

Henry David Thoreau, American Subversive: Sensory Balance in Walden

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*T*he notion that Henry David Thoreau was the first American nature writer has been adequately disproven, but he was certainly the first to change the way Americans wrote about nature in a number of important ways. Not least of these was how Thoreau subverted the predominance of sight in previous American nature writing by portraying a more balanced representation of the senses in his most famous work, *Walden*. Thoreau's sensory balance is a convention that continues today and can be found in any number of acclaimed works of American nature writing.

In his chronicle of the historical roots of American nature writing in *This Incomparable Land: A Guide to American Nature Writing*, scholar of environmental literature Thomas Lyon calls attention to Hellenism and Hebraism as the dual philosophical and psychological origins of Western culture. These two traditions, explains Lyon, “enforce the separation of mind from matter, self from surroundings, and man from nature” (17). The genre of nature writing, through which authors engage their environment and attempt to diminish the gap between the self and the surrounding world, is inherently at odds with these philosophical foundations of Western culture. Lyon identifies nature writers as a “distinctly nonconforming, even heretical minority” (19). Nature writing subverts the principles espoused by these dual foundations of Western civilization.

So too can the West's cultural predilection toward sight as the predominant and most important sense be traced back to the cultural roots of Hellenism and Hebraism. In Mark Smith's *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*, where he compiles the work of a breadth of sensory studies scholars, he explains that many Greek philosophers, Plato and then Aristotle pre-eminent among them, championed sight as the greatest of the senses. Smith explains that Plato considered sight the foundation of philosophical inquiry as well as the sense best able to appreciate beauty (28).

Robert Jütte, in *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace*, goes into even greater detail. Jütte makes clear that it was Plato, in *Timaeus*, who first systematically dealt with the senses, remarking on taste, smell, hearing, and vision, but neglecting touch. Plato described the sense of sight as "divine," and the central concept of his philosophy was the Greek word *eidos*, meaning "idea," but which derives from the Greek word meaning "to see" (36).

The genealogy of the West's privileging of sight over the other senses clearly traces back to Plato, but it was Aristotle's work that solidified sight's place at the top of the hierarchy. He added the sense of touch, and, as Jütte notes, ranked the senses in *De anima* in this order: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch (39). Although this first ranking of the senses has not been without its revisions and alternate arrangements, it has generally held as the prevailing order in Western culture (63).

Smith notes also that early Christian thinking was rooted in the visual. There was some ambiguity and disagreement over whether the senses were good or bad: were they pathways to sin or gifts from God? (29). Nonetheless, sight was typically regarded as the most highly esteemed sense: "The eye was often singled out as more beautiful, powerful, truthful, and godly than the other senses. In the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas reaffirmed the Platonic and Aristotelian penchant for sight by giving it pronounced ascetic, religious authority" (28). In concordance, Jütte notes that "somewhat similar arguments for the priority of sight can be found in the Hebrew

literature of the Middle Ages" (65). For instance, Maimonides, a Sephardic scholar, wrote: "The most complicated and also the most perfect of the senses is the sense of sight" (qtd Jütte 65). The predominance of sight as a foundation of Western culture has deep roots in both Greek and Christian thinking.¹

This cultural privileging of sight in the West influenced how early Americans wrote about their environment. The Hellenistic and Hebraistic philosophical traditions of distancing oneself from the environment, outlined by Lyon, overlay neatly with the Western privileging of sight. As Lyon explains, the Western attitude was of "the sense of self as a separate and distinct entity, that sense which seems to place nature at a distance" (18). So it is no surprise that as Europeans arrived in America and began writing about their environment, sight was the preferred sense through which to engage the landscape because it allowed Europeans to evaluate it from a distance.

When one first considers that early American nature writers were explorers and colonists seeking to understand a new continent full of potential dangers, it makes even more sense that early American nature writing would be so sight-heavy. Relying on sight more than the other senses was a natural extension of their desire for safety. Because sight offered the most distance from the landscape, it also afforded the most safety, or at least the greatest sense of safety.

Early American nature writing is a field that has only recently begun to receive significant attention from ecocritics, especially with Michael Branch's recently published anthology *Reading the Roots: American Nature Writing before Walden*. Branch's book is a corrective: he seeks to draw attention to the many examples of American nature writing that were pre-Thoreau. A great portion of the works he includes are exploration narratives and what might be labeled settlement or colonial narratives, which discuss various aspects of colonial life.

In these early works of American nature writing, one finds consistency with the established Western privileging of sight over the other senses. Many of the earliest exploration narratives offer grand visual

descriptions of the scenery, such as in French Huguenot sailor Jean Ribaut's account of surveying coastal South Carolina in 1562:

The sight of the faire medowes is a pleasure not able to be expressed with tonge, full of herons, corleux, bitters, mallards, egertes, woodkockes, and of all other kinde of smale birdes with hartes, hyndes, buckes, wild swynem and sonderly other wild beastes. (qtd Lyon 17)

Ribaut's coastal survey exemplifies the emphasis on sight as an early means of engaging and recording the American landscape because it allows for distance and safety. The heavy reliance on sight as a means of depicting the natural environment in early American nature writing might most accurately be referred to as a hypervisuality. There are exceptions to this hypervisuality of early American nature writing, notably settlers' descriptions of which wildlife they thought tasted best, such as in Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan*, but the emphasis on sight is consistent. In another widely cited example of early American nature writing, William Wood's *New England Prospectus*, the author describes the wildlife in mostly visual but occasionally audial or gustatory terms.

The next development of American nature writing further entrenched sight as the most highly relied upon sense in the genre: the rise of the naturalist-explorer. As Christopher Iannini shows in his recently published *Fatal Revolutions: Natural History, West Indian Slavery, and the Routes of American Literature*, the rise of natural history study in the Americas and the emergence of the Caribbean plantation system were two inextricably linked events because a great deal of pre-Thoreauvian natural history writing was preoccupied with the potential of exploiting the new landscape of the Americas, such as Mark Catesby's *Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*. As Iannini explains:

European intellectuals and readers began to attribute considerable value to firsthand written accounts of flora, fauna, climate, and natural processes from the colonial

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Americas, as new metropolitan institutions such as the Royal Society (London) and the Académie royale des sciences (Paris) undertook the "improvement of natural knowledge" through observation, experiment, and published description. (4-5)

So the demand for American natural history writing, created by these scientific societies based in Europe, was overwhelmingly visual in nature, which of course resulted in naturalist-explorers engaging with nature in a primarily visual mode.

While American nature writing began to proliferate during this era as a result of European demand for exploration narratives, the predominance of sight as the primary means for rendering the environment and its inhabitants became even further ingrained. When discussing the rise of natural history study as a scientific discipline in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Michel Foucault elaborates on the reasoning behind natural history study's hypervisuality:

Hearsay is excluded, that goes without saying; but so are taste and smell, because their lack of certainty and their variability render impossible any analysis into distinct elements that could be universally acceptable. The sense of touch is very narrowly limited to the designation of a few fairly evident distinctions (such as that between smooth and rough); which leaves sight with an almost exclusive privilege. (132-33)

Foucault's explanation of sight's rise to prominence in the field of natural history study is reflected in naturalist William Bartram's *Travels*, often cited as the most influential pre-Thoreauvian example of American nature writing. Bartram exemplifies the further consolidation of sight's predominance with his heavy reliance on images: he rarely portrays wildlife in anything but visual terms.

Bearing in mind Bartram's exemplification of early natural history study's overwhelming visual bias, the wood thrush can serve as something

of a case-study for how the portrayal of the senses in American nature writing is misleading. It is important to note that the wood thrush is both a common bird of Eastern forests and also easily encountered, but not by sight. Its song is beautiful, ubiquitous, and carries well, even in the forest, but the bird, despite its ubiquity, is rather difficult to see. It skulks in thick tangles deep in the woods.

Yet despite the difficulty of encountering a wood thrush visually, it was one of Thoreau's favorite birds. As Lyon explains: "The song of the wood thrush, a common bird in the Concord area, touched Thoreau deeply [...] there are thirty-nine references to the wood thrush in his journal, almost as many as to Emerson" (53). By contrast, consider the wood thrush's treatment by Thoreau's predecessors, as Lyon, again, explains: "Mark Catesby evidently did not hear the wood thrush sing, since he merely listed it as the 'Little Thrush' [...] and was not particularly attuned to bird song in general. William Bartram does little more than list the bird" (53). That any naturalist could have encountered a wood thrush and not noted the beauty or at least the complexity of its song, which is performed just about endlessly in spring and summer, is almost unfathomable. Visually, the wood thrush is rather uninspiring. It's a dark brown bird. The white belly is heavily marked with black spots in a somewhat aesthetically pleasing pattern, but those marks are typically hard to see. The essence of the bird is its song. Clearly, the priorities of Catesby and Bartram in describing and categorizing the nature of America did not extend to the auditory.

It's worth noting also that Catesby and Bartram, while authors of travelogues, were just as importantly, and perhaps more so, visual artists. Their writing served as something of a support system for their illustrations of American nature. In an effort to appeal to European audiences, naturalists like Catesby and Bartram presented American nature in hypervisual terms. Emerson, too, with his fantasy of an all-seeing eye, was a hypervisualist. It would take the arrival of Henry David Thoreau to break the hypervisual streak in early American nature writing.

A number of scholars have engaged with Thoreau's portrayal of the senses, but two that deserve special consideration are Victor Carl Friesen and Ian Marshall, who have both devoted a significant portion of their scholarly energy to this topic. As Friesen notes in his grand survey of the senses in the entire Thoreauvian oeuvre, *The Spirit of the Huckleberry: Sensuousness in Henry Thoreau*, scholarship on Thoreau's portrayal of the senses has, quite surprisingly, only recently gained in popularity, much like the field of sensory studies itself (xiii-xiv).

It's important to note that Thoreau's intention was not to rearrange Western culture's sensory order and knock sight off as the king of the senses.² Thoreau merely wanted to obfuscate the hierarchical order of the senses, use them all to interact with his environment, and portray each of the senses in his writing. This usage of the senses can be perhaps best described as Thoreau's sensory balance model. In *Walden*, there are excellent examples of Thoreau's high estimation of each of the senses.

A prime example of Thoreau's high regard of the sense of sight is his description of Walden Pond in the chapter "Ponds." His visually-dominant description of the pond extends for several pages, but even within this long description, one can see a microcosm of Thoreau's sensory balance model emerge: "The eye rises by just gradations from the low shrubs of the shore to the highest trees. There are few traces of man's hand to be seen. The water laves the shore as it did a thousand years ago" (121). Here, although Thoreau continues with his description of the shoreline surrounding the pond, his visual representation incorporates a decidedly tactile element as well. The flatness of the water is contrasted with the textured plant life. The use of the word "laves" evokes a tactile response from the reader. Even the metaphorical reference to "man's hand" invokes tactility.

Yet it is Thoreau's engagement with the sense of sound where he begins more fully to differentiate himself from the sensory representations in previous American nature writing. In order to look more closely at the auditory aspects of *Walden*, it is helpful to examine the recent work of Thoreau scholar Ian Marshall. By examining *Walden* through the lens of

sound expert R. Murray Schafer and his *The Soundscape*, Marshall surveys and details the soundscape of *Walden* and another work, *My Green Manifesto* by David Gessner.”³

Marshall points out that one viable reading of *Walden* is as a rejection of, in Schafer’s words, a lo-fi soundscape, where individual sounds cannot be distinguished from one another, in favor of a hi-fi soundscape, where individual sounds can be clearly differentiated (2). Thoreau portrays a hi-fi soundscape in *Walden* in a number of ways, but a good example is his portrayal of the biophony, or the sounds of non-human living things (5). Marshall notes that Thoreau extensively catalogues the biophony in *Walden*, from bullfrogs to raccoons, foxes, squirrels, various other mammals, and, of course, an impressive assemblage of birds (11-12).

Marshall usefully tallies thirty species of birds identified by sound in *Walden* (12). Many of the bird species Thoreau mentions are a sort of meta-recognition of the importance of sound, since they are named after their calls: whip-poor-will, chickadee, veery, wood-pewee, and che-wink, now known as the eastern towhee. The onomatopoeic names of these birds are not only derived from our perception of the sounds they make, all of them are more easily detected by sound than by sight. This is certainly true of the wood-pewee, for instance, which calls loudly from the canopy and is easily heard, but is quite difficult to visually locate.

Indeed, it is helpful to consider the particularities of the landscape Thoreau is writing about as one considers his portrayal of the senses. To do so, it is useful to examine Steven Feld’s essay “Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Toward a Sensuous Epistemology of Environments,” where he describes how the Kaluli people of the Papua New Guinean rainforest interact with their environment primarily through sound:

The diffuseness of sound is significant in the tropical forest environment, and the bodily orientation of its inhabitants through hearing, listening and voicing has strongly impressed itself on ethnographers who have worked in the area [...] the locational information

available from sound in this environment often greatly exceeds that available from vision, in both variety and salience. Even though one quickly realizes that hearing is the most culturally attuned sense in Bosavi, audition is always in an interplay with the other senses, particularly in a tense dialectic with vision. This is because much of the forest is visually hidden, whereas sound cannot be hidden. (186)

Although there are no doubt many differences between the rainforests of Papua New Guinea and the deciduous forests outside Concord, limited visibility combined with the significantly auditory presence of a great deal of wildlife are traits that both ecosystems share. Hence, it's not surprising that the way Thoreau interacts with the Eastern forests undergoes a transformation from the sight-based West to a more balanced and oftentimes audio-dominant means, as the Kaluli do.

Thoreau's presentation of the whip-poor-will throughout *Walden* deserves special attention as an example of how vision is an inadequate means of representing his environment. For instance, at the beginning of "Solitude" when Thoreau wanders out into the evening, he specifically indicates that he can "see nothing special," but he hears "the note of the whippoorwill [...] born on the rippling wind from over the water" (84). When one encounters a whip-poor-will, it is almost always at dusk, when visibility is limited and the birds call loudly. If one seeks to see it and approaches more closely, the bird will probably flush and the observer will only momentarily glimpse it, if lucky, before it relocates and begins calling again – once satisfied that it is adequately camouflaged. It is a bird that actively deflects visual engagement, and yet it appears in *Walden* in "Solitude" as well as in "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" and "Spring," precisely because of Thoreau's ability to appreciate the sounds of his environment.

While birds, other wildlife, and elements of the geophony, or sounds from non-living nature like wind, comprise the majority of Thoreau's soundscape, it is his deep fascination with the field of botany that provides

the basis for his explorations into taste and touch. Although he at times eats or fantasizes about eating meat, he typically recoils from the act after engaging in it. In his engagement with nature, Thoreau craves plants – in part because they are the ideal subject for full sensory engagement. As Friesen points out in a separate essay, “Seeing Beyond the Verge of Sight: Thoreau’s Nature as Incessant Miracle”:

As a complete human being, Thoreau wanted to see more life in scientific descriptions. He spoke of a botany text having much detail about flowers but little of the flowers’ flower-like properties [...] thus he praised Renaissance botanist John Gerard of Britain, who had not only “seen and raised a plant but felt and smelled and tasted it, applying all his senses to it. (3)

Botany is the perfect vehicle for Thoreau to implant his sensory balance model: he can touch, taste, smell, see, and even in some instances hear plants, as when the wind moves through the grass. An excellent example of Thoreau’s botanizing sensuousness occurs in “Sounds”:

In my front yard grew the strawberry, blackberry, and life-everlasting, johnswort and golden-rod, shrub-oaks and sand-cherry, blueberry and ground-nut. Near the end of May, the sand-cherry, (*cerasus pumila*,) adorned the sides of the path with its delicate flowers arranged in umbels cylindrically about its short stems, which last, in the fall, weighed down with good sized and handsome cherries, fell over in wreaths like rays on every side. I tasted them out of compliment to Nature, though they were scarcely palatable. The sumach, (*rhus glabra*,) grew luxuriantly about the house, pushing up through the embankment which I had made, and growing five or six feet the first season. Its broad pinnate tropical leaf was pleasant though strange to look on. The large buds, suddenly pushing out late in

the spring from dry sticks which had seemed to be dead, developed themselves as by magic into graceful green and tender boughs, an inch in diameter; and sometimes, as I sat at my window, so heedlessly did they grow and tax their weak joints, I heard a fresh and tender bough suddenly fall like a fan to the ground. (74)

Thoreau describes the plant life surrounding his home with specificity, empowering readers to visualize plants they are familiar with. Thoreau also goes into detail describing the flowers and stems of the sandcherry. Then he describes how he feels the cherries and tastes them, not out of pleasure or for sustenance but for knowledge. He even writes of how he heard a bough fall. The plant world provides Thoreau with the ideal medium for enacting his sensory balance model.

Although Thoreau's interactions with wildlife rarely invoke the use of smell, it remains an important sense in Thoreau's estimation. In another essay, "A Tonic of Wildness: Sensuousness in Henry David Thoreau," Friesen remarks that Thoreau's "sense of smell, by his own account, is a much perfected sense, akin to that of an animal" (253). So although Thoreau rarely smells animals directly, his acuity of smell still manages to bring him in closer proximity to them by making him more animal-like. A notable example of when Thoreau brags about his heightened sense of smell is when he remarks that he could detect the presence of someone passing through his woods even some ways off by the lingering odor of a pipe or cigar in "Solitude" (84). The intrusion of a person into his woodland does not go undetected because of his animal-like sense of smell.

With the sense of taste, Thoreau leaves readers with a particularly memorable rant, and an excellent example of the sensory balance model in his discussion of huckleberries in "The Pond":

It is a vulgar error to suppose that you have tasted huckleberries who never plucked them. A huckleberry never reaches Boston; they have not been known there since they grew on her three hills. The ambrosial and

essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is rubbed off in the market cart, and they become mere provender. As long as Eternal Justice reigns, not one innocent huckleberry can be transported thither from the country's hill. (112-13)

Thoreau takes a righteous delight in the fact that only individuals who take the time and make the effort to pick the berries themselves can enjoy their taste, since the berries cannot be transported without being ruined. In order to enjoy the taste and presumably the aroma of the berries, the sense of sight must first be used to locate them, and then the sense of touch must be engaged to pick them. It is a full sensory experience.

Although Thoreau's invocation of the sense of touch may at first not be as immediately noticeable as his dealings with sight and sound, touch is one of Thoreau's most highly valued senses. The entire experiment of *Walden* is supremely tactile. He walks daily and he walks far. He hoes his garden as he tends the bean fields. He relishes physical labor of almost any sort. Again and again, Thoreau's use of tools evokes the sense of touch. Friesen adds that "the sense of touch, in turn, is continually stimulated by Thoreau's interaction with the natural environment of woods, waters, and winds" ("Tonic" 253). Thoreau's sense of touch can never be sated by all the available stimuli of Walden Woods.

Even Thoreau's titling of his chapters, which multiple times reference the seasons, can be interpreted as a sensuous exercise, since the mere mentioning of winter and spring evoke sensory stimulation. Winter is cold, and conjures up images of a white landscape. Spring recalls warmth and color and sound and light and even the smell of blossoms. It is perhaps quite fitting *Walden's* penultimate chapter, "Spring," contains this passage:

The first sparrow of spring! The year beginning with younger hope than ever! The faint silvery warblings heard over the partially bare and moist fields from the blue-bird, the song-sparrow, and the red-wing, as if the last flakes of winter tinkled as they fell! [...] The brooks sing carols and

glees to the spring. The marsh-hawk sailing low over the meadow is already seeking the first slimy life that awakens. (200-201)

Here Thoreau begins with an image, that of the first sparrow of spring, then describes it through its "silvery warblings" so the reader can hear the bird, then transplants the image onto the barren ground. The ground is described as "moist," which conjures up a tactile sense in the reader. Inanimate objects contribute their own happy noises. Finally, Thoreau ends with an image of yet another bird which is itself involved in the act of seeing. This passage is notable because not only does Thoreau evoke so many senses in such a short period, but because he connects his own heightened sensory awareness with the sensory awareness of the creatures around him.

Thoreau's sensory balance model leaves the reader experiencing the place he writes about as fully as possible. It is as Marshall notes in an earlier project, *Walden by Haiku*, a transcription of the entirety of *Walden* into haiku: "*Walden* accomplishes that goal of a good haiku: it is no longer a bunch of words about the pond, but the pond itself. The words have disappeared, ceasing to mediate between the observer and the place being described. What is left is the place itself" (16). The reason why *Walden by Haiku* is capable of working at all is in large part because of Thoreau's rich sensory detail. To convey a landscape to such an extreme level of accuracy that it transcends the description and instead becomes the thing itself requires the use of all available senses.

Another reason for Thoreau's use of sensory balance is his being disconcerted by the emerging scientific values of his day. Friesen remarks that "Thoreau wanted to see the 'means' of science (its accumulation of hard facts and measurements) *not* become its 'end'" ("Seeing" 3). Scott Slovic makes a similar point in his *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*: "Thoreau's primary criticism of formal science concerns its tendency to reduce the natural world to systems of knowledge; such systems, in their artificiality, strike him as inherently devoid of experiential fullness" (52). Thoreau's full

employment of each of the five senses was one of his primary methods for combating what he considered such a glaring deficiency of scientific study and understanding. Most recently, Laura Dassow Walls has produced an entire book on the subject of Thoreau as scientist, where she argues that just as the fields of science and literature were violently dividing, Thoreau attempted to stitch them back together and heal their painful separation.⁴

Despite Thoreau's efforts, the literary and scientific worlds have divorced rather dramatically, yet his sensory balance has persisted with remarkable longevity in the field of American nature writing. Following in Thoreau's sensuous wake, any number of canonized American nature writers might also be considered champions of his sensory balance model. In Aldo Leopold's essential "Thinking Like a Mountain," quite possibly his most famous essay and important contribution to the conservation movement, he finds profound meaning in the howl of a wolf, and even posits that the best way to appreciate the interconnectedness of things is to inhabit the form of the mountain, to better hear and see and feel changes to the environment. In John Muir's work one finds no shortage of sensory engagement, from his elegiac description of the water ouzel, now commonly known as the American dipper, to his tale of climbing up into a Douglas fir tree to experience a storm in the mountains of California.

In *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson, probably the most influential nature writer of the twentieth century, explicitly champions the sensory balance model. She writes that "senses other than sight can prove avenues of delight and discovery" (83), and she goes on to cite various examples of appreciating elements of both the biophony and geophony through different senses (83-85). It should be noted that several of these examples appear prominently in *Walden*, such as the wood thrush and whip-poor-will; the latter's call she describes as a "monotonous night chant, rhythmic and insistent, sound that is felt almost more than heard" (85), a blending of the senses.

In the works of Thoreau and so many others, the sensory balance model, although manifesting differently in every writer, has become a widespread convention. It can even today be observed in how nature writing is taught in the academy and within other contexts. Nature writing courses have become increasingly popular, and it is typical of nature writing courses to require students to spend time outside engaging the senses, and then record their thoughts and experiences. A variety of nature writing course syllabi available on the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment's website demonstrate this.

The sensory balance model is visible also in the many workbooks available to professors who specialize in either creative writing or nature writing. In *Tell It Slant: Writing and Shaping Creative Nonfiction*, the authors begin the first chapter with a discussion of the five senses,

By paying attention to the sensory gateways of the body, you also begin to write in a way that naturally *embodies* experience, making it tactile for the reader. Readers tend to care deeply only about those things they *feel* in the body at a visceral level [...]. We experience the world through our senses. We must translate that experience into the language of the senses as well. (7)

What follows are five sections of exercises designed to help students write about the five senses. In another example, *The Alphabet of the Trees: A Guide to Nature Writing*, a collection of essays on how to teach nature writing, primary educator Christian McEwen explicitly discusses ways to coax children into writing about nature through each of the five senses in his essay, "O Taste and See!: Using the Five Senses to Write about Nature": "In the exercises that follow, I asked the children to slow down and pay attention, focusing in turn on each of the five senses [...] as they moved from sight to sound to touch, and on to memories of taste and smell, they surprised themselves with their own expertise. Their work became richer, dreamier and noticeably

more personal” (100). Much like in *Tell It Slant*, his essay is structured as various prompts he has used to elicit writing that values all five senses. The writing of the senses has become a highly valued skill in American classrooms, and is often considered fundamental for proficient writing.

Even in the world of acclaimed contemporary nature writing, Thoreau’s model of sensory balance is still in effect. Julian Hoffman’s *The Small Heart of Things: Being at Home in a Beckoning World*, published in 2013 and winner of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs’ award in creative nonfiction, is firmly entrenched in the Thoreauvian sensory balance model. In a passage about encountering what he believes to be a wild boar, Hoffman writes,

Out of the silence came a sudden, terrifying wail. I bolted up and listened carefully. It came again, piercing and piglike, a haunting siren-squeal. The cry lifted hairs on the back of my neck. [...] I packed my flask quickly away and edged toward the mass of pale stems. The sunlight was bright in my eyes, and the next shuddering wail echoed within me. (54)

Hoffman, in a short space, manages to depict sound, touch, and even taste while completely marginalizing the importance of sight. The sounds of the approaching creature, which turns out not to be a boar at all, are terrifying in their aural presentation, eliciting a tactile response with his shifting posture and alertness of the hair on his body. His flask is mentioned, invoking the cooling taste of water on the tongue. Not only is sight completely disregarded as a means for knowing, it is rendered useless, as the sunlight prevents him from seeing while the sounds enter deep into his being.

Interestingly, however, one of the few recent innovations in the nature writing genre, the rapid emergence of the blogosphere as a platform for nature writing, seems to be bringing nature writing back to its pre-Thoreauvian roots as a visually dominant genre. When writing about nature on the internet, it is essentially a given that the

author must include pictures of the landscape, flora, fauna, or other objects being written about. One might argue that nature blogging isn't real nature writing, but virtually any nature writer hoping to gain recognition in the modern era is expected to have a personal blog. Julian Hoffman, despite his recent acclaim, or perhaps because of it, is one such example, and he frequently updates his blog with posts that contain both text and pictures.⁵ The venues in which nature writers might seek to publish their work are also becoming increasingly digital and image-reliant.

It's also probably not an exaggeration to state that many readers of nature blogs only skim the text of the blog posts and then skip to the pictures. With the mass availability of excellent yet affordable photographic equipment, the visual element seems prevalent in the burgeoning world of nature blogging. Has nature writing returned to the era of Catesby and Bartram, where the hypervisual reigns? Has Thoreau's sensory balance model, after its long era of dominance, finally been upended by the emergence of widespread internet access and photographic equipment? We'll have to wait and see.

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Notes

¹ Davis Howes and Constance Classen's *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society* is another good source for this topic.

² Friesen even goes so far as to claim that Thoreau attached some superiority to the sense of sight.

³ This source, an unpublished manuscript, was obtained by contacting Ian Marshall, whom the author knows personally and once introduced at a nature writing conference while in graduate school. I asked for recommendations on scholarly sources for Thoreau's portrayal of the senses, and Marshall generously replied by sending his manuscript.

⁴ Laura Dassow Walls. *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

⁵ Julian Hoffman. *Notes from Near and Far: Impressions of Place*. <<https://julianhoffmanwordpress.com/>>.

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