted to the harvesting of the Walden ice: the winter following the pond survey, a crew of a hundred ice-cutters arrived at the pond to cut the ice for shipment to the tropics. The ice-cutting parallels the mapmaking sequence insofar as it is a socially acceptable undertaking. The first two sequences should indeed be envisaged together, as aspiring to social approbation or commercial gain. Mapmaking, however auto-derisive, was still

nodding to social recognition—which was certainly important to Thoreau (he was a sought-after land surveyor), but whose pressure he also often lamented, as indicated by his famous and repeated metaphor for surveying—“tending the flocks of Admetus”—and by his statement in this passage:

[We] are conversant only with the bights of the bays of poesy, or steer for the public ports of entry, and go into the dry docks of science, where they merely refit for this world, and no natural currents concur to individualize them [i.e., our thoughts]. (*Walden* 292)

Thoreau’s statement shows that scientific inquiry was not meant to appear as his preferred form of environmental awareness.

Beyond the semi-parodic relation between sequence 1 and sequence 2, however, the second sequence fundamentally differs from the first because it does not correspond to any form of inquiry. In this middle sequence, matter is just matter—neither allegorical nor symbolical. It is a mere resource to be exploited for practical purposes and material gain. Note, however, how Thoreau denounces the economic logic behind ice-cutting (294), but remains friendly to the poor fellows who are the agents of environmental degradation (295), even trying his hand at the logging of the ice. This logging of the ice is not liable to any form of translation, even less to a transcendentalizing process. Even more than the mapmaking passage, the ice-cutting one is predicated on the power of sequence, linearity, and causality. Ice-cutting intrinsically negates any form of substitution, but favors repetition of the same (as indicated by the telling image of the contractor’s commissioning the exploitation of the Walden ice “in order to cover each one of his dollars with another” [294]). This is a process of mere duplication and replication: instead of producing difference or expansion, it contracts and reduces the world. Exploitation is based on a principle of repetition and identity. Or, put differently, the only substitution it operates is of stasis for process and energy (seasonal flux): the massive, monumental, static icestack is meant to substract matter from its normal life cycle, and to disrupt or blur the normal succession of seasons (thus also suppressing contingency, like mapmaking but in a different way). This is because ice-cutting is based on a capitalistic downplaying of the present in favor of future interest. On the contrary, Thoreau’s environmentally-friendly logging of the real (especially in his *Journal* or *log*) is primarily meant to enhance one’s relation to the present.

Both the measuring of the pond and the harvesting of its ice appear as fables of perfection, each in its own way: mapmaking nods in the direction of ideal or transcendentalizing wholes, ice-cutting toward a perfectly regular icestack

that appears as a paradoxically reductive *transposition* of wholeness (and here we may also hear echoes of Humboldt's desire for "wholes"). Like mapmaking, it enacts a suppression of the contingent. But, Thoreau suggests, the contingent and the particular cannot be eliminated without eliminating life itself—without draining life of its substance (hence Thoreau's diametrically opposite desire "to individualize [our thoughts]" [292]). In sequence 2, matter is simultaneously and paradoxically treasured and dematerialized (because the only conversion or translation it is liable to is monetary). The ice-cutters embody—or are the driving belt of—a materialistic worldview, but it is a materialism of subtraction (and extraction, for that matter! although the lake will eventually be replenished, as Thoreau emphasizes [297]), as opposed to the one that is propounded in the "Spring" chapter, to which I would now like to turn.

3. Disowning the Rhetoric of the Ideal and Reclaiming Materialism

The third sequence focuses on the thawing bankside of the "Deep Cut" of the railroad skirting Walden Pond. It is often regarded as *Walden's* climax, and it has generated a wide range of commentaries. It is also understood as the culmination of the book's seasonal pattern. It is important to be aware, however, that to some extent it is a constructed event—which Buell even describes as a "conceit," as he points that it was "introduced into the last drafts," and that it "drew on periods of thaw that took place in December, January, and February" (*Environmental Imagination* 245, 246) rather than in Spring. This certainly points to a specific purpose—perhaps what Thoreau called the discovery of the "spring of springs" (*Walden* 41)—and it reminds us that Thoreau deliberately orchestrated the final stages of his book to achieve maximum impact—so much for those who have insisted on the death of the author.

Inquiry

In a way, mapmaking and the sandbank passage form a kind of arch, in the sense that they are both forms of inquiry, as opposed to the central ice-cutting passage, in which there is no inquiry at all. By inquiry, I do not mean a metaphysical inquiry into the origins and ends of the universe, but rather into its material dimension: the earthly configurations of lake, ice, and sand. If the shadow of metaphysics still reverberated in sequence 1—eventually leading to a containment or subsumption of matter—there's nothing metaphysical in the third sequence. Sequence 3 is a striking ode to the preeminence of matter and concentrates upon a concrete and palpable reality—as opposed to the artificialized matter of the ice-cutters. The richness of the earth's surface with its natural coloration, its mineral and organic wealth as suggested in a phenomenological approach, the sensuous, nearly tactile pleasures constitute

the writer's central stance. The writer remains earthbound, and he intends to make the most of this limitation—but the idea is certainly quite different from Humboldt's desire "to trace the stable."

In this sequence, as in sequence 1, but even more so, Thoreau appears as subverter of all productive systems, and as promoter of an art disdainfully indifferent to any social approbation or commercial gain—he was certainly eager "to transact some private business" (19). He appears as a figure resisting social expectations or aesthetic integration. The passage points to the profoundly anti-institutional dimension of Thoreau's prose. I think it is hard to imagine *today* what the sandbank passage *as literature* represented at the time—i.e., a rejection of literature itself as institution. It is hard to understand what Thoreau's famous etymological ramblings (312) represented at the time, in a widely tamed or even decorous literature—in some sense it made it analogous in its impact to Dickinson's use of language. In this passage, Thoreau seemed to owe no obligations to society and even to be oblivious to the fact that society existed. The way lay open to forgetting all education or literacy, all received ideas:

The whole bank, which is from twenty to forty feet high, is sometimes overlaid with a mass of this kind of foliage, or sandy rupture, for a quarter of mile on one or both sides, the produce of one spring day. What makes this sand foliage remarkable is its springing into existence thus suddenly. When I see on the one side the inert bank,—for the sun acts on one side first,—and on the other this luxuriant foliage, the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me,—had come to where he was still at work, sorting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about. I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is something such a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body. You find thus in the very sands an anticipation of the vegetable leaf. No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly. The atoms have already learned this law, and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally* whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat, (*labor*, *lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing;

globus, lobe, globe, also lap, flap, and many other words,) externally a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of lobe are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single lobed, or B, double lobed,) with a liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward. In globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves. Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit. (*Walden* 306-07)

We are here confronted with an art too frenzied to lend itself to even a minimal obligation to communicate—be it truth, method, or value—but an art intent on the circulation of energy, on the relations between mysterious though concrete phenomena. Through a radical disruption of our ordinary modes of seeing, Thoreau gives us the “real,” *literal* form of the transaction between nature and consciousness, finally refusing to separate matter and spirit.

Acknowledging Otherness

That radicality sets this passage apart, even from the first sequence, with which there are a number of crucial differences.

The first one may be encapsulated in the sweeping statement that the prevailing aesthetic mode moves from the picturesque to the grotesque: one will notice that Thoreau explicitly refers to one of the high priests of picturesque description and theory, William Gilpin, in the course of the mapmaking passage (287), whereas he underlines (in italics) a reference to the aesthetics of the grotesque in the sandbank passage (305). The grotesque appears as a metaphor for non-linearity, for the liberation from standard, orthodox worldviews (and for metamorphosis). One must emphasize the anti-picturesque character of the thawing bank passage. The picturesque was oriented toward “giving scenery culturally and aesthetically respectable forms and meanings” (Grove Dictionary, “Picturesque”). At a time when one of the central aesthetic aspirations was for “associations,” those offered by Thoreau in this passage (including the excrementitious), were certainly not the favored ones... The picturesque relies on disembodied thought and perception (with a focus on the ocular), whereas the body plays a central role here. The picturesque is also a mode that focuses on legibility (as a worthy, if slightly paradoxical, inheritor of the Enlightenment)—i.e., on the possibility of reading and rationally ordering the landscape. In

sequence 3 there is indeed a form of ordering, but one that has much more to do with a mystical—or is it proto-ecological?—sense of generalized relationality: the idea that “the Maker of this earth but patented a leaf” (308). And here, perhaps, Thoreau confronts the possibility that the world is illegible or impossible to read rationally—that the fabled Book of Nature is now so irremediably timeworn that it can only be apprehended through a somewhat chaotic sequence of words and syllables.

The second crucial difference between sequences 1 and 3 is the focus on the unmeasured and unmeasurable, that appear as the essence of poetry (as also suggested by Humboldt). If mapmaking meant delimiting or imposing limits, the sandbank passage, on the contrary, appears to be predicated on the opposite notion of the value of having “our own limits transgressed” (318), as Thoreau sums up his thought at the end of the “Spring” chapter (sequence 4)—our own limits, i.e. also our own constructs. This in particular involves transgressing the limits of language (the linguistic material), i.e. its mastery over the world—just as we are requested to acknowledge the uncontainable flowing or flowering of matter. It is an economy of excess and not containment (see “excess of energy” [306]). In particular, it focuses on the imagination as exceeding—though certainly not suppressing—knowledge derived from experience, and it is also simultaneously inscribed and dependent on signifying processes which disrupt access to logical meanings and definable objects. Excess is fundamental: in Thoreau’s view, nature is what is in excess of all things human. In a way, whereas imagination, in the first sequence, was part of and support for a larger humanist project, Thoreau here accepts the idea of an imaginative process that is dissociated from imaging (it is more difficult to picture the world evoked in the sandbank passage) and distinct from any easily definable or transparent meaning. If mapmaking appeared as a fundamentally humanist project, the sandbank passage foregrounds a form of imagination which recuperates matter and exceeds conceptual definition—but does certainly not negate meaning. Or, put slightly differently, it questions or suspends linguistic meaning, but not human significance. Such an approach points to the impossibility of fully grasping (i.e. synthesizing) our experience of the world, and thus ultimately serves as ground for Thoreau’s plea for nature at the end of the “Spring” chapter:

At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable... (*Walden* 317)

In the concluding sequence, which may also appear as the rationale for Thoreau's Journal, nature retains its otherness, as there is an acceptance of the gap between nature and consciousness: nature has been acknowledged as a force both within and outside the human, and, specifically, as what exceeds and disorients, but also animates, human language. And language in its materiality is precisely what in its turn prevents the assumption (or *Aufhebung*) of nature into human consciousness.

In his attempt at breaking out of closure, Thoreau fought to attain the purity of a *tabula rasa*, of a new beginning, of raw materials instead of prefabricated, inherited ideas and ideals. He seems to be eager to devour language itself raw, not just a woodchuck (210). His language here is irrational, even *unfathomable*, as opposed to the pond (which can be fathomed but also recuperated by reason and rationality, as the "ethical translation" indicates). Language is not just a tool but seems to play an active role and to reduce the degree of control exercised by the perceiver: in that sense in the sandbank passage Thoreau puts himself—i.e., the human—at risk: he accepts losing control of the real as part of one's accomplishment of one's humanity; he accepts the existence of nature as exceeding our control and our signifying process. The reader is not invited to mentally picture/image realistic attempts at mastering the real (such as mapmaking or ice-cutting), but to engage in a process of figuring new, hitherto unthought of and ungraspable relations to the physical world and forms of awareness. He thus puts himself at risk, insofar as he chooses to ignore all the safety devices which we construct for ourselves in order to slip past the dangers that are inherent in our being-in-the-world. The goal is not to communicate an abstractly figurative meaning, but to create through the linguistic material a heightened awareness of the environment, where the reader can experience the imaginary dimension of sensation. Far from threatening perception, this denial of transparency and linearity is precisely what enriches and enhances awareness.

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