

The Thoreau Society Annual Gathering, Concord, MA, July 6-10, 2016
Finding the Extraordinary in the Ordinary: Henry D. Thoreau as Proto-ecologist, Reformer, and Visionary

Albena Bakratcheva
New Bulgarian University

Thoreau's "Sympathy with Intelligence"

In his last years Henry Thoreau was convinced that "The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence." "I do not know, he wrote, that this higher knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before—a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun." These lines from "Walking" seem to capture in a nutshell Thoreau's mature thinking: Thoreau had already attained new kind of visibility beyond the visible, a new kind of knowledge beyond the sophisticated familiarity with visible things, a novel, perhaps more radical, transcendence able to counterbalance the minute, microscopic attention to details in nature and make the ordinary extraordinary.

In 1836, some twenty years before Thoreau wrote the above lines and exactly one hundred and eighty years before our time, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* was published to express what was already in the air – the need for a newly established correspondence between mind and nature, for "an original relation to the universe". Emerson's word was *vision*, or a newly achieved perceptiveness for nature as always wearing "the colors of the spirit". A few years later Emerson will describe his Poet as the *Seer* and Namer, in whose *eyes* America is a poem and "will not wait long for metres". The visual arts were moving in the same direction, with John James Audobon's paintings of American birds widely known at the time and the Hudson River School having already established the American landscape as an artistic object in its own right. In fact, its founder, Thomas Cole, saw a close relation between

poetry and painting, asserting that “to walk with nature as a poet is the necessary condition of a perfect artist”. Henry Thoreau preferred words to paints (never actually developing any taste for the visual arts), but he turned walking with nature into a mode of life – poetical, scientific, “simplified”, true. And this true living with nature led him to the wish to speak *for* nature, to become nature’s own voice against all human threats. Cole’s walks with nature did also lead him to the understanding that nature should not be devastatingly used only but defended and preserved – just as it happened with Thoreau and a couple of decades later, with John Muir and John Burroughs, and, still later, with Aldo Leopold, or Gary Snyder, or Edward Abbey, or many other nature writers. By focusing on some of the major aspects of the multi-dimensional and seemingly endless environmental discourse of American culture, I’d like to discuss here nature-awareness as a distinctively American phenomenon, which led to the emergence and flourishing of nature writing in the US, as well as to the occasions for the great anniversaries we celebrate this year - the creation of the US National Park Service in 1916 and of Baxter State Park in 1931.

Unquestionably, in 1836 Emerson’s *Nature* put the clear-cut beginning of this all. Emerson’s idea of “correspondences” remained always attractive for Henry Thoreau, even when his scientific interests seemed to be pushing him in the opposite direction: he would capture with great precision the fragmentariness of observation, while remaining faithful to his Transcendentalist poetics; he would make distinctions while drawing correspondences, always thorough in his ability to perceive and transmute beauty into words. Emerson’s influence on John Muir also remained most powerful throughout his life: on excursions into the back country of Yosemite, he traveled alone, carrying “only a tin cup, a handful of tea, a loaf of bread, and a copy of Emerson”; and he usually spent his evenings sitting by a campfire in his overcoat, reading Emerson under the stars. “If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars”, Emerson had said in *Nature* and Muir stuck to that faithfully. For him, just as for John Burroughs, Emerson was the first American literary star to fill their firmaments. Both were Emersonians before they were Thoreauvians, as Laurence Buell points out, and “both became what posterity has called Thoreauvians without original intent to follow Thoreau as a model, even though their mature writing often echoes his”: Burroughs

turned from Emersonian essays to nature writing in order to establish his individuality from the master, and Muir probably did not absorb Thoreau deeply until after he had established his life as hut-dwelling Yosemite naturalist and met Emerson (*Environmental Imagination*, 322-3). The three men followed their own paths towards environmental conscience and, consequently, nature writing, sharing the inspiration they inhaled from Emerson's work.

"I wish to speak a word for Nature," Thoreau proclaims with eloquent fervor in the beginning of his late essay "Walking"; "I wish to make an extreme statement," he repeats emphatically, and sets out to contrast the "absolute freedom and wildness" of nature with the "freedom and culture merely civil," conceiving of "man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society" (*TE* 117). The essay is, among other things, an experiment in which Thoreau's continuously evolving thought attempts to balance his scientific observation of nature with the Emersonian Transcendentalist notion of illumination in nature, both for the sake of man as part of nature and for nature's own sake. The very idea of "walking" is precisely such "balancing" concept: "walking" is simultaneously a "profession" and an "art". "Walking" demands faith "in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows," and depends on the spiritual "subsistence" provided by "the swamps which surround my native town," Thoreau writes, adding "botany cannot go farther than tell me the names of the shrubs" (130-131). In these words, again, Thoreau is not drawing a contrast between the knowledge of natural science and the knowledge which transcends science, but is trying to combine the two. He adds depth to the former while abandoning himself with exaltation to the latter, drawing from the dry names of botany, from the informative accuracy of "the high blueberry, panicked andromeda, lambkill, azalea, and rhodora," the sublimity of spiritual health which walking among woods and fields provides.

A couple of decades later John Muir wrote: "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into the trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves". This meant glorifying nature for both man's sake and her own sake.

Such was the disposition with which Thoreau set out to “speak a word for Nature” and “make an extreme statement.” What is more, he sets out to speak not so much “about” nature but “on her part” and in her defense. It should be kept in mind that “Walking” was given as a lecture repeatedly before its actual publication in printed form. The essay’s flaming rhetoric bears the intense affective power of the orator speaking in front of an audience. Thoreau in “Walking” is simultaneously the voice of nature and its defender.

“When we walk, we *naturally* go to the fields and woods: what would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a mall?”(120) Thoreau believes that there is only one “right direction” which is “natural” or faithful to nature (which does not betray nature), and in following this direction, “walking” invariably leads to Wildness. Nature’s cause is the cause of Wildness, because “life consists with Wildness.” What is more, “not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him” (130). The need for wild nature, “not yet subdued to man,” is a matter of essential independence, as well as essential dependence for Thoreau. He pleads for the preservation of wildness for its own sake, elevating its value to being synonymous with life as a whole, but, at the same time, he points to man’s continuing need for the unspoiled, independent, uncultured, overflowing and vigorous otherness of nature. Man needs untamed nature. Whereas *Walden* demonstrates Thoreau’s shift in thinking from homocentrism to ecocentrism, “Walking,” for its part, expresses and defends his radical commitment to the preservation of nature, upholding the ecological cause for its human implications as well – wild nature becomes the guarantee of man’s physical but also, and above all, spiritual and intellectual health. And the reverse argument is also suggested in the essay: the spoilage of the wilderness, its subjugation into gardens and malls leads to decline – both physical and, above all, spiritual: Thoreau sees in the cutting of woods the destruction of thought.

In his essay “The American Forests”, published some thirty years after Thoreau’s “Walking” and republished a hundred and fifteen years ago as part of *Our National Parks* in 1901, John Muir makes this same connection: “The forests of America, he writes, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best he ever planted God has cared for these trees ... but he

cannot save them from fools, - only Uncle Sam can do that". This is a claim towards nature preservation already very specific, indeed. But it is a very poetic claim too; and it is exactly here that Muir comes closest to Thoreau. For when Muir's prose echoes Thoreau's, it is not so much because Muir had deliberately remade himself in Thoreau's image, but rather that he used Thoreau's vocabulary as kindred expression of the holiness of the pristine places of the earth (*Environmental Imagination*, 333). "In God's wildness lies the hope of the world", John Muir writes; "In wildness is the preservation of the world", Thoreau insists in "Walking".

And if "life consists with wildness", as Thoreau asserts with conviction, then "he would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him... whose words were so true and fresh and *natural* that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring" (133). All John Muir's work certifies that he completely identified with this statement. What Thoreau had done was transform the cause of wild nature into the cause of true (truthful) poetry. The gesture is definitely ecopoetic. Thoreau pleads for "literature which gives expression to Nature," meaning that such Literature is not merely one kind, but the only one kind. Muir definitely shared the opinion and always aimed in his writing at a kind of raw authenticity, a minimally mediated rendering of direct experience.

In Thoreau's case this went so far that not only his words expanded naturally like spring buds, but his very behavior seemed to take on the "natural" aspect of inhuman nature. "I love Henry," Emerson quotes one of his friends, "but I cannot like him; and as for taking his arm, I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm-tree" (*SE* 344). It is by no accident that, especially in the last decade of his life, Thoreau was perceived by his fellow Concord inhabitants as an oddity, even an eccentric. In his Journal of 1856 Thoreau addressed the question: "I see that my neighbors look with compassion on me, that they think it is a mean and unfortunate destiny which makes me to walk in these fields and woods so much and sail on this river alone. But so long as I find here *the only real Elysium*, I cannot hesitate in my choice. *My work is writing*, and I do not hesitate..." (*SJ* 33). Of life, of his own life, sublimated and elevated into the poetry of "walking" and wording, Thoreau had always written and he continued to write until the end of his days, because, as said in the late Journal,

“there is nothing so sanitive, so poetic, as a walk in the woods and fields... Nothing so inspires me and excites such serene and profitable thought... In the street and in society I am almost invariably cheap and dissipated, my life is unspeakably mean... But alone in distant woods or fields, in unpretending sprout-lands or pastures tracked by rabbits... I come to myself, I once more feel myself grandly related... This stillness, solitude, *wildness* of nature is a kind of thoroughwort, or boneset, to my intellect. This is what I go out to seek” (*SJ* 34-35: 7 January 1857). And “Walking” echoes with its own confession: “I walk out into a nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in” (122)...

Thus, it was impossible for Thoreau not to have “faith” in nature; it was impossible for him not to defend nature – for himself, for nature’s own sake, for the sake of poetry, for the sake of Man. He upheld his faith and defended its source in the only way fit for a writer – by transforming everything into words, by writing. And words have their public aspect, so Thoreau’s life-preserving devotion to nature only naturally becomes a cause defended before an audience. While his Journal acquired a value for Thoreau as a thing in itself with the years, not fully meant for any reader, in everything else he wrote in the last decade of his life, Thoreau wielded the public force of words to its maximum degree, mostly in order to defend, insistently, the great cause of wild nature – the supreme eco-cause of his mature thinking. Thoreau delivered repeatedly not only “Walking,” but all his later essays as lectures before putting them in their final shape for publication; in other words, the essays’ public biography depended on their unmediated influence both over the listener, as well as, later, over the reader. During those last years, Thoreau indeed set out to “speak a word for Nature”: the different lectures/essays (and the larger works published only posthumously, such as *The Maine Woods* and *Cape Cod*) show abundantly the various nuances of Thoreau’s aesthetic and spiritually religious dedication and his unambiguous commitment to the preservation of nature. Thus, “The Succession of Forest Trees” delineates the principle of succession in forests, which Thoreau discovered and which, in fact, gives a most solid reason that he be considered a pioneer in ecology. In the same year, 1860, in the crowded lecture hall of Concord lyceum, Thoreau delivered his speech “Wild Apples”: intensely poetic, overflowing

with awe for nature's beauty, this speech (published posthumously towards the end of 1862) took up anew the praise of the West and the Wild from "Walking," but also the gloomy acknowledgement of the fact of growing deforestation: "The era of the Wild Apple will soon be passed. It is a fruit which will probably become extinct in New England," Thoreau remarks with rebuking sorrow, confirming his words, in the manner of the old Puritans, with a quotation from the Bible: "Be ye ashamed, O ye husbandmen" (*TE* 220-221). During these same months, Thoreau revised and prepared for publication his earlier essay "Autumnal Tints" (also published posthumously in the end of 1862). In its fine poetry, the essay is brimming with admiration for New England's nature, "the brilliancy of [whose] our autumnal foliage" amazes "Europeans coming to America" (*TE* 177); but Thoreau also warns the reader to watch over it: for, "a village needs these innocent stimulants of bright and cheering prospects to keep off melancholy and superstition... What if we were to take half as much pains in protecting them as we do in setting them out...?" (*TE* 193-194)

However, Thoreau delivers his true environmentalist vision in "Huckleberries," an essay written at the same time but left unpublished long after. In this essay, the years-long ecocentric tendency in his thought takes on a clearly distinguishable form – Thoreau pleads for the creation of publicly protected natural areas. He proposes two things: first, the lands by the banks of the Concord river to be preserved as green areas, and second, in every town's surroundings to set aside "a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, ... where a stick should never be cut for fuel... but stand and decay for higher uses – a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation." These are already concrete projects aiming the protection of the environment, i.e. the wilderness – both for its own sake and for the sake of man and his spiritual and physical "health." Clearly, Thoreau's thinking would have continued in this ecological direction, both in writing and in action. The text of "Huckleberries" was meant to be delivered as a public lecture and published subsequently. But all of this never took place. Thoreau's untimely death cut short the new breadth and complexity of his mature ecocentric thought.

In 1836 Emerson pleaded in *Nature* for a newly established and newly enjoyed relation to the universe. A decade later Thoreau had already found his own ways towards such a relation and another decade later he was convinced that “To preserve wild animals implies generally the creation of a forest for them to dwell in or resort to”, as well as that “So it is with man” (“Walking”). The foundations of nature writing were thus laid. The environmental horizons of American culture were opened to unfold in the work of nature writers and national park forefathers John Muir and John Burroughs and further in the great American enterprise of national park service with its grand opening exactly a hundred years ago.

REFERENCES:

- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Cameron, Sharon. *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Cavell, Stanley. *The Senses of Walden*, New York: Viking, 1972.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., New York-Toronto-London-Sydney-Auckland: Bantam Books, 1990.
- Hildebidle, John. *Thoreau: A Naturalist's Liberty*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.
- Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, London-Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- Paul, Sherman. *Repossessing and Renewing. Essays in the Green American Tradition*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976.
- Peck, H. Daniel. ed., *The Green American Tradition. Essays and Poems for Sherman Paul*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1989.
- Richardson, Jr., Robert D. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Rossi, William. "Thoreau's Transcendental Ecocentrism", Richard J. Schneider, ed., *Thoreau's Sense of Place, Essays in American Environmental Writing*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000.
- Sayre, Robert F. *Thoreau and the American Indians*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977.
- Schneider, Richard J. ed., *Thoreau's Sense of Place, Essays in American Environmental Writing*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *The Essays of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. by Richard Dillman, Albany, New York: NCUP, Inc., 1990.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *The Natural History Essays of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. by Robert Sattlemeyer, Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1980.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*, Walter Harding, ed., *The Variorum Walden / Henry David Thoreau*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1963.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. "Believing in Nature: Wilderness and Wildness in Thoreau's Science", Richard J. Schneider, ed., *Thoreau's Sense of Place, Essays in American Environmental Writing*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. *Emerson's Life in Science: The Culture of Truth*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science*, Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.
- Worster, Donald. *Nature's Economy: The Roots of Ecology*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979.