

“The sun is but a morning star”: Thoreau’s Future

Daniel S. Malachuk

I.

In view of the future or possible, we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty on that side; as our shadows reveal an insensible perspiration toward the sun. (“Conclusion,” *Walden*)

*T*hanks to literary scholars, roughly one-hundred years after his birth, Henry David Thoreau was canonized. As Lawrence Buell has shown, by the start of the twentieth century, Thoreau had come to be admired by modernizing academic critics as one of a set of feisty authors who rejected the “genteel” pieties of the old literary canon (1999 28). In this reassessment, however, one piety went unchallenged: the newly celebrated writers – including also Hawthorne, Whitman, and Melville – were still reckoned nationalists first and foremost, more “patriotic [...] than oppositional” in standing for “good old American individualism” (30). This critical bias proved hard to break, and even decades later to nod to Thoreau’s supposed nationalism remained habitual in academic arguments, even those with quite different aims. There is, for example, Stanley Cavell’s surprising assurance in 1972 that the otherwise exquisitely skeptical Thoreau quite intentionally – his protestation it was “by accident” notwithstanding (*W* 84) – started his stay at Walden Pond on the Fourth of July, for “Any American writer [...] is apt to respond to that event in one way or another” (8).

Today, two-hundred years since his birth, when it comes to reading Thoreau, literary scholars can justly pride themselves on having shaken

off that last genteel piety; we are now able to see that Thoreau's ethical vision was – all along, and as he himself explained in closing *Walden* – never meant for just “John or Jonathan” (W 333). However, the credit for this latest revaluation of Thoreau cannot go to the discipline of English, or the academic humanities more broadly; instead, as Thoreau turns 200 we must in truth thank those leaders of the two greatest worldwide progressive movements who – years and years before literary scholars – insisted upon Thoreau's indispensable example. Decades went by, that is, before literary scholars began regularly to acknowledge what Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, and others had plainly stated: that Thoreau's “Civil Disobedience” helped launch the international movement for human rights (Rosenwald). Similarly, it took the example of roughly three generations of environmentalists – from George Perkins Marsh to Aldo Leopold to Rachel Carson – before scholars began to identify in Thoreau's turn toward “wildness” not a code word for Manifest Destiny but rather a tribute to a place entirely outside the national imaginary, a place symbolized by that “huckleberry field, on one of our highest hills” (as he writes in “Civil Disobedience”) where “the State was nowhere to be seen” (RP 84). As Buell, analyzing Thoreau's “environmental sainthood,” sums up in *The Environmental Imagination*: “Literary scholars, who compose the majority of professional Thoreauvians, have by and large responded to rather than led this wave of reinterpretation [of Thoreau as an environmentalist], as was also the case in the late 1960s and 1970s with regard to the placement of Thoreau within the history of American radical protests against statism and infringement of civil rights” (368).

However, if over the last century these two progressive movements have finally inspired academic critics to recognize in Thoreau's calls for rights and for nature an international range, there have been very few efforts to show how these two commitments of Thoreau's actually hang together in his thought. This is not just a problem in Thoreau studies, and is likely due to the rival orientations – anthropocentric and biocentric, respectively (and crudely) – that keep the human rights and environmentalist movements themselves from fully joining forces. There are some efforts

within the academic humanities community, however, to harmonize versions of these two progressive projects. Of most interest for Thoreau scholars is Gayatri Spivak's notion of "planetary." Eschewing the tainted term "globalization" – associated as it is with "the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere" – Spivak in 2003 imagined an alternative dedicated instead to alterity. Refusing to "offer a formulaic access to planetary" (78), Spivak hinted instead that where globalization – especially in computerized activity – "allows us to think that we can aim to control [the world]," planetary would acknowledge that in reality "The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system," and therefore "we inhabit it, on loan" (72). Spivak hinted at a kind of residual humanism in this ethic of alterity – e.g., "To be human is to be intended toward the other" (73) – but mostly insisted that alterity cannot be reduced to "the Other": that is, it "is not our dialectical negation" for "it contains us as much as it flings us away" and so alterity in being "above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us" nor is it "specifically discontinuous." As Spivak conceded of her challenging new orientation, "We must persistently educate ourselves into this peculiar mindset" (73).

With time, this intriguing ethic has boiled down to a resolute commitment to particularity, for here the contrast with globalization is most powerfully clear. "Unlike the global," as Laurie Edson has recently observed, "the planetary does not seek to reduce or assimilate the particular" (110). However, still attractive in planetary is that opacity that is a specialty of Spivak's, its "sketchiness," as Wai Chee Dimock has called it, mainly because to summon planetary in academic arguments, Dimock continues, is to enter not into the usual critique but into "the optative mood, as a generative principle fueled by its less than actualized status" (2007 5). In its focus on particularity, then, planetary encourages academic humanists to move beyond neoliberalist globalization, but, also, in its very lack of focus, planetary encourages us to move beyond postmodernist "irony and hermeneutics of suspicion" (Elias and Moraru xi). In these two ways, planetary conjures a leveled and egalitarian utopia of particulars.

Undoubtedly due to his already high standing in the fields of human rights and environmentalism, Thoreau was linked almost immediately to planetarity. Three years after Spivak's proposition, in an original 2006 elaboration, Dimock dedicated the first chapter to Thoreau, who exemplified for her the kind of post-national orientation necessary to contribute to this new ethic of planetarity. Specifically, by likening his reading of "the Bhagvat-Geeta" in *Walden* to a "mingl[ing]" of "the pure Walden water [...]" with the sacred water of the Ganges," Thoreau compels his readers to be at once "subnational" and "transnational" (9) and in so doing to join a new "global civil society" (7). The most famous reader to accept Thoreau's invitation (Dimock observes, drawing especially upon the postwar scholarship on Thoreau and human rights) would be Mahatma Gandhi, who formulated *Satyagraha* in response to "Civil Disobedience," and in so doing stitched together a powerful chain of particulars. In Thoreau's sentences, then, we can see how "the threads of deep time that string them together [give] us a civil society woven of continents and millennia" (22).

A latent tension begins to reveal itself here, however, between Thoreau's commitment to particulars (e.g., the Ganges River, the ice of Walden Pond, the author of the Bhagavad Gita) and the worldwide philosophies to which his and Gandhi's thoughts about these particulars give rise: to characterize these thoughts as crossing both nations and millennia – as Dimock does – begins to sound a lot like the universalism – the sameness – which planetarity is meant to resist. The tension only increases when we recall Thoreau's actual disdain for time, which is (to take perhaps the most famous of his dismissals) "but the stream I go a-fishing in." "I drink at it," he writes, "but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains." Eternity, not time, is Thoreau's watchword in *Walden*, symbolized here not with planetary but rather extraterrestrial imagery: "I would drink deeper [than in time's shallow stream and] fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars" (W98).

That tension between Thoreau's sensitive attention to the particular and his relentless drive for the universal – both in the usual figurative sense

but also the literal – became even more pronounced in Laura Dassow Walls’ important 2013 elaboration of Thoreau’s distinctiveness as a theorist of planetarity. For Walls as for Spivak, Thoreau’s “alterity forc[es us] to become [...] planetary thinker[s]” (25). Moreover, Thoreau always “scales up” (26) so as to “never lose sight of the sometimes surprising extent of [our] relations” (26). And Walls shows us that he scales up not just to the planetary level: “Even while Thoreau hoes his beans, he reminds himself that the star that lights his labor ‘illumines at once a system of earths like ours’”; this is, she adds, “planetary thinking gone stellar” (26) – or, we might say, gone universal.

Especially, then, when we remember academic criticism’s real resistance over the past century to “scale up” from reading Thoreau as a nationalist to an internationalist – and in so doing simply to catch up to non-academic readers like John Muir and Tolstoy – the renewed insistence today upon Thoreau’s penchant for particularity – even as wonderful a set of particulars as comprise the whole planet – should give us pause. There is, of course, the Thoreau who, especially in view of the past, looks to the particulars, as in the first half of *Walden*’s “Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors,” a delightfully complex tribute to the persons and things that once populated the present site of his cabin (W 256-64). However, elsewhere in the same book he tells us that we stand “on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future” (W 17), and there is indisputably plenty of the latter in his work. And, when Thoreau turns to the future, he favors not the particular but the universal. For instance, the second half of “Former Inhabitants and Winter Visitors” concludes with Thoreau “expect[ing] the Visitor who never comes.” That is, if at that chapter’s start Thoreau dwells among specific “former occupants of these woods” that he “conjure[s] up,” by chapter’s end he looks to the future for “the man approaching from the town” (W 270).

In this other mode of Thoreau’s, then, the mode of expectation, Thoreau eschews particulars for universals like “the Visitor” or “the man”: universals that like our outlines (to consider the epigraph for this section

of my essay, taken from the end of *Walden*) are “dim and misty” on our future-fronting side, but that are still universals, what Plato called archetypes. For Thoreau, we’ve left Plato’s cave, only to discover – soon, if not yet – that, while we’re no longer distracted by the fire’s shadows on a wall, we are now distracted by our own shadows dancing before us, the sun at our backs. Here again is the sentence:

In view of the future or possible, we should live quite
laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty
on that side; as our shadows reveal an insensible
perspiration toward the sun. (*W* 324-25)

In this strange figure, we look to the future and the possible, but unlike Plato, Thoreau’s future notably does not seem to include the sun. Rather, that star at once illuminates for us the universals still to come but also distracts us with our own senseless shadows still perspiring – panting – back toward it. It is an accusatory “as” in “as our shadows,” in short. This moment, from the beginning of “Conclusion,” like the other about the morning star at the very end of the same, are part of a stealthy but persistent campaign that Thoreau leads in *Walden* – not in favor of the sun, which is of course a dominant theme of this book about awakening, but actually against it. For the sun that defines the horizon for planetarity may be a positive awakening force, yes, but ultimately, like the morning, is of our past, not our future.

Consider how “Walking” also concludes with this same distinctive orientation as the “dim and misty” moment: i.e., we are walking away from a morning sun, which dutifully illuminates the universals toward which we saunter, symbolized by that privileged site of dynamic potentiality in Thoreau’s imagination, the bank-side:

So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun
shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall
perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up
our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm
and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn. (*Ex*
222)

II.

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. (“Where I Lived, and What I Lived For,” *Walden*)

Thoreau’s scrupulous attention to the materiality of life – his *Journals* in this regard perhaps unparalleled in canonical nineteenth-century literature – is undoubtedly a major reason he seems initially to fit so well within the planetarity paradigm. In a recent essay reading of the “eco-materialist Thoreau” (29), for example, Hester Blum takes as emblematic – in the *Walden* chapter “The Pond in Winter” – Thoreau’s readiness to bust the myth of its bottomlessness by carefully sounding and mapping it. Acknowledging that Thoreau is “insistently mindful of the coincidence of the practical and poetic dimensions of natural spaces,” Blum gravitates to the former. “In setting the pond in material relation to the world instead of retaining its symbolic value for abstraction,” Blum writes, “Thoreau thus rescues unknowability as a philosophical problem rather than an empirical one” (30).

This is a nice but misleading distinction, however, for it wrongly suggests that for Thoreau the philosophical and empirical were indeed entirely separate worlds. Blum’s initial acknowledgment of the “coincidence” of the practical and poetic comes closer to the truth, as does Laura Dassow Walls’ explication that for Thoreau not only is “‘nature’ [...] no more separable from ‘culture’ than oxygen is from life” but “ideas are material and materiality is ideal” (24). Still, “coincidence” and “inseparability” seem effectively in these readings to level Thoreau’s

ideal concerns down to material ones when, in fact, the opposite is consistently the case for Thoreau in his published works. To return to the example of the pond sounding in *Walden*, Thoreau concludes that same passage with a plea not for materiality but ideality. Remarking on the surprising depth of the pond, he writes “I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be bottomless” (W 287). This is not a plea to expose the infinite as a sham but precisely the opposite: a reminder that, as our science progresses, we must never make the mistake of assuming we know everything. For a deeper unity – one encompassing material and ideal – awaits us. “Now we know only a few laws [of nature],” Thoreau explains in that same chapter, and “our result” – such as the result of the pond sounding – “is vitiated, not, of course, by any confusion or irregularity in Nature, but by our ignorance of essential elements in the calculation” (290).

The deep reverence for the unknown in *Walden* is echoed in Thoreau’s late-life contention in “Walking” that, along with the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, “there is equal need of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance, what we will call Beautiful Knowledge, a knowledge in a higher sense” (Ex 214). Quite at odds with the well-intentioned but hubristic empiricism driving the planetarity ethic, Thoreau concedes that his own “desire for knowledge is [only] intermittent.” In contrast, “my desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet is perennial and constant. The highest that we can attain to is not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence” (215).

In short, in the postmodern academic humanities generally but in literary studies especially, our professional drive toward particularity – pursued once through nationality, and now lately through paradigms like planetarity – continues to blind us to Thoreau’s own distinctive Platonism. For example, it is powerful but not complete to find in Thoreau’s drift upward to the sun’s point of view, at the end of the “The Bean-Field” chapter in *Walden*, evidence – as Buell did in his great 1995 work – of his

biocentricism (129-30). For while this ascension certainly prompts the realization that “the sun looks on our cultivated fields and on the prairies and forests without distinction” and thus that the beans must “grow for woodchucks partly” (W 166), Thoreau finally returns from the sun not just to the husbandman who will “finish his labor with every day, relinquishing all claim to the produce of his fields” but also to the husbandman’s thoughts: “and sacrificing in his mind not only his first but his last fruits also” (166).

This is the final peak to which Thoreau ascends, so often in passages like these: the human imagination. Here is where his Platonism technically morphs into the Romantic variety, and, like Kant, Thoreau’s mind becomes filled not only with “the starry heavens above me [but also] the moral law within me” (129). In the sentences that follow upon his late-life call in “Walking” for us to “elevate ourselves a little more” (Ex 219), Thoreau recounts how he climbed a pine tree near the end of June to find “delicate red cone-like blossoms, the fertile flower of the white pine looking heavenward.” The culmination of the passage, though, has Thoreau parading “the topmost spire” through the village so that others “wondered as at a star dropped down” (220). Wonder – human wonder – is where all of this leads; as I have argued elsewhere, this is Thoreau’s “higher-use ecology” (Malachuk 198-204). Thoreau explains the concept in *The Maine Woods*. It is not the lumberman or the tanner who are “the friend and lover” of the pine, “who understand its nature best”:

No! no! it is the poet; he it is who makes the truest use of the pine, who does not fondle it with an axe, nor tickle it with a saw, nor stroke it with a plane, who knows whether its heart is false without cutting into it, who has not bought the stumpage of the township on which it stands. All the pines shudder and heave a sigh when that man steps on the forest floor. No, it is the poet, who loves them as his own shadow in the air, and lets them stand. (MW 121-22)

That the trees are but a shadow of the poet is another reminder that Thoreau's ultimate sympathies lie not with the tree, nor even with the sun that illuminates that tree along with the rest of the planet. No, they lie with the universe without, and within.

The non-academic readers who led the two major progressive movements of the twentieth century recognized Thoreau's universality. For example, to articulate his own version of the higher-use ecology, John Muir, in the chapter "The Wild Gardens of the Yosemite Park" in his 1901 *Our National Parks*, turns to that same passage from "Walking" about the starry pine blossom. Citing the sentences just quoted about human oblivion to natural sublimity, Muir then adds that "The same marvelous blindness prevails" even here in the towns sprouting up around California's new national parks, where "the blossoms are a thousandfold more abundant and telling" than those of Concord. Remembering how he, like Thoreau, once "carried a handful of flowery branches" of a red silver fir into a tourist resort one summer near Lake Tahoe, Muir stresses that – yet again – the branches "quickly attracted a wondering, admiring crowd of men, women, and children."

"Oh, where did you get these?" they cried. "How pretty they are – mighty handsome – just too lovely for anything – where do they grow?" "On the commonest trees about you," I replied. "You are now standing beside one of them, and it is in full bloom; look up." And I pointed to a blossom-laden *Abies magnifica*, about a hundred and twenty feet high, in front of the house, used as a hitching post. And seeing its beauty for the first time, their wonder could hardly have been greater or more sincere had their silver fir hitching post blossomed for them at that moment as suddenly as Aaron's rod. (169-70)

Nature in all of its miraculous particularities realizes its highest use exciting humans to wonder, which in turn leads us on the one hand to the "love work" (171) (as Muir calls it) of preservation but on the other to those sacrificial thoughts – the highest use of fruits, first and last – that

enable us to see beyond the horizon. Yosemite and all our national parks are thus useful to excite our limitless wonder like a “wild garden,” as Muir puts it; they are there – as Thoreau hoped for the Maine wilderness – “for inspiration and our own true recreation” (MW 156).

The wonder nature excites in us is also politically utopian. Typical is the conceit used in “Civil Disobedience.” Yes, “They who know of no purer sources of truth, who have traced up its stream no higher, stand, and wisely stand, by the Bible and the Constitution, and drink at it there with reverence and humility.” But, there are higher ideals for Thoreau, further upstream: “they who behold where it comes tricking into this lake or that pool, gird up their loins once more, and continue their pilgrimage toward its fountain-head” (RP 88). Consider again the passage referenced by Blum. Contemplating that sounded pond in “The Pond in Winter,” Thoreau concludes that, frankly, “the imagination, give it the least license, dives deeper and soars higher than Nature goes. So, probably, the depth of the ocean will be found to be very inconsiderable compared with its breadth” (288). On the one hand, this is, as Blum suggests, a gesture made in the planetarity spirit; stressing the material limits of our daily lives, Thoreau acknowledges science will undoubtedly see to it that our oceans are also eventually sounded. But, much more, it is a reminder that nonetheless we are creatures of imagination, a faculty deeper than the sea.

Imagination enables us to reinterpret all the particulars of politics in the light of universals. As Martin Luther King recognized in his short 1962 tribute to Thoreau, “as a result of his writing and personal witness we are the heirs of a legacy of creative protest.” Thoreau taught, King wrote, “that no moral man can patiently adjust to injustice” (43). In “A Plea for Captain John Brown,” Thoreau celebrated exactly this kind of creative protest, Brown being his exemplary pilgrim to the fountain-head of justice. It is from this higher place that Brown draws inspiration, and to charge him of all people with “high treason” leads Thoreau to make this sharp apostrophe to governments:

Treason! Where does such treason take its rise? I cannot
help thinking of you as you deserve, ye governments. Can

you dry up the fountains of thought? High treason, when it is resistance to tyranny here below, has its origin in, and is first committed by, the power that makes and forever recreates man. When you have caught and hung all these human rebels, you have accomplished nothing but your own guilt, for you have not struck at the fountain-head. (RP 130)

Brown's sense of justice is so pure, because he has received it directly from that "power" that recreates man, "the fountain-head." Thoreau's prose sparks with the same energy – and terminology – as his tributes to the Maine wilderness, as well as his "Spring" chapter of *Walden* when – by the thawing sand banks – Thoreau imagines himself close to God's workshop:

When I see on the one side the inert bank – for the sun acts on one side first – and on the other this luxuriant foliage, the creation of an hour, I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me – had come to where he was still at work, sporting on this bank, and with excess of energy strewing his fresh designs about. (W 306)

If we are to take Thoreau's vertical convictions for a guide, then, to unite the movements for rights and nature will necessitate recognizing some hierarchies that planetarity simply cannot abide: Thoreau imagined a world driven by higher laws, available to persons like Brown and King who refresh their political imaginations at the highest source, the fountain-head. But the major academic work on Thoreau in the last few decades – not only in relation to planetarity but in the ecocritical and political scholarship that has preceded it – sticks resolutely to the horizon. Consider the political scholarship. On the one hand, when Gandhi translated extracts from Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" for the newspaper *Indian Opinion* in South Africa in 1907, he prefaced them with Tolstoy's caution that "a Christian, who sincerely believes that the fulfilment of Jesus' teaching shall bring him salvation, cannot attach any importance to this principle

[of State necessity]” (qtd Hendrick 464). On the other hand, more than sixty years later, in her own 1971 essay “Civil Disobedience,” Hannah Arendt begins with the opposite move: not underscoring but dismissing Thoreau’s appeal to the fountain-head of conscience. Yes, this was once taken to be “the voice of God [...] announc[ing] the Divine law,” but that’s no longer the case (66). Perhaps today’s civil disobedients “may still claim the initial validation [to be] their consciences,” but in reality, Arendt concludes, “they actually rely no longer on themselves alone” (68); rather they are “organized minorities” (98). George Kateb would later develop this resolutely worldly interaction of the individual and the democratic process into the exciting notion of “democratic individuality” (Kateb); nonetheless, this effectively defines a closed-loop ecosystem, cutting Thoreau from the mystical fountain-head and thereby – to recall his apostrophe to governments – “dry[ing] up the fountains of thought.”

Thoreau’s conviction about nature’s transcendental otherness is similarly at odds with contemporary academic sensibilities expressed in ecocriticism. What began as a promotion of nature’s intrinsic metaphysical value to be on par with humans’ – as in the “ultimate” premises of deep ecology as put forward by Arne Naess in 1986 – has instead become over the last three decades – with global weirding now fully underway – a demotion of both humanity and nature to a common hot mess. As Jedediah Purdy has recently written of “the Anthropocene,” “the familiar contrast between people and the natural world no longer holds. There is no nature that stands apart from human beings. There is no place or living thing that we haven’t changed” (Purdy). In the Anthropocene, Purdy concludes, “The question is no longer how to preserve a wild world from human intrusion” – for our own true recreation as Thoreau imagined. Instead, the question is “what shape we will give to a world we can’t help changing” (Purdy). To insist, as Thoreau did, that nature partakes of something higher that must be preserved is, for the contemporary ecocritic, even a kind of violence. As Timothy Morton explains in *Ecology without Nature*, “Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It

is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration” (5). But turning nature into a “transcendental principle” or even “fetish object” (as Morton puts it) is exactly what Thoreau – and his fellow Romantics – were intent upon doing, which would explain Morton’s hostile portrait throughout this influential book of Thoreau’s eco-mimesis (31), eco-didacticism (61-63, 70), and eco-reification (119).

The academic humanities level universal laws down to particular processes, but Thoreau inflates particulars into universals. Exemplary in this way is his experience with the phosphorescent wood in *The Maine Woods*. “I let science slide,” he proclaims, “and rejoiced in that light as if it had been a fellow-creature.”

A scientific *explanation*, as it is called, would have been altogether out of place there. That is for pale daylight. Science with its *retorts* would have put me to sleep; it was the opportunity to be ignorant that I improved. (*MW* 181)

Once again, ignorance – or “Sympathy with Intelligence,” as he calls it in “Walking” – is his aim. “Your so-called wise man goes trying to persuade himself that there is no entity there but himself and his traps,” Thoreau explains, “but it is a great deal easier to believe the truth” (181). The passage ends this way.

Long enough I had heard of irrelevant things; now at length I was glad to make acquaintance with the light that dwells in rotten wood. Where is all your knowledge gone to? It evaporates completely, for it has no depth.

I kept those little chips and wet them again the next night, but they emitted no light. (182)

When Thoreau ventures into the wild, then, it is a validation of philosophical imagination and not just the particularities of ecology.

Similarly, following the powerful and oft-cited contention in “Walking” that he “with regard to nature” feels “I live a sort of border life” between two worlds, Thoreau makes clear that it is not only the material difference of the country from the city that matters, but the spiritual:

Daniel S. Malachuk, “‘The sun is but a morning star’: Thoreau’s Future”

I took a walk on Spaulding's Farm the other afternoon. I saw the setting sun lighting up the opposite side of a stately pine wood. Its golden rays straggled into the aisles of the wood as into some noble hall. I was impressed as if some ancient and altogether admirable and shining family had settled there in that part of the land called Concord, unknown to me – to whom the sun was servant – who had not gone into society in the village – who had not been called on. (*Ex* 218)

For Thoreau, what matters most about Spaulding’s Farm is not its ecology *per se*, as attentive as he was to those particulars, but this “shining family,” for whom the sun is – notably – but a servant. Thoreau, who “after a long and serious effort to recollect my best thoughts” enables him “to recall them and recollect myself,” becomes their fellow *aristos*, “aware [as he is] of their cohabitancy” (219).

While there is in eternity “something true and sublime” (to recall this section’s epigraph), “God himself culminates in the present moment.” Clever animals, we humans “are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us” (*W* 97).

III.

Why should I feel lonely? is not our planet in the Milky Way? (“Solitude,” *Walden*)

If postmodernism can be said to have – contrary to its very self-understanding – a founding moment, the first chapter to its own metanarrative so to speak, a good case can be made for Nietzsche’s 1873 “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense.” While Nietzsche’s intentions may have been less dogmatic (Berry 49-67), postmodernism has found in this text the electrifying notion that truths, after all, “are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions” (146), the stories we’ve told ourselves so often that we no longer remember that we ourselves made them up.

In that essay, Nietzsche's startling claim rests on its own wonderful story, so compelling we might forget that it, too, is made up. As this fable sets the stage for all the notorious arguments to follow, it is worth citing at length:

In some remote corner of the universe, flickering in the light of the countless solar systems into which it had been poured, there was once a planet on which clever animals invented cognition. It was the most arrogant and mendacious minute in the 'history of the world'; but a minute was all it was. After nature had drawn just a few more breaths the planet froze and the clever animals had to die. Someone could invent a fable like this and yet they would still not have given a satisfactory illustration of just how pitiful, how insubstantial and transitory, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature; there were eternities during which it did not exist; and when it has disappeared again, nothing will have happened. For this intellect has no further mission that might extend beyond the bounds of human life. Rather, the intellect is human, and only its own possessor and progenitor regards it with such pathos, as if it housed the axis around which the entire world revolved. But if we could communicate with a midge we would hear that it too floats through the air with the very same pathos, feeling that it too contains within itself the flying centre of this world. There is nothing in nature so despicable and mean that would not immediately swell up like a balloon from just one little puff of that force of cognition; and just as every bearer of burdens wants to be admired, so the proudest man of all, the philosopher, wants to see, on all sides, the eyes of the universe trained, as through telescopes, on his thoughts and deeds. (141)

As bewitching as this story has become over the intervening years, we need to remind ourselves that Nietzsche offers here just one reading of what has come to be known as the “Great Silence.” In physicist Enrico Fermi’s 1950 formulation, this is the puzzle why such an ancient universe with, statistically, so many other worlds capable of life – many of them with a billion years or more of a head start on us – has thus far – with the exception of our planet – proven lifeless. Informed by earlier versions of evolutionary theory and geological and cosmological history, Nietzsche begins with basically the same assumptions as Fermi: that “there once was a planet” not alone in space but “In some remote corner of the universe, flickering in the light of the countless solar systems into which it had been poured;” that a subset of that planet’s animals “invented cognition;” and that just as at some remotely past point this planet was forged hot so too at some remotely future point it will grow cold.

Successors to Fermi, though, have interpreted that Great Silence quite differently from Nietzsche. Especially in recent decades, armed with ever more sophisticated versions of the 1961 Drake Equation about the likelihood of extraterrestrial life, philosophers have developed dozens of other reasons than Nietzsche’s breezy “we are alone” to explain our cosmic situation. Perhaps the most influential living philosopher to consider this question, Nick Bostrom, contends that there are three most likely answers to the paradox centered around the development of artificial intelligence, a stage of technological advancement that looks to bring with it great peril. One possibility is that AI serves, tragically, as a “Great Filter,” inadvertently extinguishing civilizations just as they reach the threshold of interstellar communication. The second and third possibilities are more optimistic: that other such advanced civilizations abound but either are waiting for our immature civilization to progress before contacting us, or are themselves enabling our advancement as a kind of pet project, playing us like a computer simulation (Bostrom 1). What the Great Silence tells us, then, is that our planet may therefore be gliding in either of these directions, tragically “into the bin of extinction scenarios,” as Bostrom explained in a recent *New Yorker* feature, or much more

spectacularly “into the bin of technological maturity scenarios,” wherein Earth is “in the center of this growing bubble of infrastructure.” Alluding to theories of planetary, stellar, and galactic civilization developed by Nikolai Kardashev among others, Bostrom hypothesizes that this infrastructure might support colonizing civilizations spreading out across the galaxy; or our efforts – or those of our godlike supervisors – might instead focus on uploading all intelligence into our own computer simulations, or even a godlike “Jupiter brain” (Khatchadourian). For those academic humanists who have forgotten that Nietzsche’s fable is indeed a fable, to listen anew to the Great Silence and hear such wildly different possibilities as Bostrom’s requires a kind of imagination – a useful ignorance, if you will – that certain authors have always encouraged. In yet another recent article popularizing Bostrom’s work, Ross Andersen points to one such author in particular:

[The first step is] to grasp the full scope of human potential, the enormity of the spatiotemporal canvas our species has to work with. You have to understand what Henry David Thoreau meant when he wrote, in *Walden* (1854), “These may be but the spring months in the life of the race.” You have to step into deep time and look hard at the horizon, where you can glimpse human futures that extend for trillions of years. (Andersen)

Andersen directs our attention to a paragraph from *Walden*’s “Conclusion” – the fourth from the end – that – on closer examination – readily invites direct contrast with Nietzsche’s fable. The two authors begin remarkably the same: Nietzsche writes with disgust about the “stagnant self-complacency of mankind” while Thoreau sneers that “This generation inclines a little to congratulate itself on being the last of an illustrious line, and in Boston and London and Paris and Rome, thinking of its long descent, it speaks of its progress in art and science and literature with satisfaction” (W 331). In all of this, Thoreau writes, we see merely the clever animal (Thoreau calls him “the good Adam”) “contemplating his own virtue,” which, again, sounds much like Nietzsche’s point that the

human intellect “regards it[self] with such pathos, as if it housed the axis around which the entire world revolved.”

But Thoreau then takes a very different turn. Nietzsche confidently asserts that “if we could communicate with a midge we would hear that it too floats through the air with the very same pathos, feeling that it too contains within itself the flying centre of this world.” Thoreau, too, thinks of insects, but – listening more carefully to that Great Silence – concludes otherwise:

What youthful philosophers and experimentalists we are!
There is not one of my readers who has yet lived a whole human life. These may be but the spring months in the life of the race. [...] We are acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live. Most have not delved six feet beneath the surface, nor leaped as many above it. We know not where we are. Beside, we are sound asleep nearly half our time. Yet we esteem ourselves wise, and have an established order on the surface. Truly, we are deep thinkers, we are ambitious spirits! As I stand over the insect crawling amid the pine needles on the forest floor, and endeavoring to conceal itself from my sight, and ask myself why it will cherish those humble thoughts, and hide its head from me who might, perhaps, be its benefactor, and impart to its race some cheering information, I am reminded of the greater Benefactor and Intelligence that stands over me the human insect. (331-32)

A century ago, academic humanists, eager to build a canon of American literature to rival those of the Europeans, especially the English, frantically read past Thoreau’s own consistent aspiration to speak to readers beyond “John or Jonathan”; it took almost another entire century to liberate Thoreau’s thought from our academic nationalism. Today, the academic humanities are in the thrall of a new particularism, a more progressive one, as it has learned from the human rights and

environmentalist movements that the valuation of persons and nature should know no planetary borders. Still, however, like that of nationality, the planetarity metanarrative rests on some faulty first premises. Following Nietzsche and his postmodern successors, planetarity still assumes that our world is indeed alone, and that, because the humans upon it are “the most arrogant and mendacious minute in the ‘history of the world’” (“human intellect” being necessarily “pitiful [...] insubstantial and transitory, [...] purposeless and arbitrary”), any metanarrative we’ve concocted is bound to be wrong. In other words, planetarity is just about the only kind of metanarrative we allow ourselves – particularist and vague – since we became suspicious of all metanarratives. It looks beyond the nation, but it stops at the planet.

In “The Bean Field,” looking beyond the nation (the town’s gala days just “popguns to these woods” (W 160), but also looking up from his beans, in “Economy,” Thoreau suddenly recalls “that the same sun which ripens my beans illumines at once a system of earths like ours” (W 10): that our planet is just one within the solar system. But Thoreau continues not with a paean to that sun and its life-giving force but rather outward into that “dim and misty” future where our current star is just another within a constellation contemplated by extraterrestrial life.

If I had remembered this it would have prevented some mistakes. This was not the light in which I hoed them. The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! (10)

For Thoreau, the Great Silence tells us not that we are alone in the Milky Way but part of what Joseph Urbas calls in Thoreau’s thought an “ontological continuum” (120).

Postmodernism desensitizes us to such messages, because it instead takes its cue from what Paul Ricoeur called the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” an orientation developed by those philosophers like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud who debunked the great metanarratives of the West

(32). In a short 1986 meditation on the role of the fantastic in philosophy, however, Stanley Cavell reminds us that, faced with these same kinds of estrangements from the old stories, Thoreau consistently insists that this means there must be more to know, not less. Cavell specifically recalls Freud’s observation that the discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin, and psychotherapy each dealt a blow to the clever animals’ narrative of self-importance. But, Cavell argues, Thoreau responds differently.

These blows are each understandable as discoveries of otherness or estrangement: cosmologically, from the universe as our home; biologically, from the idea of ourselves as superior to our origins; psychologically, from our own soul. But exactly these sad estrangements are for Thoreau ecstatic or fantastic opportunities: the sun is but a morning star (there is room for hope); we are indeed animals, and moreover we are still in a larval state, awaiting metamorphosis; we are each of us double and each must learn ‘to be beside oneself in a sane sense’ (as opposed to our present madness). (Cavell 1986 45)

Cavell’s pitting Thoreau against the hermeneutics of suspicion is inspired, particularly his portrait of Thoreau’s preemptive responses to Darwin and Freud. But Cavell is not nearly generous enough in his reading of Thoreau’s response to Copernicus. For Thoreau’s fantastic observation that “the sun is but a morning star” (W 333) is not merely a metaphor for “hope”; that paraphrase doesn’t account for the “but.” Thoreau seems instead to be expanding upon his conviction – throughout *Walden* and his oeuvre more generally – that the sun – and the planetarity it defines – should put no limits upon our thinking; the sun serves at best for our morning thoughts, for “the spring months in the life of the race.” But as we mature as a civilization, and turn away from that now setting sun, and instead (as again at the close of “Walking”) feel its rays “light up our whole lives with a great awakening light, as warm and serene and golden as on a bank-side in autumn,” then we shall sympathize with intelligence, and with Thoreau’s future.

Western Illinois University

Works Cited

- The author wishes to thank Rebecca Graham, Raymond Norris, Richard Schneider, Dieter Schulz, and Barry Tharaud for their feedback on earlier drafts.
- Andersen, Ross. "Omens," *Aeon* (25 February 2013). Available: <https://aeon.co/>
- Arendt, Hannah. "Civil Disobedience." In *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1969.
- Berry, Jessica N. *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Blum, Hester. "Terraqueous Planet: The Case for Oceanic Studies." In *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015. 25-36.
- Bostrom, Nick. "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?" *Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 211 (2003), 243-55.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.
- . "Henry Thoreau Enters the American Canon." In *New Essays on Walden*. Ed. Robert F. Sayre. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 23-52.
- Cavell, Stanley. "The Fantastic of Philosophy." *The American Poetry Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (May/June 1986), 45-47.
- . *The Senses of Walden*. New York: Viking Press, 1972.
- Dimock, Wai Chee. "Introduction: Planet and America, Set and Subset." In *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*. Ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. 1-16.
- . *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Edson, Laurie. "Planetarity, Performativity, Relationality: Claire Denis's *Chocolat* and Cinematic Ethics." In *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*. Ed.

Daniel S. Malachuk, “‘The sun is but a morning star’: Thoreau’s Future”

Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015. 107-24.

Elias, Amy J. and Christian Moraru. “Introduction: The Planetary Condition.” In *The Planetary Turn: Relationality and Geoaesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Amy J. Elias and Christian Moraru. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015. xi-xxxvii.

Hendrick, George. “The Influence of Thoreau’s ‘Civil Disobedience’ on Gandhi’s Satyagraha.” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (December 1956), 462-71.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Practical Reason: Revised Edition*. Tr. Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Kateb, George. “Democratic Individuality and the Claim of Politics.” *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (August 1984), 331-60.

Khatchadourian, Raffi. “The Doomsday Invention.” *The New Yorker*, Vol. 91, No. 37 (23 November 2015), 64-79.

King, Martin Luther. “A Legacy of Creative Protest.” *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Autumn 1962), 42-43.

Malachuk, Daniel S. *Two Cities: The Political Thought of American Transcendentalism*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016.

Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Muir, John. *Our National Parks*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1901.

Naess, Arne. “The Deep Ecology Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects.” *Philosophical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, Nos. 1/2 (1986), 10-31.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense.” Tr. Ronald Speirs. In *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 139-153.

Purdy, Jedediah. “Anthropocene Fever.” *Aeon* (31 March 2015). Available: <https://aeon.co/>

Ricouer, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy*. Tr. D. Savage. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972.

- Rosenwald, Lawrence A. "The Theory, Practice, and Influence of Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience.'" *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. William E. Cain. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 153-180.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Excursions*. Ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- . *The Maine Woods*. Ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- . *Reform Papers*. Ed. Wendell Glick. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- . *Walden*. Ed. J. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Urbas, Joseph. "'Being Is the Great Explainer': Thoreau and the Ontological Turn in American Thought." In *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon*. Ed. François Specq, Laura Dassow Walls, and Michel Granger. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013. 105-125.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. "Walking West, Gazing East: Planetarity on the Shores of Cape Cod." In *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon*. Ed. François Specq, Laura Dassow Walls, and Michel Granger. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013. 21-42.

