

Life in the Woods: Towards an Ecocritical Reading of Thoreau's *Walden*

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Abstract: *Ecocriticism* is a comprehensible introduction to the study of the relationship between the physical environment and literature. Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relation between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty:xviii). Ecocriticism calls for a paradigm shift from the human-centric to the bio-centric, which transcends the mutually exclusive categories of centre and periphery. This paper examines Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as an ecocritical text applying the trope of pastoral tradition. The pastoral concept has become synonymous with a threefold literary tradition that includes the pursuit of the countryside as a refuge from the city, the contrast between urbanity and rurality, and the idealization of rural life that hides the hard realities of work. *Walden* may be read as the report of an experiment in transcendental pastoralism. Thoreau is considered to be the most important figure in shaping American preservationist and environmentalist thought. He is the patron saint of American environmental writing.

Keywords: Thoreau, Ecocriticism, Transcendental, Pastoralism, Man, Nature

Ecocriticism, as a theory of literary criticism, rises and begins to flourish in 1990s in Europe and America. Ecocriticism calls for a paradigm shift from the human-centric to the bio-centric, which transcends the mutually exclusive categories of centre and periphery. Just as Feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. Literary theory, in general, examines the relations between writers, texts and the world. In most literary theory “the world” is synonymous with society-the social sphere. Ecocriticism expands the notion of “the world” to include the entire ecosphere.

The term “Ecocriticism” was coined by William Rueckert in “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”, in 1978 but its antecedents stretch back much further. By ecocriticism Rueckert meant “the application of ecology and ecological concept to the study of literature” (Glotfelty xviii). Cheryll Glotfelty in her introduction to *The*

Ecocriticism Reader (1996) defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xix). Ecocriticism depends upon our willingness as readers to marginalize, if not completely overlook, precisely those aspects and meanings of texts that are traditionally privileged or valorized...

“what ecocriticism calls for, then, is a fundamental shift from one context of reading to another- more specifically, a movement from the human to the environmental...a humanism informed by an awareness of the more than-human”. (ISLE, 7.1, Winter 2000, 9-32).

Ecocriticism is dominated by the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) formed in 1992, and its journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) in 1993. Henry David Thoreau is the patron saint of American environmental writing. *Walden* (1854) remains Thoreau's most enduring work but also because it embeds much of the history of his thinking about the natural environment as it unfolded from his apprentice years to his full maturity. Thoreau's evocation of a nonhuman entity as a major presence, superior to any human being in the text, the narrator included, is an extraordinary event in the pre-modern American literary canon, matched only by Melville's white whale, whose interest to a much greater extent than *Walden Pond* hinges on its status as a figment of the quester's imagination. In *Walden*, Thoreau moves from Caustic criticism of American society to a lyrical intimacy with nature, teaching him how the spirit can redeem one from the evils of the other.

This paper examines Thoreau's *Walden* as an ecocritical text applying the trope of pastoral tradition. Infact the text itself is a best example of American pastoral literature. *Walden* may be read as the report of an experiment in transcendental pastoralism. *Walden* begins with the hero's withdrawal from society in the direction of nature. In form and feeling, indeed, Thoreau's book has much in common with the classic Virgilian mode. Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism* (2004) explores the idea of pastoral tradition in the study of ecocriticism. Garrard refers to Terry Gifford who distinguishes three kinds of pastoral: the specifically literary tradition, involving a retreat from the city to the countryside, more generally, any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban; and the pejorative sense in which pastoral implies an idealization of rural life that obscures the realities of labour and hardship. These three manifestations of the trope find expression in the text.

Since the Romantic Movement's poetic responses to the Industrial Revolution, pastoral has decisively shaped our constructions of nature. Even the science of ecology may have been shaped by pastoral in its early stages of development and we have seen that the founding text of ecocriticism, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), drew on the pastoral

tradition. No other trope is so deeply entrenched in Western culture, or so deeply problematic for environmentalism. With its roots in the classical period, pastoral has shown itself to be infinitely malleable for differing political ends, and potentially harmful in its tensions and evasions. However, its long history and cultural ubiquity mean that the pastoral trope must and will remain a key concern for ecocritics. In the second chapter entitled “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”; Thoreau describes the site as an ideal pasture, a real place which he transforms into an unbounded, timeless landscape of the mind. And he identifies himself with Damodara (Krishna) in his role as shepherd, and with a shepherd in a Jacobean song:

There was a shepherd that did live,
And held his thoughts as high
As were the mounts whereon his flocks
Did hourly feed him by. (Thoreau:132)

Though the book resembles the classic pastoral in form and feeling, its facts and images are drawn from the circumstances of life in nineteenth century America. By 1845, according to Thoreau, a depressing state of mind—he calls it “quite desperation”—has seized the people of Concord. The opening chapter, “Economy” is a diagnosis of this cultural malady. He is contending against a culture pervaded by a mechanistic outlook. It may well be conducive to material progress, but it also engenders deadly fatalism and despair. At the outset, then, Thoreau evokes the image of the machine to represent the whole tone and quality of Concord life or, to be more precise, anti-life:

Actually, the labouring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day; he cannot afford to sustain the manliest relations to men; his labour would be depreciated in the market. He has no time to be anything but a machine. (Thoreau:48)

The image of the railroad on the shore of the pond figures an ambiguity at the heart of Walden. Man-made power, the machine with its fire, smoke, and thunder, is juxtaposed to the waters of Walden, remarkable for their depth and purity and a matchless, indescribable colour—now light blue, now green, almost always pellucid. Thoreau focuses upon moments when pastoral peace is interrupted by an actual or metaphorical machine, as when the railroad impinges upon his retreat in Walden:

The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town, or adventurous country traders from the other side. (Thoreau:161)

“The ecocentric root of modern environmentalism,” writes Timothy O, Riordan, “is nourished by the philosophies of the romantic transcendentalists of mid-nineteenth-century America”. Wilderness, Roderick Nash writes, “was ultimately significant to Thoreau for its beneficial effect on thought”. In his Journal, Thoreau writes, “What is

Nature unless there is an eventful human life passing within her?" (Journal 5:472). In no other work does Thoreau employ ecocentric personifications as fully as in *Walden*. The title of the chapter "Solitude" is ironic because the speaker personifies the natural world so heavily that he is scarcely ever alone, but is "sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature". (Thoreau:177) Underscoring the idea of the kinship of living things, at the end of the book he writes that "the earth expresses itself in leaves" (Thoreau:354). In "Spring", Thoreau employs an extended personification in which the earth is a human body: "I know of nothing more purgative of winter fumes and indigestions. It convinces me that Earth is still in her swaddling clothes, and stretches forth baby fingers on every side" (Thoreau:357). Concluding this extended metaphor, he writes, "The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history...but living poetry" (Thoreau:357).

Readers of *Walden* learn much about Thoreau's attitude toward animals, which is certainly commensurable with those of many contemporary animal rights practitioners. Thoreau equates hunting with murder, and he employs a self-conscious anthropomorphism to express the kinship of animals with humans: "The hare in its extremity cries like a child. I warn you, mothers, that my sympathies do not always make the usual philanthropic distinctions" (Thoreau:357).

Through his life in the woods, living for the most part off the fruits of the land and deriving intellectual stimulation from plants and animals, Thoreau demonstrates that man can live successfully in the midst of nature. The animals give him companionship and accept him as a familiar part of their environment. Thoreau's "life in the woods" revealed ethical truths about the way humans should treat one another, truths that extended from human beings to include the ways we should treat all organic life: "No humane being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature which holds its life by the same tenure that he does." (Thoreau:260). Thoreau says that he would eat a rat with relish if it were necessary, but he also says that he loses a bit of self-respect every time he goes fishing.

"I have a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning, when nobody calls," (Thoreau:182); Thoreau says in the chapter called "Solitude." Thoreau favors this kind of contradictory statement that turns out not to be a contradiction once we realize that the "company" he describes is not human. His companions include all the chipmunks, squirrels, spiders, and wasps, even the plants that are flowering by his doorway or in the nearby field. Thoreau is our philosopher of being alone without being lonely. How could I ever be lonely, he argues in a well-known astronomical passage, when I find myself here in the middle of the Milky Way? A sudden change in the writer's point of view leaves the reader almost gasping for breath. His appeal to contemporary environmental thinkers is evident in all such shifts in point of view. My

home is not merely my house and my yard; my home is the river valley, the mountain range, the continent, the very planet I inhabit.

Henry David Thoreau, inspired by sitting by Walden Pond, observing carefully the natural world and carefully recording his observations, is one of the first modern ecocentric thinkers. Thoreau's 1851 statement, "in wildness is the preservation of the world" demonstrates an ecocentric view quite different from the American thought of his day. Thoreau rejected materialism, finding a much more satisfying existence in intimate relationship to the natural cycles of Walden Pond. Thoreau found more enjoyment and meaning from his relationship with the pond, as one can hear in this line from his book *Walden*:

...whenever I looked out on the pond it impressed me like a tarn high up on the side of a mountain, its bottom far above the surface of other lakes, and, as the sun arose, I saw it throwing off its nightly clothing of mist, and here and there, by degrees, its soft ripples or its smooth reflecting surface was revealed, while the mists, like ghosts, were stealthily withdrawing in every direction into the woods, as at the breaking up of some nocturnal conventicle. (Thoreau:130)

However, as Thoreau relates in the fourth chapter, "Sounds," he spent his time during his first summer at Walden hoeing beans, rather than reading, or sitting all morning watching and listening to the birds. That reverie is broken by the whistle and rumble of the passing train, which reminds Thoreau of the destruction of nature and country life by progress and industrialization. Living in the woods, Thoreau devotes his time to experiencing nature, as he describes in chapter nine, "The Ponds" -sometimes fishing with an elderly man who is hard-of-hearing and sometimes floating about in his boat playing his flute. He gives detailed descriptions of surrounding bodies of water Flint's Pond, White Pond, Goose Pond, and Fair-Haven Bay but finds Walden, with its pure clear water, to be the epitome of nature's offerings. The scenery of Walden is beautiful but humble. The pond is very clear, half a mile long and one and three-quarters of a mile around, in the middle of pine and oak woods and surrounded by hills 40-80 feet high in the southeast and 100-150 feet high in the east. One can look at the reflection of the landscape in the lake and literally see the wind in the ripples it creates. The fish jumping to catch bugs also create ripples, as do the water-bugs which skim over the surface on calm days. Even though trees have been cut down and the railroad runs nearby, the water is the same as Thoreau saw when young. He has changed while the pond remains perennially young. In this chapter, Thoreau uses minute descriptions of nature which would comprise the bulk of his later writing to reveal his understanding of human spirituality and its connection to nature. In his "Conclusion," Thoreau explains he left Walden because he had many more lives to live. He urges his readers to turn inward on immense spiritual journeys of self-discovery; to find fulfillment in nature rather than riches; and to avoid conformity and live his own life as he must.

Man as part of nature living in a society in which man in the form of railroads, factories, and other technical innovations had begun to tame and control nature, Thoreau counters the separation of man from society by conceiving of man as a part of nature. Through his life in the woods, living for the most part off the fruits of the land and deriving intellectual stimulation from plants and animals, Thoreau demonstrates that man can live successfully in the midst of nature. The animals give him companionship and accept him as a familiar part of their environment. The assertion that man is part of nature promotes Thoreau's suggestion that most people who be more intellectually fulfilled and spiritually aware away from the smothering cocoons of city and village life.

A follower of the Concord school of Transcendentalism and a good friend of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau expressed and clarified transcendentalist conception of nature as the embodiment of the divine. For him, the divine is most sublimely expressed in nature. He draws upon various Christian conceptions of the divine, as well as those from Eastern religions with which he is familiar, and recontextualizes them to create new meaning. For him, the role of God as creator of all of nature is most inspirational, and through this understanding, he expresses the Transcendentalist belief in existence of a spark of divinity in all men. At the same time, his effect on the tradition of nature writing, and the wider environmental movement, has been incalculable. Thoreau holds the idea firmly that only by giving up the anthropocentric thought can human save the planet and all things of creation on it. In the end Thoreau restores the pastoral hope to its traditional location.

Pastoral remains significant for an American Ecocriticism, oriented towards the revaluation of non-fictional nature writing, because it continues to supply the underlying narrative structure in which the protagonist leaves civilization for an encounter with non-human nature, then returns having experienced epiphany and renewal. American literature emerging in the nineteenth century in the midst of massive industrialization, can attempt to mediate between competing values, 'the contradiction between rural myth and technological fact'. (Leo Marx, p.354). On inspection it proves to be another embodiment of the American moral geography-a native blend of myth and reality. The hut beside the pond stands at the centre of a symbolic landscape in which the village of Concord appears on one side and a vast reach of unmodified nature on the other. As in most American fables, the wilderness is an indispensable feature of this terrain, and the hero's initial recoil from everyday life carries him to the verge of anarchic primitivism. "We need the tonic of wildness," (Thoreau:365); Thoreau explains, using the word "pasture" to encompass wild nature: "We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander" (Thoreau:366).

Timothy Morton is surely right that, as ecocritics, we now need to move

toward an ecology without nature. We cannot, however, conceive of an ecological ecocriticism without Thoreau. He is a nineteenth-century thinker for the twenty-first century. He is a secular high-priest for our time, perhaps for all time. His message to us now is a message of intellectual optimism but of environmental warning. Thoreau's writings became the touchstone for a new and deeper valuation of nature which led, in the decades after his death, to the beginnings of the environmental movement in the USA, starting with Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Muir. As Lawrence Buell writes, thousands of devotees have made pilgrimages to Walden Pond and Thoreau has become our 'environmental hero', the father of American nature writing.

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