

# *“Wild Apples” and Thoreau’s Commitment to Wildness in the Last Decade of His Life*

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*I*n February 1860, in the crowded lecture hall of the Concord Lyceum, Henry Thoreau delivered what turned out to have been his final speech there, “Wild Apples.” Intensely poetic, overflowing with awe for nature’s beauty, this speech (published posthumously in *The Atlantic Monthly* in November 1862) took up anew the praise of the West and the Wild from “Walking,” but was already filled with the gloomy awareness of times soon to be past. Unlike “Walking” with its grand scale celebration of wildness and the nation’s manifest destiny, “Wild Apples” finds its cosy niche in Thoreau’s thinking of the very last years of his life when he was already following his ecocentric, preservationist ways along with a newly developed capability of overcoming the poignancy of existence through humor and extensive, ‘wild’ narration as in *Cape Cod*, or through making an art of the most refined poetic elegance as in the late essays.

“The flowers of the apple are perhaps the most beautiful of any tree’s, so copious and so delicious to both sight and scent” (203), Thoreau points out to his last Concord Lyceum listeners and to all his future readers. Frequently these flowers make the walker “turn and linger near some more than usually handsome one” (203), but only a “skillful gleaner” (217), Thoreau is sure to emphasize, can truly see the heavenly beauty of the wild apple. Thoreau clearly speaks of this “noblest of fruits” (205) as a most trained and astute perceiver who has realized

afresh through his own rich and profound experience why “the noblest part of man’s noblest feature is named from this fruit, ‘the apple of the eye’” (202), and who would definitely not substitute this analogy for the transparency of the Emersonian eyeball. Thoreau’s wild apples are skillfully seen and masterly appreciated; they are the saunterer’s apples whose beauty and fragrance can only be enjoyed in their own wild habitat, because along with huckleberries and intellectual freedom, they are, in Janet Fisco’s words, “the sweet rewards of sauntering” (136).

In “Walking” Thoreau is convinced that “The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence” and that hardly “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” (138). This kind of discovery always with Thoreau flows into writing. “*My work is writing,*” his Journal of 1856 records, “and I do not hesitate [...] the theme is nothing, the life is everything” (SJ, 33). And of life, of his own life, sublimated and elevated into the poetry of sauntering and wording, Thoreau continued to write until the end of his days. As he noted in his Journal entry of January 1857: “There is nothing so sanitive, so poetic, as a walk in the woods and fields [...] 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). And this was what he found.

The wild apples, the autumnal tints, the huckleberries of New England were among his very last themes that he instilled with life. Insignificant as themes as they definitely were not for him, Thoreau made them mean that “life is everything” through defending the cause of nature for its own sake, through self-immersing in nature, as well as through the very process of writing as a vital activity. In his last years Thoreau kept observing and writing daily and, in the course of time, more and more intensely, with the mature Journal truly becoming part of his life and his late work generally acquiring a rather comprehensive representational character (the Homeric epicality of *Cape Cod* included).

At the same time Thoreau’s deepening self-identification with Nature led him to both plead for its preservation and to provide verbal autoportraits through natural objects, which is the case of “Autumnal Tints” and, especially, of “Wild Apples” (where the plural in the title suggests not a variety, but a single focus – a choice very similar to that of *Walden*). “The wild apple,” as Steven Fink observes, “is the European who, like [Thoreau] himself or the backwoodsman, has reattached himself and adapted to the natural environment” (278). The essay, as Lawrence Buell points, “is a display of field-naturalist apple lore and expertise wrapped in a charming portrait of a slightly dotty wild apple enthusiast that doubles as mock-confession and gentle mockery of the ignorant [...] reader’s ability to read landscape” (106). “Wild Apples” offers its deep and competent reading of the New England landscape through addressing its readers with pictorial beauty and an alluring (self)image, thus provoking their appetite for those wild “sudden revelations” and discoveries that guarantee the preservation of life, both spiritual and physical.

### **Preoccupation with Wildness**

Some twenty years before Thoreau’s thinking began to unfold along the lines of biocentrism, 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” (15). Emerson’s word was *vision*, or a newly achieved perceptiveness for nature as always wearing “the colors of the spirit” (19). 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” (222). The visual arts were moving in the same direction, with John James Audubon’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” (qtd Noble 39).

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 and scientific, simplified and 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 but only 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, Gary Snyder, Edward Abbey, and many other nature writers. This multi-dimensional and seemingly endless environmental discourse of American culture has made nature writing a distinctively American phenomenon and has also led to the great American enterprise of the national park system.

Unquestionably, in 1836 with *Nature* Emerson 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. Everything written after 1850 testifies to the flourishing of Thoreau's mature thought, whose wholeness was established with the gradual shifts over the years: he captured with great precision the fragmentariness of observation, while remaining faithful to his Transcendentalist poetics; he made 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 Muir's 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 (see Tallmadge 52-53). "If a man would be alone, let him look at the stars," Emerson had said in *Nature* (17), and Muir stuck to that faithfully. Both he and John Burroughs were Emersonians before they were Thoreauvians, as Lawrence Buell points out, and both became what posterity has called Thoreauvians without original intent to follow Thoreau as a model: Burroughs turned from Emerson's

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" (323). Inspired by Emerson's work, the three men followed their own paths toward environmental conscience and, consequently, nature writing.

"I wish to speak a word for Nature," Thoreau proclaims with eloquent fervor in the beginning of "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" (117). The essay, another in the series of works capturing the breadth and the impulses of an entire decade in Thoreau's intellectual history, is also, among other things, an experiment in which Thoreau's continuously evolving thought attempts to balance his scientific observation of nature with the Transcendentalist notion of illumination in nature, both for nature's own sake and for the sake of man as part of nature. Thoreau's "walking" is simultaneously a "profession" and an "art" (two interchangeable rather than distinguishing qualifications); it 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" (130-31). A couple of decades later John Muir wrote: "It seemed to me that the Sierra should be called [...] the Range of Light [...] as it is the most divinely beautiful of all the mountain-chains I have ever seen [...]. Every rock seems to me to glow with life" (*The Mountains of California*, 4-5). This was celebrating nature's wild beauty for both man's and her own sake.

Such was the disposition with which Thoreau set out to speak for nature and in her defense. In as much as Thoreau identifies himself as "a part and parcel of Nature," he feels justified to become her representative and her speaker. But as long as being an organic part of Nature depends on walking – a talent with which Thoreau finds himself endowed "almost alone" (118), just as in "Wild Apples" the seeing "skillful eye" is only his own, – and as long as the role of the representative implies the public

speaker, Thoreau's defense of Nature is addressed to all those who directly or indirectly threaten or, at least, misunderstand its integrity.

Thoreau's flaming rhetoric in "Walking" bears the intense affective power of the orator speaking in front of the actual audience in the lecture hall. "Walking" continues the New England tradition of oratory; but the emphasized "extremeness" of its statement also testifies to Thoreau's radical *personal* commitment to Nature's cause, suggesting also the devotion of *love*. "I fell in love with a shrub oak," Thoreau writes in his late Journal (J, IX, 146) and affectionately confesses: "all nature is my bride" (337). Always erotically charged, Thoreau's love for nature is so powerful and so all-absorbing that it unifies into one brotherly affection, friendship and filial love, and is further intensified, moreover, by the sense of being mutual: "Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around," "Walking" claims fondly, "with such beauty, and *such affection* for her children, as the leopard" (137).

Thoreau's boundless love for his native countryside adds another wonderful nuance here: hardly another Concordian ever experienced his belonging to the region with such fulfillment and such conviction in the place's universal symbolism; hardly another ever walked across the town's surroundings with such need for intimacy, for oneness of self and nature; and, doubtlessly, there has been no one else who has soared to such poetic heights, both in emotion and in writing, reviving indeed the very etymology of "Concord," or agreement, harmony, love. Precisely with the insatiable passion of someone in love, striving to annihilate the distance with the loved one, coming to know in its deepest details the object of his affections, Thoreau was walking amidst the countryside of Concord.

Strong affection thus presents the obverse side of Thoreau's late intellectual disposition toward scientific knowledge, observation and description of nature. The "great awakening light" illuminates not only the mind, but also the heart, and so in his walking Thoreau finds no difficulty in transforming the beautifully concrete and worthy of study vicinity of his native town into the magnificent scenes of the Holy Land. Clearly, his wild apples, "these I mean, unspeakably fair," will be the "apples not of Discord,

but of Concord!" (216) Nature's cause is for Thoreau also the sacred cause of love, especially in the last decade of his life, and therefore its defense requires an "extreme" statement. But just as well a quiet and moderate one, as in "Autumnal Leaves" and "Wild Apples."

Thoreau believes that there is only one "right direction" which is natural or faithful to nature, and in following this direction, "walking" invariably leads to Wildness. Nature's cause is the cause of Wildness, because "life consists with Wildness" (130). The need for wild nature 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. "The purpose of wildness," as Richard J. Schneider rightfully observes, "is to refresh civilization, not to reject it" (49). That is why the Walden experiment, the journey on the Concord and Merrimack rivers which preceded it and the later trips to the Maine woods and Cape Cod, as well as Thoreau's daily walking in Concord's vicinity, are all approaches to or inscriptions within the vitally important otherness of nonhuman nature. For, as said in *Walden*, in order to become "Indra in the sky looking down" (101), first one has to "live deep and suck out the marrow of life" (67). And the marrow of life runs there, in the depths of nature not subdued by man.

So, whereas *Walden* demonstrates Thoreau's shift in thinking toward ecocentrism, "Walking" and the late essays express and defend his radical commitment to the preservation of nature, upholding the ecological cause also for its human implications. And the reverse argument is also suggested everywhere in Thoreau's late work: the spoilage of the wilderness, its subjugation into gardens and malls leads to decline – both physical and, above all, spiritual. In the cutting of woods Thoreau saw the destruction of thought.

In his essay "The American Forests," published some thirty years after Thoreau's "Walking," 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” (*Our National Parks*, 248-73). Such a claim about nature preservation is 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, as Buell points out, “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” (333). Just like Thoreau, John Muir believed that in God’s wildness is the hope and the preservation of the world.

“I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated,” Thoreau claims in “Walking” (137), entering the limitless domain of newly accentuated correspondences in his eco-homo-centric apology. To defend such a notion, one needs faith. “In the nineteenth century, it was entirely possible and even necessary to ‘believe’ in Nature,” Laura Dassow Walls asserts, adding that “Thoreau arrived at a radical view of nature as a self-generating, creative agent by incorporating Humboldtian protoecological science into traditional and romantic forms of natural theology” (17). Still, as Thoreau clearly points out, “the science of Humboldt is one thing, poetry is another thing” (133). Hence, “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 [...] aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature” (133). Thoreau is not searching after the effective metaphor here, but is offering his overall conception of literature as the art of artlessness. Instead of opposing poetry to science, this conception admits and proves their compatibility. In his later years Thoreau understood and experienced the “naturalness” of poetry as a supreme faith in wildness – for both nature’s and poetry’s sake. He had begun to look for the poem that would “adequately express this yearning for the Wild” (134), as “in literature it is only the wild that attracts us” (133). So



Thoreau transformed the cause of wild nature into the cause of true (truthful) poetry. The gesture was definitely ecopoetic.

Thoreau pleaded for "literature which gives expression to Nature" (133) meaning that such literature is not merely one kind, but the *only* kind. Such was Thoreau's conviction and he followed it in the daily writerly practice of his last years.

### **Literary Wildness**

Consequently, not only Thoreau's 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" (344). Thoreau was interested in man as a part of nature – and more than anything else, he was that man, that other I of Walden, of the forest, the meadow, to all of which he had dedicated himself with boundless faith and with enormous human love.

It is by no accident that, especially in the last decade of his life, Thoreau was perceived by his fellow Concordians as an oddity, even an eccentric. Not that he had ever strived to make his way of life socially acceptable, as he had never experienced the need for social understanding. In his Journal of 1856, Thoreau addresses 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" (SJ, 33). His choice was sauntering and it was inseparable from *wording*, as Thoreau was sauntering out "into a nature such as the old prophets and poets, Menu, Moses, Homer, Chaucer, walked in" (122).

In his late work, as Robert Milder observes, "Thoreau selects and arranges natural facts with such quiet artistry that the interpretative context for his life seems almost to arise spontaneously from nature itself" (189). The Journal of his last decade belonged to Thoreau's life not only literally, but somewhat naturally, and the same goes for his essays and lengthier

works of these years too. The very process of writing, of incessantly putting things into words, or of wording the world, had acquired for mature Thoreau a significance far beyond the Emersonian emphasis on the creative process as superior to its final product; it had become for Thoreau a natural process in the sense of both serving the cause of nature preservation as well as the cause of his own life's preservation.

Writing already equaled life for him. Thoreau had turned writing into a vital activity and his self-identification with natural objects was an inherent part of this activity. The red maple and the elm, the scarlet oak and the sugar maple from "Autumnal Tints" all bear traits of Thoreauvian self-images, but the supremacy of the wild apple here hardly needs to be discussed. Thoreau found the wild apple closest to him, as it "is wild only as myself" (208). He admired the wildness of the American wild apple as wildness acquired and not aboriginal, flourishing in the woods away from the cultivated stock.

But Thoreau was attracted to the wild apple also because "The era of the Wild Apple will soon be past" (220). Death had already been quite an issue in his mind and heart (as *Cape Cod* certifies perhaps more clearly than any of his late writings); Thoreau had witnessed the deaths of his brother, sister and father and was beginning to have a presentiment of his own death. So very naturally, indeed, he would celebrate and thus eternize the revitalizing wildness of the wild apple; he would preserve it in and through words with the sad assumption that its time was drawing to a close, just as was his own. In his last years Thoreau was engaging all the powers of verbal expression in order to sustain life. He was pleading the cause of nature preservation for both its sake and for the human sake while at the same time writing was becoming for him something much more than a profession and an art: the making of the "only" literature was becoming life, and this ecopoetic life preservation could only end in the most natural way, or with the end of the writer's life.

Both as a noun and verb, "preserve" clearly enough is the key to late Thoreau's errand to mankind. "Unable to redeem his townsmen by morally awakening them," as Milder notes, "Thoreau could at least work

to save a portion of redemptive nature till their descendants should have grown wise enough to profit from it” (199). Such a disposition could already incorporate death by envisioning it as inherent and inevitable part of life. Unlike *Walden* with its seasonal agenda that conspicuously excludes Fall, late Thoreau’s work already brings into focus the glorious autumnal tints of New England along with the frozen-thawed November wild apple which seems “to have borrowed a flavor from heaven” (219). In its words of utmost poetic beauty and power, Thoreau’s “Wild Apples” saved and preserved forever this heavenly autumnal flavor.

Thus, it was impossible for Thoreau not to have faith in nature and not to defend nature. His way was the only way fit for a writer – namely, writing. And words inevitably 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. He did that mostly in order to defend, insistently, the great cause of wild nature – the supreme eco-cause of his mature thinking. However, lecturing also turned out to be the public announcement of his *life as a writer* and only a writer. Thoreau was not the public figure and speaker that Emerson had already long proved himself to be, but he repeatedly delivered as lectures all his late essays as well as parts of the lengthier works before putting them in their final shape for publication.

During these last years Thoreau indeed set out to “*speak* a word for Nature”: the different lectures show the various nuances of his aesthetic, scientific, and spiritual commitment to the preservation of wildness in both man and nature. In other words, the late works’ public biography was begun by Thoreau’s listeners to be continued later by his readers. Moreover, mid-nineteenth-century New England was providing quite a wide audience for natural history work (see Buell 412-16), and this interest was only eased by the traditional discourse of natural theology (see Rossi, *Introduction* x). Thoreau had lectured earlier, of course, but in the last decade of his life his interest in his audience/reader seems to have become

more intense in both his rhetorical extremity and his preference for providing detailed (often scientific) knowledge through the exploration of classic literary modes, such as the traditionally audience-oriented Homeric epicality (in *Cape Cod* especially) or the travel narrative (most of the late works fall into this category more clearly than the earlier ones).

In all possible ways the late Thoreau's listener/reader – that of *Cape Cod* and *The Maine Woods*, of “Walking,” “Autumnal Tints,” or “Wild Apples,” – is kept absorbed in an overall sense of journeying. After all, Thoreau's walking *is* journeying, and Thoreau keeps on telling the stories of his own journeys. In his last years he had already, in his own words from *Cape Cod*, “extended his excursions” (851), and these travels, as Laura Walls observes, “gave him contact with other regions [...] different enough from Concord to set going the process of comparison Humboldt and Darwin had modeled” (135), i.e., he had already become a traveler very much in the manner of Humboldt or Darwin in his life and in his scientific inclinations (and through his reading and writing he had always been a traveler in his mind).

Moreover, he had already become the lecturing traveler who was talking in public about his travels. Thoreau's narratives do record real journeys and so their documentary character is only proper. Just as *Cape Cod*, for instance, has its “Stage-coach Views” chapter telling of first-hand experience, so “Wild Apples” offers its “true account” of Thoreau's very own first glimpse of “my long-sought crab-apple” as a view “from the cars” (208). Also, the huge amount of references to and citations from all kinds of history and natural history books, chronicles, journals, topographical sources, other travel books, even newspapers, that Thoreau “wildly” provides in his late works, definitely enforces the impression that these works are themselves documentary pieces. And if in its documentary nature a narrative is to be listened to or read as truthful, and therefore, trustworthy, then the audience should trust its speaker/author just as he does in addressing it – for the sake of nature's just cause as well as, usually, for the sake of true aesthetic pleasure. The late Thoreau knew and fully explored all the means and powers of both explicitly and

implicitly addressed narration, and he persisted in his need for a sufficiently wise and knowledgeable (reading) audience.

Before such an audience Thoreau could freely and safely even play with his own name, as he does in *Cape Cod*: "But whether Thor-finn saw the mirage here or not," he notes, "Thor-eau, one of the same family, did" (983). In "Wild Apples," however, where hardly a trace of humor appears, the name of Thor is never mentioned despite all the references to the Prose Edda; its absence, perhaps, should suggest to the reader that evil, or Loki had still no hold over the wild apples and Thor-eau could still taste them and keep himself young, as "No, for Ragnarok, or the destruction of the gods, is not yet" (204).

Along with so much more, late Thoreau's work is deeply concerned with names and naming and fully engages its audience in this respect too. *Cape Cod*, for instance, quite tellingly begins with a discussion on the probable etymology of the Cape's name and clearly expresses Thoreau's life-long interest in these things: with the pristine, Homeric energy of an American Adam – equipped, moreover, with a remarkable philological background, scientific knowledge, and poetical talent – Thoreau retraces the history of a name to its fullest extent, his exploratory journey in the history of a name unfolding into a journey into the history of a place (Nauset, Cohasset, Truro, etc.), or that of a botanical or zoological species, or into the legendary or mythological past.

Regardless of its short generic format, "Wild Apples" with its chapter on "The Naming of Them" is a clear-cut expression of this same overflowing (philological) energy. After having traced back all the linguistic and mythological roots of "apple" he could possibly think of, Thoreau fervently addresses his audience with this question: "Who shall stand godfather at the christening of the wild apples?" His answer comes naturally: "It would exhaust the Latin and the Greek languages, if they were used, and make the *lingua vernacula* flag. We should have to call in the sunrise and the sunset, the rainbow and the autumn woods and the wild-flowers, and the woodpecker and the purple finch and the squirrel and the jay and the butterfly, the November traveler and the truant boy, to our aid" (216).

Thoreau would meticulously provide all kinds of Greek and Latin names in his late work, clearly aware, as he says in “Walking,” that “botany cannot go farther than tell me the names of the shrubs” (130). Without drawing a contrast between the knowledge of natural science and the knowledge that transcends science, late Thoreau believed that “the poet to-day [...] enjoys no advantage over Homer” (133). Thoreau had always treasured Homer’s language, as he found it pristine, closest to nature; Homer had always stood for him as the Emersonian Language-maker and Namer, the Sayer of wildness itself: more and more with the years, as Thoreau was himself searching for the truest verbal expression of nature’s wildness, or for the Literature of the Wild.

In the last decade of his life Thoreau was wishing to speak a word *for* Nature in the sense of becoming nature’s advocate: while his pathos in defending nature’s cause dominates in “Walking,” “Autumnal Tints,” or “Wild Apples,” the years-long ecocentric tendency in his thought takes on a clearly distinguishable form in “Huckleberries,” where Thoreau pleads for the creation of publicly protected natural areas and declares his already environmentalist position whose development was sadly cut short by his untimely death. However, speaking *for* Nature also meant for the late Thoreau letting Nature speak for herself – i.e., finding his writerly or literary ways of providing Nature with as though unmediated ways of expressing herself. The success of Thoreau’s late natural history essays Milder properly points to as resulting in Thoreau’s “new power and willingness to write about himself obliquely” (184), or his foregrounding other things than himself. (Later, John Muir will show a similar preference in his writing, aiming at a kind of raw authenticity, a minimally mediated rendering of direct experience of nature.)

This same tendency toward “erasing” his writerly presence in the text, H. Daniel Peck observes in Thoreau’s mature Journal of the 1850’s, which he finds sometimes “even ‘modernist’” (73). Thoreau’s intense love of the sentient world, Peck observes, “drove him toward strategies of perception and language that anticipate twentieth-century poetry and thought. In the living practice of his Journal, he stands on the threshold

of an objectivist, process-oriented philosophy" (74). Thoreau's verbal portrayals of New England's autumnal tints or wild apples, which preserve their 'moments of being' forever, can certainly be seen as representing these same objectivist strategies.

Applying her different course of thinking here, Laura Walls arrives at a seemingly opposite conclusion, namely that because in his last decade Thoreau "repeatedly invoked chaos and contingency, the generational source, the saving "wild," which alone could redeem an encrusted, static, and alienated civilization," so "the terms of his last writings suggest something incongruously akin to "postmodernism" (13). Regardless of the qualifications, however (moreover, put in quotes in both cases), it seems an obvious and shared agreement, as Ronald Hoag puts it, that "the wild is Thoreau's name for the boundlessness of nature in all its forms, including the wild speech that suggests nature's ultimate unfathomableness" (154).

In wildness the late Thoreau saw the preservation of the world. The wildness of his speech was his writerly way to both literally and literarily preserve wildness, or life.

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