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## Why Read Thoreau?

Some years ago, the political philosopher George Grant presented a paper entitled "Why Read Rousseau?" to a meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association in Halifax. The title of his paper reflected Nietzsche's influence, in particular the young philologist's challenge, in the first of his *Untimely Meditations*, to the apparent arbitrariness of modern scholarship. In that early writing, Nietzsche confronted the student working on Democritus with the question that continues to nag the modern academic: "Why not Heraclitus? or Philo? or Bacon? or Descartes? . . . and why especially a Greek, why not an Englishman, a Turk?" The following remarks consider why it is worth reading Thoreau, particularly amidst that post-everything mish-mash that defines contemporary Western culture.<sup>1</sup>

On one level, it hardly seems necessary to make the case for Thoreau. From the Hollywood luminaries and rock stars, who helped raise the millions of dollars necessary to save Walden Woods from developers, to the Thoreau Society itself, which now supports a web site on the Internet and an educational centre in a converted New England mansion, the Thoreau business is thriving as never before.<sup>2</sup> To some extent, interest in all things Thoreauvian reflects the ecological awareness so pervasive in the affluent West. Or, as one of the more acerbic American critics of this eco-culture recently noted, "[Thoreau] is the source of the loathsome self-righteousness that turns every kid who's ever thought 'a tree is better looking than a parking lot' into Jeremiah-of-the-Recycling-Bin" (O'Rourke 68).

Yet, Thoreau's popular appeal is only partially explained by our current veneration of all things wild and natural. His writings also tap those deeper springs of individualism and rebellion against the crush of mass society that are a more enduring part of North American culture. And with the globalization of green values and American popular culture, it isn't surprising that Thoreau's popularity now extends well beyond North America. There are hundreds of editions of *Walden* appearing in dozens of languages, and in Japan, which claims more members of the Thoreau Society than anywhere else outside North America, Henry's popularity is rivalled only by that of Lucy Maud Montgomery.<sup>3</sup>

Thoreau's popularity in the larger culture has its scholarly counterpart in the steady stream of academic studies of everything from Thoreau's reading habits, acquaintances and psychological make-up to his use of imagery and the structure of his prose. With a few notable exceptions however, rather less attention has been paid to Thoreau's ideas than to what Walter Harding has described as "belletristic"<sup>4</sup> studies. One reason for this relative neglect of Thoreau's message in favour of his writing is that the message of simple living seems not to lend itself to sophisticated analysis. *Walden* is, after all, addressed to his neighbors; it speaks the language of every person in a style that is as solid and simple as the cabin he built on the shores of the pond. In this respect, the work resists being transformed into the less accessible and more rarefied tongue of the specialist. Moreover, one can't help but think that Thoreau's very popularity among ordinary readers has tended to detract from his standing among scholars as a subtle and perceptive social critic.

Nonetheless, there is an important theoretical component to Thoreau's writing. Writing simply and clearly was for him more than just a means of making his message accessible to a larger public. For the journal writer who spends most of his time writing about himself, writing simply becomes an expression of living simply: "the best you can write will be the best you are" (qtd. in Krutch 265). However, as the example of Thoreau's life and craft suggest, neither the writing nor the living was particularly easy or spontaneous. Cutting through the alluvium of jargon, rhetoric, cant and academic obfuscation to achieve the simple clarity of an expression that drops like a stone to the ground, is not only a mark of good craftsmanship, it becomes an accomplishment of philosophical

significance: an essential element in that "economy of living [which] is synonymous with philosophy" (*Walden* 52).<sup>5</sup>

Thoreau expressed his life in his writing, not only in what he said but in how he said it. The result is an economy of style and substance that suggests an affinity with Nietzsche, that other great nineteenth-century thinker and stylist. In good Thoreauvian fashion, Nietzsche also repudiated any sort of systematic "philosophy," arguing that the will to a system reflected "a lack of integrity" (Nietzsche, *Twilight* 25). Instead of a philosophic system, we are offered thoughts out of season and untimely observations that sound out the hollowness of prevailing opinions, all packaged in a rigorously condensed style that forces the reader to "ruminate" rather than simply nod assent.

If Thoreau anticipated the economy of Nietzsche's prose, he also shared much of the substance of his "philosophy." In particular, he struggled no less than Nietzsche to overcome resentment, cynicism and naysaying through a deliberate effort to affirm, even to brag about, his life, as lustily as the crowing in *Ecce Homo*. In Thoreau's writing, this sense of irrepressible vitality is conveyed through arresting aphorisms about lives of quiet desperation or through vivid word pictures of thawing ice, or fishing by moonlight. And as with Nietzsche's more acid prose, these pictures of a world full of youthful optimism and energy serve to sharpen the critique of everything that enervates and depresses in the modern world of commerce, newspapers and fashion. The end result is that the new philosopher, whether Nietzsche's free spirit or Thoreau's independent one, is identified not so much with deep thinking as with deep living and an ability to express this vitality in an economy of style which says "in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book—what everyone else *does not* say in a book" (*Twilight* 104).

## II

Like Nietzsche, Thoreau advanced a philosophy which centres on life. In reaction to the forces within and outside that conspire to deaden our senses, he drew on the natural world to create powerful images of the vitality of life. The novelty of each day and season, the promise of a new dawn, the immortality of the pond, all call us to rise unspeakably early each morning, firm in the belief that the day is full of the promise of glorious and heroic deeds. As mentioned above, the resulting opposition

of nature to society, the former associated with vitality and the latter with lassitude and decadence, gives a distinctly critical dimension to this life affirmation. In other words, the counterpart of the Nietzschean embrace of life is seen in Thoreau's status as the consummate rebel, the marginal even irresponsible figure, refusing to be weighed down by the burdens of family, career, farm or even friends.

As Joyce Carol Oates observed not long ago, this image of the rebellious Thoreau has traditionally appealed more to the young and youthful in us than to the mature and the tenured, a fact which also helps to explain the relative neglect of his "philosophy" among academics (Oates 31). This image of Thoreau is more clearly visible in the first part of *Walden*, which comprised most of the first version, than it is in the later sections. The passages that convey this spirit of rebellion are among the most memorable in the book. There is, for instance, Thoreau's comment about living thirty years on the planet without having heard a single word of good advice from his elders, or his description of our mean and sneaking lives spent "lying, flattering, and voting." He reviles that fool's life which is little more than the weary tedium of getting a living, pitying those poor souls who creep down the road of life, pushing their barns, their 100 acres of land, pastures and wood lots ahead of them (*Walden* 5-9).

In refusing to accept that life which is nothing more than making a living, Thoreau becomes, in the first part of *Walden*, the advocate of an alternative to the emerging industrial economy of nineteenth-century New England.<sup>6</sup> Thoreau's alternative however, had little in common with the later proposals of the English Fabians, perhaps the last group of English readers attracted to Thoreau, or with the then-popular Fourierist experiments in communal living, embraced by those like his friend Bronson Alcott. Unlike these critics, the essential categories of Thoreau's alternative economy are closer to Nietzsche's glorification of the individual and life, than to the socialist preoccupation with the collective and wealth. For instance, Marx argued that the failures of capitalism arose from the inability of a system of production based upon private appropriation to realize its own promise of universal abundance. Private property is a structural limitation on the continued expansion of production and wealth. But Thoreau rejects the very promise of material abundance. Capitalism is not condemned in the language of capitalist

political economy but according to an alternative economy which recognizes that the true cost of a thing is measured not by labor but by "the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it" (*Walden* 31).

As surveyor of forest paths and "inspector of snowstorms," Thoreau assumes a radically different attitude towards wealth accumulation than either budding capitalists or hopeful socialists. Instead of producing more, he suggests consuming less, not three meals a day but two. Rather than developing more elaborate means of production, we need to design simpler ones. Thoreau advises working less, not more, six weeks a year probably being sufficient, at least for him. We should spend the better part of the day in a nobler enterprise than merely making a living. Walking, for instance, becomes in this economy a "sort of crusade" and we are advised to "go for the shortest walk, perchance in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return,—prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms" ("Walking" 593-96). Affirming life means repudiating an economy which sacrifices life for the security promised by commerce and industry, a promise seldom kept in any case since a man sits as many risks as he runs. In reality, what passes for security is little more than dull conformity and monotonous routine carried out in the conviction that this so-called life is the only way (*Walden* 11). Accordingly, we are advised to keep accounts of a different sort of profit and loss, weaving baskets we can afford not to sell, and assiduously going about our private business of improving the nick of time and notching it on our stick.

In contrast to the busy tedium of that "restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century" (*Walden* 329), nature offers to Thoreau a picture of genuine vitality: "We know too well what [we] shall have for our Saturday's dinner, but each day's feast in Nature's year is a surprise to us . . ." (*Journal* xii, 96). While there is a predictable quality to what passes for life in the world of newspapers and fashion, "nature is constantly original and inventing new patterns, like a mechanic in his shop" (i, 332). Paradoxically, such vitality is reflected in the predictable cycle of the seasons that offers the assurance of boundless energy, novelty and new life from old: "where a forest was cut down last winter, another is springing up by its shores as lustily as ever" (*Walden* 193). Evidence of such vitality is even supplied by the pond itself, perennially

young with not one permanent wrinkle "after all its ripples" (193). While in society all change that is not just more of the same seems miraculous, in nature, genuine change "is a miracle which is taking place every instant" (11).

Rebellion against conventional society is the counterpart of Thoreau's affirmation of life. This connection between refusal and affirmation is reflected in his lifelong efforts to become more familiar with that world far removed from post office and telegraph: "I wish," he wrote in his journal, "to get the Concord, the Massachusetts, the America, out of my head and be sane a part of every day" (ix, 208). It is also the basis of one of Joseph Wood Krutch's many keen insights into Thoreau's importance. Krutch noted that while Thoreau was out of step with his contemporaries in many respects, none of his many eccentricities "was more unusual than his happiness and his inability to regret it." The month before his death from tuberculosis, Thoreau's sister, Sophia, wrote in a letter that it was not possible to be sad in his presence. And even when illness prevented him from walking, he wrote to a young admirer that he was "enjoying existence as much as ever" and regretted nothing. In this respect Thoreau's rebellion against the way most men live appears less in his complaints about the post office and railroad than in his determination to affirm the goodness of life. Sam Staples, the jailer during Thoreau's famous overnight stay in the county jail, remarked that at the end he "never saw a man dying with so much pleasure and peace." Rebellion as life affirmation is the clear message of *Walden*, sounding as it does, "not a vulgar note of defiance but the mere effervescence of life" (xi, 191) and reflecting the writer's determination to love his life "to the very core and rind" (qtd. in Krutch 245-47).

The determination to live fully in the present is not as easy as it sounds. For one thing it requires a degree of faith in the beneficence of life which is not easily sustained in the midst of the experience of life's pain and suffering. And if such faith is difficult to sustain at any time, it is especially so in a society increasingly driven by the twin demands of technology and commerce. We are absorbed into a technological fate that "never turns aside" (*Walden* 118) driving us along every path but our own. This suggests that the familiar image of the rebellious Thoreau, easily dismissed by the serious as adolescent and irresponsible, needs to

be supplemented by this other image of one determined to live by faith rather than succumb to the predictable routine of modern life.

This notion that technology drives out that faith necessary to live well is captured in a comment by Stanley Cavell that, for Thoreau, "we live by fate because we are determined not to live by faith" (Cavell 96-97). Living fully requires that we resist the pull of a technological fate symbolized by post office, telegraph and railroad, and such resistance demands that we "trust a good deal more than we do" and cure ourselves of our "incessant anxiety and strain" (*Walden* 11). The alternative to this faith appears in that technological destiny represented in the 1840s by Cunard steamers in Boston Harbor, telegraph lines running beside Walden pond and the railway line newly built from Boston through Concord—fare \$.50 (Richardson 137-39). Thoreau describes those who embrace this destiny with such alacrity and think it "essential that the Nation have commerce, and export ice, and talk through a telegraph, and ride 30 miles an hour" as like the sleepers supporting the tracks, unaware that "we do not ride on the railroad, it rides upon us" (*Walden* 92).

Living deliberately involves rejecting that commercial and technological destiny we have created for ourselves, a fate which carries us along unthinkingly in the blind routine of business and busyness. In its place we need to have faith in the beneficence of the natural world and in our ability to meet our genuine needs and dispense with the rest. Much of *Walden* is an attempt to justify this faith, showing in the first section, how easy it is to acquire those essentials of life necessary to maintain our vital heat. Food, shelter and clothing, if kept simple, are as easy to obtain as the equally nourishing spiritual food of autumn leaves, pond ice or wild apples. In each case, the nature represented by a spring morning or fishing by moonlight is clearly beneficial. It meets our spiritual and physical needs and answers to our moral conceptions.

The images evoked by this somewhat user-friendly view of nature are not just those of beauty and goodness but also of reliability and security. As against the false security promised by technology and business, the predictable cycle of the seasons like the passage of a day offers an effective counterpoint to the ephemeral and unreliable flux of society. Nature represents all that is solid and reliable in the midst of the bustling life of fashion, newspapers, technology, and opinion (see Cavell 69-74).

Like the solid foundation on which he builds his cabin, Thoreau sees the need:

to work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*. . . . (*Walden* 97-98)

The solidity of the world that is not human becomes the rock on which to rest that faith necessary to live fully in the present, free from anxiety or regret. It is the permanence of the pond which, despite the work of ice-cutters and tree-cutters, remains eternal: "The water laves the shore as it did a thousand years ago" (186). This appeal of the solidity of the factual also helps to explain the work of the journal-keeper documenting the seasonal changes, measuring the thickness of the ice or drawing the shape of a leaf. These ordinary facts convey something of the solidity of a world that can be measured, dated and drawn. And it is precisely this solidity that offers reassurance in the dependability of the natural world as against the ever-shifting ground of opinion.

### III

This image of a bountiful and reliable nature supporting our faith in the goodness of life seems to conflict with what are for Thoreau the equally important associations of nature with the wild, capricious and unpredictable. In his view we are hungry not only for the security of a provident nature, but even more for the wild caprice of an order which transgresses our self-imposed limits. In one sense this need for the "tonic of wildness" finds expression in the need for mystery. While we work to find a solid bottom to things, to measure the depth of all our ponds, "we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable." It is significant in this regard that while he spent his time surveying the land and fathoming the ponds, Thoreau also required that the "land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable" (*Walden* 317-18). In the same measure that nature answers to our need for a solid foundation to life, it also appeals to this equally authentic need for mystery, novelty and an often dangerous unpredictability.



Accounts of this wild nature which is not so clearly for humanity, are found in Thoreau's descriptions of the Maine woods or of the ocean off Cape Cod. Mount Katahdin represented for him a less predictable and wilder nature than that associated with the fields, ponds and rivers around Concord. As a recent critic noted it was a nature "powerful, gigantic, awful and beautiful . . . at best indifferent to human life" (Richardson 181). The same is true of the ocean, described in *Cape Cod* as "naked Nature, inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man." It is "a wilderness reaching round the globe, wilder than a Bengal jungle and fuller of monsters." The wildness of the ocean is seen in its unpredictability. In contrast to the seasonal cycles that offer a kind of comfort and security to life in the woods around Concord, the ocean appears capricious. At times, it is as peaceful as a placid harbour yet "it will toss and tear the rag of a man's body like the father of mad bulls. . . ." Appropriately, Thoreau introduces his account of the Cape with a description of a shipwreck, which seems as indifferent to the victims of the tragedy as the sea itself (*Cape Cod* 144, 218-20).

Thoreau was obviously more comfortable wandering along the banks of the Concord River than on the beaches of Cape Cod or in the Maine woods. The nature of a tranquil forest at dawn evoked more from him than the bloody battle of tooth and claw and in general he preferred ponds to oceans, fields to mountains and even botany to zoology. At the same time, in striving to embrace life, Thoreau anticipates Nietzsche's affirmation of a nature that is apparently beyond good and evil. While it is easy to enjoy nature when it confirms our moral notions, it is more difficult to acknowledge that being is good even when it seems to transgress these moral limits. This is the point of Thoreau's observations in a letter he wrote in November 1860: "What is and is not ashamed to be is good"; "Nature is goodness crystallized." This is a goodness far removed from what he described as "all mere sentimental, warm blooded, short lived, soft hearted moral goodness."<sup>7</sup>

The tonic of the wild appears closer to home in the goodness of a November day, a hard winter, a rough sea or even in wild apples which in the house seem sour but "a bracing walk makes sweet" ("Wild Apples" 293). As for seasons, November is arguably the worst:

bare frozen ground with pale brown or straw-colored herbage, a strong, cold, cutting northwest wind which makes me seek to cover my ears, a

perfectly clear and cloudless sky. . . . This month taxes a walker's resources more than any. . . . You can hardly screw up your courage to take a walk when all is thus tightly locked or frozen up and so little is to be seen in field or wood. (*Journal* x, 202-3)

Despite this, Thoreau proclaims the need to sing winter, arguing that of all seasons its fruits are the finest. As the afternoons grow short, we grow pensive; as nature's crop falls and freezes we are forced to draw more on our own inner resources. "Life is reduced to its lowest terms" (iii, 352). "Now for the oily nuts of thought which you have stored up" (iii, 112). Compared with this "harvest of thought," "all previous harvests are stubble . . . mere fodder and green crop" (vi, 85).

The idea that fall and winter bring out the best in us is a recurring theme in the *Journal*. Writing of a late October day in 1857 with the "sky covered with continuous cheerless looking slate coloured clouds" and the fields with pale brown grass and bare gray maples, Thoreau describes the pure white light of a brief sunset as the clouds break for a moment at dusk. This event, like everything in nature, is a prompting to thought. In this case it encourages the recognition that it is only "at the 11th hour, late in the year [that] we have visions of the life we might have lived. No perfectly fair weather ever offered such an arena for noble acts" (x, 132-33).

The idea that living fully, unencumbered and reflectively, involves a willingness to embrace the cruellest months and the harshest realities conjures up those Nietzschean images of severity and self-overcoming characteristic of the truly free spirit. For Nietzsche, saying yes to life meant accepting a measure of hardness, even cruelty in one's evaluations. One must become used to living alone, on high mountains, among ice and rocks, "hyperborean," and severe, especially towards oneself. There are intimations of this attitude in the well-known image of Thoreau as cold and aloof, showing little sympathy for the ordinary life of domestic responsibility. Hawthorne's son Julian regarded Thoreau as "bitter, selfish, jealous and morbid" and a more recent critic described his "implacable humorlessness, his fierce concentration on the themes of purity and elevation, [and] his scorn for ordinary human weakness."<sup>8</sup>

If there was a hard edge to Thoreau's personality which often made him appear austere and unfeeling, these same traits can also be found in his writings. One example is the description of the impoverished Irish

family of John Field in *Walden*. Confronted with the desperate poverty of this immigrant family housed in a leaky shack and scraping out a living "bogging" a neighbour's field, Thoreau can only suggest a lifestyle change. If they would only eat less and leave off using tea, coffee, butter, milk and meat, they wouldn't have to work so hard to supply their needs and could spend more time fishing. And as a bonus they wouldn't require such expensive boots. Because they are too dim to grasp this common-sense advice, the immigrant family with their "wading webbed bog-trotting feet," are portrayed as destined for both physical and spiritual poverty. It seems unlikely that the Fields will ever find getting a living to be the sport it is for Thoreau. Thoreau's flippant, even supercilious response to the desperate need of his neighbors reveals a less than endearing side of his personality. Yet whatever one thinks of his apparent contempt for charity and ordinary human compassion, it is at least consistent with the argument he advances about the need to say yes to life. Pity is a depressing sentiment in the Nietzschean sense that it depresses vitality and nurtures the suffering spirit. In this respect, the philanthropist is seen as perpetuating or even promoting the misery he claims to alleviate. Rather than consoling the fears of the weak, Thoreau recommends confirming their hopes through the example of our own "simple and irrepressible satisfaction with the gift of life" (*Walden* 78). One thinks here of Thoreau's own happiness in the face of recurring illness, which again anticipates Nietzsche's irrepressible joy in a life plagued by crippling headaches, sickness and eventual dementia. In each case, the claim is that pity, no less than self-pity, is an obstacle to the affirmation of life which in its fullest sense is beyond easy moral evaluation.

Thoreau's writing provides a number of other examples of what appears to be callous indifference to the suffering of others. From his delightful observations on the ant war to the cheerful effect of watching the vulture feeding on carrion, Thoreau's acceptance of life reveals a hard edge. He writes: "I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another." At such times when it has "rained flesh and blood" we are forced to conclude that "compassion is a very untenable ground" (*Walden* 318). This same streak of callous indifference appears in his response to the fate of those Irish immigrants drowned in the wreck off Cape Cod.

Thoreau justifies his disregard by asking: "If this was the law of Nature, why waste any time in awe or pity?" (*Cape Cod* 13). If the Higher Laws section of *Walden* reads like a caricature of pious New England Transcendentalism, it is worth remembering Thoreau's own response to this aspect of his work: "what offends me most in my compositions is the moral element in them. . . . Strictly speaking, morality is not healthy" (*Journal* i, 316). Because much of life is simply too hard and too cold to be wrapped in the warm softness of pity and self pity, conventional morality proves inadequate for one determined to love life to the very "core and rind."

For Thoreau, as for most people, the hardest thing to accept in life was the loss of what is best in it, whether it was the loss of his brother, his friends or the nature that he remembered from his youth. If he was in fact born just in the nick of time, this is because he could still recall the comparatively wilder nature of his youth. Living on the eve of the civil war when the railroad and telegraph were still novelties, he could still remember when Penobscot Indians camped on the shores of the Concord river. He knew from experience that "the era of the Wild Apple will soon be past," and was struck by the fact that "all the great trees and beasts, fishes and fowl are gone" (viii, 220-21). "Few and fewer pigeons visit us every year" and the evil days were coming when "walking over the surface of God's earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman's grounds" ("Wild Apples" 304; "Walking" 602, 627). Soon, even picking huckleberries would be illegal. Two years before he died he wrote: "Thank God men cannot as yet fly and lay waste the sky as well as the earth" (*Journal* xii, 387). In each of these cases there is an awareness of loss that is as much an obstacle to the irrepressible satisfaction with life as is the knowledge that life is hard. In particular, the barely perceptible but seemingly inexorable loss of the natural world, was creating a situation in which it would be impossible to live well.

The experience of loss was undoubtedly the most serious obstacle to Thoreau's sense of well-being. He never really overcame the death of his brother and later, in 1854, he vented his rage over Massachusetts's support for slavery by writing of having lost a country to injustice. Yet even these experiences of loss cannot be seen as unequivocal evils. As what George Grant once described as an "intimation of deprivation," loss can provide an image, however fleeting, of the good of a world at risk (*Technology &*

*Empire* 143). In fact, it was precisely because he was so immediately affected by its gradual disappearance that Thoreau was able to write so passionately about the natural world. Living in the midst of a technological destiny, it is difficult to recognize the loss of what is outside that destiny. The importance of Thoreau's account is that it allows for a re-discovery of the sense of the loss of a world which is not man, which doesn't answer to our preconceptions, which invigorates precisely because it is wild, and unfathomable, and which gives a solidity and assurance to life. Perhaps this notion of the goodness of loss is best seen in a passage from the Village section of *Walden* about being lost in the woods. Only when we are lost, Thoreau writes, do we fully "appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature." In fact, only when "we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves" (171). One of the great achievements of *Walden* is to rekindle in us this sense of loss.

#### IV

One of the standard criticisms of Thoreau is that his representations of nature are as inauthentic and contrived as his own life. Where *Walden* champions the virtues of simplicity, and naturalness, neither quality accurately describes Thoreau's life and his art. If his daily walks along the railway tracks to town for family dinners belie the image of the rugged individualist making his own way on his own terms, so, one could argue, is the nature of *Walden* less a description than an artistic creation. The craft involved in recapturing the qualities of wildness in a nature already tamed by two hundred years of cultivation is evident from the nine years and seven sets of revisions necessary to construct the account. In the same way that Thoreau's Harvard education and scholarly discipline distanced him from the "animal man" represented by his Canadian woodchopper friend Alek Therien, so is the nature of *Walden* richer than the unmediated impressions of the casual observer.

The distance between Thoreau's injunction to live simply and the actual complexities of his own life, like that separating the rich complexities of *Walden* from the simple pleasures of Walden, is bridged by the realization, made at the outset of these remarks, that living simply is no easier than writing simply. On this point, Thoreau goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the task of simply attending to nature involves a serious discipline: the discipline of "looking always at what is to be seen"

(*Walden* 111). And if *Walden* is the product of a disciplined and sustained creative attention to the world, this same attentiveness is no less than what the work recommends to the reader. Being aware and awake to the life around us is precisely what, some years later, Nietzsche described as learning how to see. He suggested that this was the first task of any real education and as such, the first step toward the development of a genuine culture. Learning to see involves "habituating the eye to repose, to patience, to letting things come to it; learning to defer judgement, to investigate and comprehend the individual case in all its aspects."<sup>9</sup> Such attentiveness requires among other things, what is commonly called strong will power, a learning how not to react immediately to every stimulus. In the same way, Thoreau's reading of the nature around Concord involved a patient and painstaking attention to detail.

In the sense just described, *Walden* is an account of a life spent reading "in the high sense," which probably explains why reading is the only activity that merits a separate chapter in the book. Far from being a passive or sedentary undertaking, reading well is described as "a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem." "We must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line." Like Nietzsche's model of a genuine education, reading in this sense stands in opposition to the prevailing values of a society preoccupied with the bustle of commerce, news, and technology. This explains Thoreau's characterization of the courageous and adventurous reader out of step with the times, sustained only by faith in the power of the text to make a difference to his life (*Walden* 101).

Thoreau's comment that "I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans" (111) suggests a similarity between the two activities. Later, in the Bean Field section there is a further development of this idea that the Herculean labour associated with the determination to "know beans" is not unrelated to that life of deliberation associated with reading the classic texts. Reading an ancient text often brings to light artifacts and relics of a more heroic past, just as the plough uncovers those arrowheads and "ashes of unchronicled nations" (158) that lie just beneath the surface. And where farmers are forever on the lookout for whatever weeds, woodchucks and weather might prevent a good harvest, readers must be attentive to the obstacles thrown up by modern life that easily distract attention from the task at hand and weaken the resolve to reap the

harvest of thought. Finally, like farmers, serious readers are sustained only by faith in the promise that their labours will be rewarded with a good crop. Hoeing beans involves studying nature and this is no less an education than reading books. Each represents a cultivation of the self that evokes the old Roman affinity of culture to agriculture according to which husbandry was "a sacred art" and it was thought that "they who cultivated [the earth] led a pious and useful life" (165-66).

Cultivation is education not only in the discipline it requires, but also in that the cultivator works with the oldest and noblest of texts, nature itself. And if the heroic books are dead to degenerate times this is no less true of the book of nature. Just as the casual reader of novels is dead to the call of new life, so the old farmer digs the same holes and plants the same seeds year after year "as if there were a fate in it." Like the casual visitor to the pond or those "whose time was all taken up getting a living or keeping it" such readers fail to see the opportunities available to live a different kind of life. Afraid to try new crops and new adventures they turn like the reader of novels to the "nine thousandth tale about Zebulon and Sephronia, and how they loved as none had ever loved before" (*Walden* 105).

The reward of reading well, whether nature or books, is the cultivation of oneself. The knowledge acquired by the attentive reader serves life, precisely in the way Nietzsche argued that the role of a genuine education is not to provide objective "knowledge stones" which rattle in the belly, but genuine nourishment. So in the *Journal* for June 1857, Thoreau writes that "our thoughts and sentiments answer to the revolutions of the seasons, as two cog wheels fit into each other" (ix, 406-7). As a good book prompts a response in the attentive reader, so paying attention to nature rewards us with new thoughts and a new outlook on life: to the scholar the daily work of "making the earth say beans," "yields a classic result" (*Walden* 157).

The purpose of Thoreau's efforts in the bean field, like that of his reading and rambling, was to establish a certain familiarity or intimacy with that other world beyond the drudgery of the whole "trivial Nineteenth Century." Whether turning to nature, to Homer or to Hindu scripture, Thoreau demanded a knowledge that served life, a knowledge that was not objective but personal and intimate. Such knowledge is closer to poetry than to science because poetry, "implies the whole truth"



(qtd. in Krutch 266), the emotional, spiritual as well as the cognitive dimension of experiencing something. To achieve this sort of intimacy means to experience the world in a new way, to be changed by the knowledge, just as some have been changed by reading a book. These days it is no longer certain, "how many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book" (*Walden* 107).

In any event, this is the kind of knowledge Thoreau aspired to in his own reading of the world around Concord: an intimate familiarity which affected him as passionately as poetry. At least this is what his own writing suggests of his experience. And it is perhaps not stretching a point to suggest that the effect of reading *Walden* can emulate to some degree Thoreau's experience of reading *Walden*. *Walden* the book captures something of *Walden* the pond so that "we the reader see, hear, smell, taste vicariously through Thoreau"—"the leaves rustle and the water ripples along his pages" (see Harding, *Handbook* 133, 180). In this sense the book is the prose poem that conveys to the reader something of that "fusing of thought and feeling" that Thoreau worked to achieve at *Walden* pond. As such, it almost serves to refute the claim made in that bit of doggerel that was transcribed from the *Journal* into a *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*: "My life hath been the poem I would have writ, but I could not both live and live to utter it."

## V

I've touched on several reasons for paying more attention to Thoreau's writings. In the first place, his vivid prose anticipates that Nietzschean critique of modern life that is beyond ideology and to some degree beyond good and evil, a critique in the name of life, health and vitality. Standing apart from Nations—"Tartars and Huns and China men" (Thoreau, "Life without Principle" 646-47)—apart from that massive institution he called mankind, nature offers lessons in how to live, not conservatively in the past or for the sake of some utopian future, but forever in the present. Whether it is the autumn leaves teaching us how to die or the earliest spring birds confronting the late snows full of youthful optimism, nature for Thoreau offers a spectacle of undiminished vitality, in sharp contrast to the desperation and anxiety of "those who are said to live in Concord."



At the same time, Thoreau was keenly aware of how difficult it is to adopt this apparently easy, even adolescent counsel of living fully in the present. It depends on faith in a world beyond our control, but such faith is the first casualty in that drive to control nature and to create for ourselves a technological destiny. In addition, one needs to develop a measure of severity and hardness to accept a nature that does not always conform to our moral judgments. Occasions when the wild and the good part company and moral limits are casually ignored demand the courage to saunter off the beaten track of conventional ideas of how to live. They require a certain "extra-vagance" of thought and judgement. Just as the simple task of walking appears as a noble crusade to the holy land, so does Thoreau's new economy of simple living demand similar Nietzschean qualities of hardness and self-overcoming. To repeat, living simply is no easier than writing simply; both demand the discipline of attentiveness and perseverance and a measure of isolation necessary for independent judgment.

Reading the classic texts in their original language, like reading nature, is difficult at any time but especially so in the modern context of commerce and technology. Not only do these obscure the meaning of the original text, they also dull the sensibility that might enable us to be receptive to its meaning. This notion that modern life eclipses both the reality of nature and our ability to appreciate it, helps to explain a certain sense of nostalgic loss associated with reading Thoreau. It is a sense that has been beautifully captured in comment by the great American essayist E. B. White:

the innocence and serenity of his summer afternoons are enough to burst the remembering heart, and one gazes back upon that pleasing interlude—its confidence, its purity, its deliberateness—with awe and wonder as one would look upon the face of a child asleep. (32-33)

At first glance this appears to be a very un-Thoreauvian response to a Thoreau who was never asleep and who refused to succumb to sadness over lost innocence and youthful promise. Yet loss, as previously mentioned is an important aspect of Thoreau's own response to nature. The struggle to express the experience of promise and vitality evoked by a bright spring morning, is a struggle against the loss of such an authentic experience. Thoreau was painfully aware that the engines of the modern

fate were making such an experience increasingly problematic, even for him. He worked to recapture a nature which was already slipping away both literally and in our awareness of it: fewer birds visited the pond each spring and there were fewer people who noticed. In other words, loss is an important element of the picture portrayed in *Walden*, even the loss of that very exuberance that Thoreau tried to recapture in his writing. This is precisely what White's experience of reading Thoreau's text reflects, a sense of the irreplaceable value of what we are losing.

Finally, if the effect of reading Thoreau is awe and wonder that anyone could see a world so full of promise and confidence, then this experience captures, to some degree at least, Thoreau's own wonder at the confident vitality so much in evidence in the world of non-human nature. Yet as the lesson of Thoreau suggests, such wonder need not encourage cynicism over our own mean and sneaking lives, or even despair over the empty space in the sky left by a fallen tree; rather, it can lead to a heightened awareness of the importance of what is missing from our own lives. Awareness of what we have lost can serve as the first step on the road to recovering it. In this respect, reading *Walden* can be a substitute for going there, provided we read his noble text in the same spirit that he read his, patiently, attentively and receptive to the call of new life contained within it.

## NOTES

1. See Grant, "Why Read Rousseau?" and Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* 31.
2. For news on this and other developments in the Thoreau industry, see Myerson.
3. See *The Thoreau Society Bulletin*, Autumn, 1993 and Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook*, ch. 5.
4. See Harding's comments on Harold Bloom's *Henry David Thoreau* in *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* (Summer 1987).
5. *Journal* entries and references to *Walden* given in the text are to *The Journal of H. D. Thoreau*, and *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley.
6. See Neufeldt, esp. chs. 5 and 6.
7. From a letter to H. G. O. Blake, 4 Nov. 1860 in Krutch 213. For a discussion of soft and hard primitivism in Thoreau, see Richardson 179-182.

8. Qtd. in Harding, *Days* 309. Geoffrey O'Brien notes Thoreau's "disturbing indifference to other people" which he finds especially evident in *Cape Cod*; see his review essay "Thoreau's Book of Life" 50. For a contrary assessment of what Harding described as Thoreau's sunniest book, see Paul Theroux's introduction to *Cape Cod*. Views similar to those of O'Brien can be found in Hochfield, "Anti-Thoreau"; and Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*. Harding blames Emerson for encouraging this image of Thoreau as a "cold, almost inhuman, stoic": see *A Thoreau Handbook* 22. For some of Thoreau's own reflections on this side of his personality, see *Journal* iii, 146-50.
9. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* 65. Nietzsche claimed that the art of reading has been so thoroughly unlearned by modern men as to make his writings incomprehensible to most readers; see his Preface to *On The Genealogy of Morals*.

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