

Introduction: Thoreau Bicentennial Essays

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*I*n his discussion of the history of poetry in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Henry David Thoreau says “there are two kinds of writing, both great and rare: one that of genius, or the inspired, the other of intellect and taste, in the intervals of inspiration” (375). Whether writing achieves the former, he says a few paragraphs later, only time will tell: “the true finish is the work of time and the use to which a thing is put” (376). When he died having published periodical essays and two books to only modest success, he likely was uncertain about how well his writing would stand the test of time and to what uses it might be put. Yet, as we acknowledge his two-hundredth birthday, we find his reputation more secure than ever and the uses to which his life and writing have been put more various and significant than he could have imagined.

In the years after his death in 1862 – through the editorial efforts of his sister and of friends H.G.O. Blake, Ellery Channing, and Franklin Sanborn – Thoreau was first remembered as the “poet-naturalist,” a pleasant but idiosyncratic (“peculiar” was the word James Russell Lowell used) nature writer. Before the end of the century, on the other hand, British editions of *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience” were published and disseminated by the British Labour Party, who viewed Thoreau as a champion of the working class. It was, however, the image of the Romantic pastoral writer that persisted in American views of Thoreau through the first decades of the twentieth century.

During the Depression it was Thoreau’s emphasis on simplicity that resonated with Americans who had no choice but to follow his advice to

minimize necessities. In the 1940s, at the same time as he was being vilified as an unpatriotic pacifist, in literary circles he at last became recognized as a major American author. Critic F.O. Matthiessen's book, *American Renaissance*, placed Thoreau in the company of Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe as an exemplary literary craftsman. This New Critical emphasis on the literary text rather than the biography of the writer led Stanley Edgar Hyman to make the extraordinary claim that Thoreau "wrote the only really first-rate prose ever written by an American, with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln."

In the Viet Nam War era of the 1960s, instead of being vilified, Thoreau was lionized as an iconic anti-war and cultural dissident, with "Civil Disobedience" appearing in nearly every college freshman reader. By the 1970s an emerging emphasis on environmentalism ushered in the Age of Ecology, and by the 1990s Thoreau was well established as the father of American environmentalism. For several decades now Thoreau has been the "green" Thoreau, but not just in America. Recently critics have begun to see Thoreau as not just a national but as a global figure. From the perspective of "planetarity" there is a new emphasis on Thoreau's international vision, seeing the waters of Walden Pond as mingling with the waters of the Ganges.

This quick summary of Thoreau's changing reputation suggests that what critic Jane Tompkins says about *The Scarlet Letter* is also true of *Walden* and of Thoreau's writing in general: "the hallmark of the classic work is precisely that it rewards the scrutiny of successive generations of readers, speaking with equal power to people of various persuasions" ("Masterpiece Theater: The Politics of Hawthorne's Literary Reputation" in *Falling into Theory*, ed. David H. Richter, 144). Thoreau's writing is rich enough to be many different things to many different readers and to many different critics.

Whether, as Tompkins suggests, the endurance of a literary work is more due to the influence of the arbiters of literary taste than to any inherent quality of the work itself, the work itself must surely contain enough richness to make it susceptible to so many points of view.

Naturalist, environmentalist, advocate of the simple life, social reformer and dissident, literary craftsman, global visionary: all of these uses to which we have put Thoreau insure that his two-hundredth birthday will not be the last time we celebrate his life and writing. The essays in this issue suggest a variety of current approaches to his significance and perhaps to his future.

Daniel S. Malachuk in "'The sun is but a morning star': Thoreau's Future" acknowledges the recent evolution of Thoreau's reputation from a national figure to a global one, but he suggests that we need to take our view of him even further. The recognition of Thoreau as more than just a nationalist writer, Malachuk reminds us, began with international political progressives – Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King – citing "Civil Disobedience" in the fight for human rights. Three generations of environmentalists such as George Perkins Marsh, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson led the recognition of Thoreau as a champion of human responsibility toward nature not just nationally but globally. These movements, while valuable, have perpetuated the anthropocentric versus biocentric split in our thinking about Thoreau. Malachuk argues that we need to see beyond the particulars of this split to recognize more fully Thoreau's core concern with universal values, moving our understanding of Thoreau beyond even planetarity to an understanding of his universalism.

In "The Samarae of Thought: Thoreau's Gathered Timescapes," Laura Dassow Walls offers a fine example of how Thoreau packs universal meaning into the smallest of natural objects. In his late notes on fruits and seeds, Thoreau was fascinated by how plants used winged seeds, samarae, to distribute and propagate themselves. This natural fact, Walls observes, suggests how "seed and wing, clasped together in coiled spring, anticipate the ripening of the cone and the opening of their cell. They anticipate the strong winds that will set them free." Walls then proceeds to explore how Thoreau developed this ability to load a tiny seed with human meaning about anticipation, hope, and time. Crucial events, Walls reminds us, occurred in January 1842 when Thoreau's brother John died of lockjaw

and Ralph Waldo Emerson's son Waldo died that same month. The shock of these losses drove Henry into deep psychological withdrawal. To find his way back he concluded that he needed to open his senses to the natural world so that he could continue to follow his brother through the places that they had frequented together: "John is now embodied in all of nature, and it is up to Henry to make ears to hear him, eyes to see him, senses to perceive him, and voice to speak." At the same time that he opened himself to nature, he often protected himself from loss by guarding against close human friendship: "This became his greatest weakness, for to guard against [empathy], he shielded himself from other human beings; and his greatest strength, in that it opened him both to intense rage whenever he perceived injustice, and to deep sympathy with all the features and beings in nature." From natural objects like seeds he learned to accept the vicissitudes of time: "He must honor both at once, see the past always alive in the present, the present always sere in the future." In the winged seed lay the themes of time and hope that would lead Thoreau to affirm in *Walden* "the sun is but a morning star."

To capture such universal themes in language required masterful literary craftsmanship. The next three essays explore Thoreau as a literary craftsman who expertly fits form to function. Benjamin Mangrum sees Thoreau's use of metaphor as an effective vehicle for philosophical concerns about the concept of necessity. When in *Walden* Thoreau criticizes the idea of "a seeming fate, commonly called necessity," he is, Mangrum suggests, tapping into the Kantian tradition of intuitive reason as opposed to a reliance on Lockean empirical experience. Locke, Mangrum argues, "banishes figurative language from his republic of serious discourse, because he feels that such words purportedly displace the mind from its lucid attention to empirical reality ('Things as they are')." Thoreau rejects Locke's view of language "by persistent and unflinching use of metaphor" to refer to nature. "*Walden's* metaphors" Mangrum says, "allow Thoreau to depict a certain distance between human cognition and its object; they depict the natural as having a reciprocating effect on the subject." Thus nature is not simply something

to know but something that, as the recent "New Materialism" suggests, has agency. Thoreau uses figurative language to illustrate this reciprocal relationship between humanity and nature and to allow "for 'many ways' of positioning one's self in relation to the world."

Another rhetorical tool of which Thoreau is a master is sentence structure. In "Thoreau's Periodic Sentences, Experiential Transcendentalism, and Scientific Method," Walter Hesford examines Thoreau's use of periodic sentence structure, the withholding of the conclusion of a sentence's main clause until the end of a sentence. Although Thoreau is famous for his short, pithy aphorisms such as "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" or "the sun is but a morning star," Hesford offers evidence that Thoreau often makes effective use of longer sentences with a snappy conclusion "to engage (and sometimes trap) his audience and to scaffold his transcendental and scientific explorations of the world." Hesford first offers a survey of the scientific and rhetorical meanings of "periodic" and shows how Thoreau's interest in periodic sentence structure has roots both in his reading of classic Greek literature and in his seasonal observations of nature. He also compares Thoreau's use of the periodic sentence to that of a range of other American writers from the Puritans to Melville. Finally, Hesford demonstrates how although Thoreau seems especially fond of periodic sentences in his early work, he continues to make effective use of periodicity into his later works to "give the reader a full experience of what may be experienced in nature," as exemplified by the *Wild Fruits* manuscripts.

In "A Greater Vital Force": Rhetorical Affinities between Thoreau and Darwin," Christina Root shifts the focus of the writer's craft to the relation between the writer and the reader. Thoreau admires Darwin's ability in *The Origin of Species* to observe nature precisely and to use rhetoric to overcome the reader's resistance to controversial ideas. However, Root argues, "In contrast to Darwin's goal of gradually convincing his readers of the truth of his argument on the origin of species, Thoreau's is to linger within the process by which new points of view are acquired, and to keep the space open in which the reader actively

experiences new ideas' becoming intelligible." By the time he wrote his late essay "Wild Apples" he was well aware that his writing style could antagonize some readers. In "Wild Apples" he congenially eases the reader into his topic, as Darwin often does, by starting with the familiar, in this case a history of "the most civilized of fruits," and then by "inviting the reader to become a connoisseur of wild apples. Darwin also finds it necessary to use shifts in language to insure the reader's understanding, as when he provides an extended discussion of "struggle for existence." Thoreau too, Root observes, "uses the wild apple's 'savory' taste to explore how changes in the meaning of the word help illuminate the evolution of the fruit itself." He insists on "the necessity of continually rethinking how words might be brought closer to manifesting nature." "Like Darwin," she concludes, "Thoreau is convinced that language needs to be approached dynamically. For neither of them is rhetoric ever merely a matter of persuasion; at its best, it is able to bring something newly into visibility and consciousness."

Thoreau's reputation as an observer of nature is one of his main claims to fame. That reputation has rested most often, though not exclusively, on his visual descriptions. In "American Subversive: Sensory Balance in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*," Frank Izaguirre argues that Thoreau's contribution to American nature writing goes beyond his visual sense to a sensory balance that invites readers to take in nature with more than just their eyes. Izaguirre begins by tracing the privileging of the sense of sight back to the ancient Greek and Christian traditions of considering humans and nature to be separate and sight as the key link between them, but one that maintained the distance between them. This tradition of privileging sight over the other senses continued into early American nature writing of naturalist-explorers. Thoreau, however, subverts this tradition through a focus on sensory balance. After surveying recent essays in sensory studies, Izaguirre gives examples from Thoreau of "how vision is an inadequate means of representing his environment" so that he uses a full range of senses. Often Thoreau can identify concealed birds only by their calls, and when studying plants, Izaguirre observes, "he can touch,

taste, smell, see, and even in some instances hear plants, as in when the wind moves through the grass." Sometimes, as in *Walden* when he describes the first sparrow of spring, he uses multiple senses to describe the phenomenon he encounters. This multi-sense model is Thoreau's way of combating the scientific emphasis on mere facts. It also becomes a strong influence on later nature writers such as Muir, Leopold, and Carson. Although perhaps threatened by internet blogs that emphasize posting visual images of nature, this model continues in contemporary nature writing and in the methods of teaching writing.

Focusing specifically on the sense of hearing, John Hay in "Thoreau's Sound Reasoning" addresses two questions about Thoreau's attitude toward music: "First, how did citizens of antebellum America approach music? And second, what were Thoreau's own personal attitudes toward aural aesthetics?" Hay first surveys the status of classical music in the Concord-Boston area of Thoreau's day and concludes that Thoreau's "scant familiarity with German composers was not notably inferior to the wisdom of his countrymen." If Thoreau preferred music boxes to concert halls, he was simply a typical Concordian. Thoreau's own interest in music converges with his interest in sound. He finds music in the sound of the telegraph wire and in the reverberations of sound echoing from Walden Pond. In a journal passage he describes his own body as the vehicle of music: "My body was the organ and channel of melody as a flute is of the music that is breathed through it." Thoreau, Hay argues, "understood his very being as both sonic and echoic, a harmonic oscillation in tune with nature." The sounds all around him in nature were the music in which he was most interested because they opened a sense of harmony with the universe. Because of his recognition of sound as music, postmodern critics have since credited Thoreau as being a musicological visionary influencing such modern composers as John Cage.

For some time now the emphasis in Thoreau studies has been moving away from exclusive attention to his most popular works, *Walden* and "Civil Disobedience," to include his complete body of work. The next three essays continue this more inclusive approach. In "Living Poems in

Thoreau's Prose," Lizzy LeRud focuses on the function of Thoreau's own poetry within his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. As LeRud reminds us, "Thoreau's poems have long been disregarded in the major studies of *A Week*, where they have been called digressions, explications, or mere ornaments to the prose." She instead views the poems as integral, organic parts of Thoreau's book. Tracking the compositional history of the poems reveals both how Thoreau often edited his poems to change their meaning and how that meaning changes within the prose context of *A Week*. Examining the dialogue between Thoreau's poems and his prose, she argues that Thoreau depicts "poetry as something akin to a biological process, albeit one that exceeds the rules of nature and especially the inevitability of death." In a book about the loss of his brother John, Thoreau hopes his poems will have immortality in the printed word that cannot be achieved in a human life. Sometimes, as in a passage about a bittern in paragraph two of "Wednesday," Thoreau embeds a nascent poem within his prose, drawing the reader's attention not only to the bird but to the "sounds and textures of Thoreau's language." LeRud goes on to discuss some of the more than sixty finished poems that he includes in *A Week* to show how their meaning changes according to their context in draft or periodical publication and how they offer meaningful conversation with Thoreau's prose text in his book.

Although of Thoreau's three travel narratives *The Maine Woods* is the most frequently discussed, in "The Red Flannel Shirt: The Dynamic Clothing Metaphor in *The Maine Woods*," Ann Beebe finds fresh meaning in his sharp eye for ordinary details. While he famously finds meaning in the flora and fauna of the woods, he also finds significance in the clothing worn by the men who work there, particularly their red flannel shirts. Lumbermen wore red flannel shirts, Beebe observes, "for practicality, for beauty, and for visibility." The handbill that Thoreau finds in the midst of the Maine Woods for the Oak Hall clothing company, a major purveyor of red flannel shirts, reinforces the idea of visible masculine pride in the wilderness. Thoreau's specific fascination with red flannel shirts in the early part of the book later evolves into a more general metaphor of

clothing associated with his Native American guides that leads, Beebe argues, to "an uncomfortable exploration of race and class in the United States." Thoreau, a typical American, tends to associate clothing with social status. So when he finds Joe Aitteon wearing a red flannel shirt, an India-rubber jacket, and a Kossuth hat, he is perplexed about whether Joe is an Indian or a lumberman. When he visits Governor John Neptune, he is again confused by how Neptune's Native American features contrast to his businessman's attire. And when he travels with Joe Polis, he observes the practical but independent clothing of a man who "exemplifies the hardiness of the Western American hero" but who has the features of an Indian. The clothing metaphor, Beebe concludes, "helps to unify the three sections of *The Maine Woods* and complicate our reading of masculinity, commercialism, race, and class."

One of the most significant developments in Thoreau studies in the last couple of decades is the recognition of the importance of Thoreau's late nature writings on fruits and seeds, a development made possible by Bradley P. Dean's editing and publishing of *Faith in a Seed* and *Wild Fruits*. In "'Wild Apples' and Thoreau's Commitment to Wildness in the Last Decade of His Life," Alben Bakratheva explores the connection between Thoreau's late essay on wild apples and his interest in the concept of wildness found in his other writings. "Wild Apples," Bakratheva argues, "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." Bakratheva first recounts the roots of Thoreau's interest in wildness in the writings of Emerson and in the visual arts of J.J. Audubon and Thomas Cole. Moreover, she examines his extended discussion of wildness in his essay "Walking," and reminds us of the influence of the concept of wildness on later writers such as John Muir and John Burroughs. Then, turning to Thoreau's later essays, "Autumnal Tints" and "Wild Apples," she demonstrates how Thoreau as a writer attempts to defend nature through such techniques as a documentary style

and an emphasis on how names can either distance us from or connect us to the reality of nature. But she also argues that “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 wildness of his speech, Bakratcheva argues, “was his writerly way to both literally and literarily preserve wildness, or life.”

Wildness for Thoreau was not a specific place but a state of mind, an attitude. He was, however, both a writer and a professional surveyor, a measurer and mapmaker. In recent years there has been a cartographic turn in literary criticism, a focus on maps in literary texts as not just illustrations but as part of the text’s meaning. In “From Tracing to Writing: the Maps that Thoreau Copied,” Julien Nègre examines the maps that Thoreau traced to guide him in his travels to show that these traced maps “are both a copy of their originals and an addition to them, produced by superimposing a new stratum of information.” Basing his comments on Jacques Rancière’s concept of “the distribution of the sensible,” the idea that maps distribute space in both culturally inclusive and exclusive ways, Nègre explores the traced maps in Thoreau’s travel narratives to show that “they are key elements in his writing project and are intimately linked to the act of writing itself.” He identifies the map that Thoreau traced for the trip up the Concord and Merrimack Rivers to show how by tracing a map from an earlier time period but selecting certain features of it Thoreau essentially rewrites the map and history. In tracing maps of the Maine Woods Thoreau discovers numerous errors, which he attempts to correct with annotations. “What is at stake here,” Nègre argues, “is the validity of the act of inscribing itself – be it annotating an inaccurate map, transcribing Indian words, or the very act of producing a text.” Nègre also identifies the source and significance of the three extant maps of Cape Cod that Thoreau traced. The discrepancies between the maps and Thoreau’s actual experience of the Cape reveal one of the central themes of Cape Cod: “What Thoreau realizes during his excursions is that the shape of the peninsula that he has inscribed on his map as something stable and

permanent is actually elusive and transient." Thus, Nègre concludes, Thoreau's traced maps "are more than just copies in that they precede and define his work as a writer."

Finally, we return to Thoreau's planetarity, his global influence, in Iuliu Ratiu's "Found in Translation: Panait Musoiu and the First Translation of *Walden* in Romania." Ratiu offers "a fresh perspective for the study of Thoreau and an appreciation of the complexities of the global flow of literary texts, people, and ideas in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries." He first demonstrates the complexity of translation by citing the translations of *Walden* into Romanian listed in 1988 and 1990 issues of the *Thoreau Society Bulletin*. The 1988 issue erroneously lists a 1976 translation by Franz Meyer that is actually a translation into German. The 1990 issue lists, first, a 1976 translation that is actually only three pages from *Walden* in a longer essay; second, a 1973 translation from English into Romanian with notes by an American Fulbright scholar; third, an earlier 1936 translation that is actually Panait Musoiu's Romanian translation of a French translation of *Walden*. Musoiu's translation and the political and cultural influence on it is the focus of Ratiu's essay. Musoiu wrote in Romanian but lived in a Romanian culture heavily influenced by France but also informed by multiple languages including Latin, German, and Hungarian. English books were available to Romanians in the nineteenth century mostly through second-hand translations from French or German. Ratiu chronicles the growth of Musoiu's interest in Thoreau. Born in 1864, as an adult, Musoiu was attracted to revolutionary causes such as communism and anarchism and discovered Thoreau's writings through members of these causes and their literary circles. In the late 1920s he set out to translate *Walden* into Romanian from the French; the process began in 1928, and finally resulted in publication in 1936. When completed the translation with appended essays involved five different languages: Romanian, French, German, English, and Bulgarian. Musoiu's translation of Thoreau's *Walden* thus became part of Romania's entry into the larger international community, and, culminating with two later translations during the Cold War in the 1970s, a symbol of democracy on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Thoreau's planetarity is further demonstrated by the fact that these last three essays are by international scholars representing Bulgaria, France, and Romania. Thoreau himself did not travel to Europe, but his writing certainly has made multiple trips abroad and continues to do so. A new translation into Persian, for instance, is forthcoming in Iran. The waters of Walden Pond thus mingle not only with the Ganges but with cultures throughout the world. The uses to which his writing has been put, the places it has impacted, and the critical perspectives from which it can be viewed all testify to the richness of Thoreau's writing and the brightness of his future as one of America's and the world's true visionaries.

