

Литература и култура

Atlantic Images in Thoreau's Cape Cod

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This paper deals with one of Henry Thoreau's late works which encompasses the several excursions that he made to the Atlantic coast in the course of the last ten years of his life. It is focused on the shift in Thoreau's thinking from homocentrism to ecocentrism which makes US criticism duly dub him "America's nature saint". The paper's main argument is that when surrounded by nature peaceful and friendly, Thoreau tends to be biocentric; while, when faced with hostile, "naked" nature like that of the Atlantic coast and the ocean itself, he has absolutely no need of blurring the distinctions between man

and nature and, entirely homocentrically, withdraws from such nature into the safe realms of culture.

"... my thoughts grew foxy"#1, a February 1854 Journal entry reports. In Cape Cod, written in the months before and after this same February, "foxy thoughts" meander too. "What could a fox do, looking on the Atlantic...? What is the sea to a fox?", Thoreau asks in Cape Cod (978) and by the mere raising of such questions suggests – and, possibly, approaches – a course of "foxy" nonhuman nature thinking. Moreover, what surrounds his Cape Cod fox staring at the Atlantic, is to him "naked Nature – inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man" (Cape Cod, 979). How does the nonhuman look on the "inhumanly" nonhuman, or how "transparent" Thoreau's mediating eyeball can be? How is human thought "wasted" on naked Nature, or how the wilderness of the ocean in Cape Cod can possibly correspond to the wilderness of nonhuman creatures but never to the wildness of Thoreau's own thinking? How do "wilderness" and "wildness" correlate for Thoreau when Nature provides "no flattery"? Dealing with these and subsequent issues in what follows I will argue that the Atlantic images in Cape Cod offer Thoreau's "other" waters – waters so different from those of rivers and ponds, waters that invite no blurring of the distinctions between author and nature, but rather unlock all the untamable intellectual vigor of a very refined cultural (human) thinking.

"For hours, in fall days, I watched the ducks... tuck and veer and hold the middle of the pond," Thoreau writes in the very end of the "Brute Neighbors" chapter of Walden and then remarks: "...what beside safety they got by sailing in the middle of Walden I don't know, unless they love its water for the same reason that I do." (Wa, 180) This passage is telling in several ways. On the one hand, it reminds of the Thoreau of the February 5th Journal entry, who had been following a fox trail so long that his thoughts grew "foxy", by pointing to a Thoreau who, after having

watched a flock of ducks for hours, has grown certain "duckishness" of thinking that enables him to get closer to the ducks' possible "reason" to be returning to the pond over and over again. This reason, however, is not explicit in the text; it remains unrevealed, its only explicit qualification being that it is most probably "the same" – the same for Thoreau and the ducks, the same for the human and the nonhuman. What gives significance to this unnamed same reason is the feeling it evokes and this feeling is named – love. Love for Walden's water. And this is a shared feeling in Thoreau's perfectly balanced Walden world – shared with the ducks, with living Nature herself. Sharing a love like this – along with the reason to love, - is a way of truly merging into Nature, of being part and parcel of her, as Thoreau says elsewhere. By having a reason for a feeling and a feeling "the same" with the ducks, Nature's unquestionably own creatures, Thoreau tends to "dehumanise" as much as possible his very human affection for the pond in the wish to deepen and intensify it as "truer" to Nature. It was Thoreau's "deeply felt affection for the place", Lawrence Buell duly observes, which "provided the original incentive for his imaginative repossession of Walden from hundreds of different angles."#2 The ducks episode offers a distinctive case of such an imaginative repossession of Walden – through Thoreau imaginatively sharing feelings for the pond with his "brute neighbors". On the other hand, however, the Thoreauvian "I don't know" in the passage should not be overlooked. That Thoreau can only guess and never know for sure whether the ducks' feeling for Walden water is the same as his points to both his wish to overcome Nature's otherness and, at the same time, to his awareness of the impossibility to do that. His "unless" is his way out of the situation: he doesn't know about the ducks' reasons, "unless" they feel like him; i.e. if the ducks feel like him about Walden, then he can be sure about their reason. But, after all, how could he possibly know how the ducks feel? Of course, the ducks episode can be read as offering a simple case of anthropomorphization – after all, it is the ducks' reason that is possibly like Thoreau's, and not Thoreau's like that of the ducks.

Such a reading, however, would be depriving Thoreau – both his experience and his text – of what was always essential to him in all the different stages of his life – more or less transcendental, less or more scientific: namely, his constant need to “speak for Nature”, to be Nature’s own voice and world its cause by wording it, to achieve all the nuances of oneness with Nature – which means both taking oneself to Nature and Nature to oneself; and mostly – oneself to Walden and Walden to oneself. Sharing feelings with the ducks is establishing, in Thoreau’s own words from the late Journal, “a tender relation” (JT, X:252) to both them and the pond. (That Thoreau continued revising Walden, the “Brute Neighbors” chapter included, in the years of his increasing scientific approach towards nature study is well known. As it is well known that notwithstanding his shift of interest, Thoreau’s sense of personal intimacy with nature was only deepening with the time.) So what the ducks episode from Walden in fact offers is Thoreau’s biocentralized human love for the pond. (Unquestionably, love does have an enormously wide scope of realization.)

There is, in fact, one more aspect of human – nonhuman sameness of disposition and behavior this episode hints at and this is the need of safety. That the ducks sail in the middle of Walden for safety is so obvious that Thoreau would not discuss it. Just as he would not discuss his own reasons for withdrawing at Walden in the terms of safety – such would remain in his explicit text only the ducks’ reasons. No similarities would be pointed to here at all. While it is more than clear that safety was among Thoreau’s major reasons for his Walden experiment – safety from the company of men. Thoreau would always need his “mile from any neighbor” (Wa, 1) for... the sake of concentration? Yes, definitely, but... The threat of society is that of distraction, of course, but it is still a lot more complex and complicated... And when you avoid it, all the complications fall down – and you are safe, safe in Nature, safe at Walden Pond. Thoreau would always keep Walden “safe” from the intrusions of

men – and Walden will always keep him safe from the otherwise inescapable attacks of the society of men. There is nothing to “simplify” while at Walden – living there is the very result of having “simplified” all the societal distractions and dangers, it is the very and only guarantee for intellectual and emotional safety. The ducks are neighbors “brute” – but Thoreau would never want to be “a mile” from them; it is brutality unknown to Nature’s brutes from which he would always keep himself at a safe distance. Thoreau does not know the ducks’ reason to love the pond – unless it’s the same as his; the ducks do not know Thoreau’s reason to live by and sail in the middle of the pond – unless it’s the same as theirs... Safety included.

Significantly enough, the ducks episode is preceded by what is perhaps the wildest scene in Walden – the author’s game with the loon. The looning of the loon is “perhaps the wildest sound that is ever heard here” (Wa, 179), his laughter is “demoniac”, his howl “unearthly”. Still, however, the loon does not bring Thoreau any sense of danger, he is no threat at all. Chasing the loon and trying to predict the unpredictable is both challenging and pleasing, “a dance between subject and object”#3, as H. Daniel Peck beautifully puts it. “It was a pretty game, Thoreau writes, played on the smooth surface of the pond, a man against a loon.” (Wa, 178) The “against” of the final phrase, Peck rightfully observes, should not be considered in antagonistic, but rather in purely pictorial terms – “a man set against the background of a loon and both set against the background of Walden, which is the stage on which their drama unfolds”#4. In conclusion of his thoughts on the loon scene, Peck notes that “objects do not, by themselves, make a world; worlds are “made” by the interaction – the “dance” – of the creative self and the world”#5. What needs to be emphasized in addition here is the necessary harmony of this interaction, the inherent harmoniousness of the Thoreauvian “dancing”. There is, in fact, no “drama” between author and loon (Thoreau does not dramatize even his miscalculations of the directions the loon would take).

The two play together and their game is "pretty" because – notwithstanding the wild, piercing, satanical laughter, – it is a harmonious game. And although the whole loon scene "emphasizes the independence of object from subject"#6, the subject still makes effort to get hold of the object's "thoughts": "While he was thinking one thing in his brain, I was endeavoring to divine his thought in mine." (Wa, 178). To be doing this is, in fact, to be growing "loon thoughts" – just as fox-tracking in the snow may evoke "foxy thoughts", or duck-watching bring in the possibility of having reasons "the same" as the ducks... The wildness of the loon can not and does not harm the harmoniousness of this beautiful human–nonhuman thought-and-chase dance – not when it takes place in "the smoothness of the water" (Wa, 179), whose surface can only slightly be rippled by the wind... The ducks episode that follows the loon one offers the finalizing "smoothing" in the "Brute Neighbors" chapter – Thoreau tucks his safe Walden world in (non)human love for Walden water...

The waters of the Atlantic, however, affect him very differently. The ocean has attraction for Thoreau only when... "beautiful as a lake" (Cape Cod, 861). But it is usually "grand and sublime" (Ibid.) and invites absolutely no sense of closeness. No foxy thoughts are possible when looking upon the Atlantic waters – not only do such thoughts not come, but are never sought after. "What is the sea to a fox?" (Cape Cod, 978) is a question entirely different from what is the pond to the ducks, or to the loon, or to the trout, or to the thrush... – or to me... To myriads of questions like these Walden offers myriads of nuances of one simple answer – home; the peaceful, harmonious, and safe Walden world invites only the establishment of "tender relations" – and establishing such "tender relations" is experiencing closeness, even sameness in attitude and disposition with its wild life, an ongoing process of familiarizing – and, hopefully, being familiarized by – this world's nature's "tender" otherness. Asking what is the sea to a fox when viewing "the restless ocean" does by no means suggest a desire for growing any foxy thoughts; if there is

anything in common between Thoreau and his Atlantic fox when in front of the ocean, it is their displacement there – neither of them belongs to this vast, ferocious world, where everything is too “untamable to be familiar” (979). What Thoreau’s Cape Cod fox on the high bank of the ocean offers is, in fact, one more nuance of his own overall feeling of complete defamiliarization when looking on the Atlantic. And the same goes for the dogs coming to the sea-shore: they look “out of place” there, “Come with a design to bark at a whale, perchance!... Still less could you think of a cat bending her steps that way, and shaking her wet foot over the Atlantic...” (978) Author, fox, dogs, imaginative cat cannot feel at ease in the midst of “naked Nature” - on the bleak strand of Cape Cod Thoreau feels utterly dispossessed of the landscape #7; what he sees there he would never, as he had done earlier in *A Week*, call “mine” (350). Moreover, being out of place there along with the fox or the dogs does not bring him any closer to them, does not evoke feelings possibly “the same” as theirs as in the ducks’ episode from *Walden*; quite on the contrary – they remain distant, alien, an inherent part of the whole alienating surrounding, and thus only sharpening Thoreau’s awareness of absurdity. In fact, the absurdity of Thoreau’s own being “at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray” (*Cape Cod*, 979) does not connect him with the absurdity of the fox or the dogs being also there, but rather emphasizes his very human reasons – or lack of reasons - to be staring at the Atlantic waters. In such a situation he cannot have reasons “the same” with either the brute newcomers to the shore, or the brute inhabitants of the sea and the seaside. Barking at a whale has definitely nothing to do with dancing with a loon... no matter how wild... “What could a fox do looking on the Atlantic...? What is the sea to a fox?”: these questions here read as “What could a MAN do looking to the Atlantic? And “What is the sea to a MAN?” The absurdity of displacement here does not unify human and nonhuman, it only intensifies Thoreau’s homocentrism. Only a peacefully rewarding place-sense can provoke Thoreau’s biocentrism; biocentric he simply cannot be, when Nature around is

"inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man" (979). "Walden, is that you?" is a question possible only when Nature around is humanly sincere and self-identification inviting. "Atlantic ocean, is that you?" is a question impossible: on the Atlantic bank Thoreau simply cannot be nature self-identifying, or biocentric. In fact, what he can only be amidst naked, uninviting and alienating Nature, is Man Thinking, fortified in his homocentrism. The fox is there only to suggest it is of no help – displacement can never be helpful; hence, "foxy" thinking here would have been one more way of experiencing displacement and, therefore, it won't be sought after. The only way for Thoreau to justify his (human) presence in the "vast morgue" (979) of the alienating Atlantic wilderness is to invest it with life, human life, with humanity and human culture – i.e., to overcome displacement by replacing it with culture.

Dealing with the February 5, 1854 Journal entry and what does it mean to think like a fox, Nancy Craig Simmons duly observes: "As he [Thoreau] tracks the fox, he comes to identify with it to the point that distinctions between himself and nature are blurred. Led by the fox rather than the form, Thoreau does not obliterate himself, even while he enables nature to reveal itself; he speaks for and foregrounds nature. To think like a fox is to think beyond conventional and societal limitations and address more senses than one. This kind of "extra-vagance" is truly biocentric writing."⁸ This definitely is not the case in the Cape Cod fox episode: the fox's inadequacy in front of the ocean is not Thoreau's inadequacy there. And, it seems, having inadequacy reasons different from those of the Cape Cod fox is Thoreau's salvation in the midst of the hostile Atlantic wilderness.

"Creeping along the endless beach amid the sun-squawl and the foam, it occurs to us that we, too, are the product of sea-slime" (979): Thoreau's disgust is evident; the feeling of oneness with the bare elements is obviously unwanted, repelling. This is the only moment of "contact"

between human and nonhuman naked nature physicality in Cape Cod. Earlier, when having similar experience of confronting sheer "Matter" at Mt. Katahdin, Thoreau was led to a disorientation: "Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?" (The Maine Woods, 646). And, even more than that, he was led to feel alienated from his own body: "this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me" (Ibid., 646). In Cape Cod however, Thoreau would not let himself be "disembodied" by the contact with the rough and rude physicality of the Atlantic ocean and shore. The "product of sea-slime" he would feel for just one single moment, in order to overcome the feeling by a very culturally refined feeling of disgust – a feeling he would gladly share with the one recorded in the Copenhagen antiquaries: that of "Thorhall, the companion of Thorfinn during his expedition to Vinland in 1007, [who] sailed past [these shores] in disgust" (980). Then Thoreau mentions of "Thorhall, who was disappointed at not getting any wine to drink there, determined to sail north again in search of Vinland" (Ibid.), and, in a typical manner, goes on with providing the Latin translation of the Icelandic antiquaries along with his own English translation. Having thus documentarily justified his own reasons to feel repelled by the Cape Cod view, i.e. having proved his cultural and historical reasons for feeling repulsively dislocated there, Thoreau continues thinking on the Atlantic wilderness: "Though once there were more whales cast up here, I think that it was never more wild than now. We do not associate the idea of antiquity with the ocean, nor wonder how it looked a thousand years ago, as we do of the land, for it was equally wild and unfathomable always." (Ibid.). Not to associate the idea of antiquity with the ocean means not to associate the ocean with the idea of culture, which, in its turn, means to consider and experience the ocean only as hostile, alienating wilderness, as unapproachable otherness - and this is exactly what unlocks the safe shelter of culture as its counterpoint. Along with the need for mild, gentle, friendly Nature.

No, Thoreau was definitely not John Muir, who had “a tendency to seek out encounter with extreme otherness, discomfort, and disorientation... as if such encounters somehow clarify and give meaning to human life.”#9. This is exactly what Thoreau would never seek out; this is exactly what would not clarify and give meaning to human life in his eyes. Because it is naked Nature – “inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man” (Cape Cod, 979)... Why would man waste thought on it, then?... If John Muir had left the University of Wisconsin to study instead at what he called “the University of the Wilderness” (Ibid., 371), Thoreau’s choice was definitely the Universe of Wildness. “Thoreau clearly identifies “wildness” not as a distant place but as a quality”, Laura Dassow Walls rightfully puts it. “It need not, then, be housed in a “wilderness” – yet it is hard to dissociate the two concepts, to accept one without the other.”#10. Although this is generally so, it is the Atlantic, however, which clearly dissociates the two concepts in Thoreau’s vision – extreme otherness can only provoke his yearning for true wildness, i.e. for intellectual freedom and enterprise beyond – and against – alienating naked Nature. “To go to sea! Why, it is to have the experience of Noah, - to realize the deluge. Every vessel is an ark.” (Cape Cod, 981) Hardly a better cultural metaphoric can be found to express hostile, threatening, howling otherness.

Counterbalancing the disgusting feeling provoked by the sea slime, what follows in Cape Cod is the peaceful scene of the interesting mirage on the shrubby sand-hill in Provincetown. This “very pretty mirage”, Thoreau quotes a Copenhagen expert, “had something to do with the name “Furdustrandás”, i.e. Wonder-Strands, given, as I have said, in the old Icelandic account of Thorfinn’s expedition to Vinland in the year 1007.”(980) Thoreau is back to the antiquaries imagery he had used to culturally justify his sense of loathing provoked by the Atlantic waters’ roughness. Now, in a typically Romanticist manner, he would associate himself with the hero of the Icelandic account by playing with names: “But whether Thor-finn saw the mirage here or not, Thor-eau, one of the same

family, did." And even more than that: "Thor-eau was born to see it." (983). It is a well-known fact that Thoreau was very attracted by names and naming, especially self-naming, and one of the ways he liked to quasi relate his own name was with that of Thor, the Scandinavian god of thunder, rain and farming. Whether here for simply the philological game or not, such a humorous self-reference is possible with Thoreau only when it is restful and beautifully settled around. When confronting the vast, defamiliarizing wilderness of the ocean, Thoreau would need the cultural support of the Thorfinn narrative to overcome sensual disgust; when calmed down and safe in peaceful nature, he is free to do anything, joyfully playing with his own name included.

Cape Cod proceeds with the author and his companion leaving the sea through scenes of "perfectly smooth" waters, beautifully painted landscapes, "most novel and remarkable" autumnal woods, and "warmer colors than I had associated with the New England coast" (984-985). The "blow, blow, blow, - roar, roar, roar, - tramp, tramp, tramp, - without interruption" (984) is left behind; tranquility is restored. So well restored, that had a fox appeared from somewhere, Thoreau could have possibly grown foxy thoughts. The chapter, however, ends with the "roaring sea" again and with the conclusion of the companions "that fishing here and in a pond were not, in all respects, the same" (996). Thoreau would not fish here with his face weather beaten; his place is the pond where one can only get mildly sun-burnt. He would fish in Walden Pond – and fish there also "other things than usual" (J VI:45). It is there that he would dance with a loon, love the pond water for the same reasons as the ducks, think as a muskrat, a chipmunk, a cardinal, or a thrush... What could a fox do looking on the Atlantic? Simply go back to the woods. What could Thoreau do looking on the Atlantic? Simply go back to the pond where he belongs. Where Nature is not repulsively naked, but nicely clothed and quite humanly sincere and ready to devote thoughts on man... Where man can so easily "fall in love with a shrub-oak" (JT 9: 146)...

NOTES:

1. Quoted by Nancy Craig Simmons in "Speaking for Nature": Thoreau and the "Problem" of "Nature Writing". *Thoreau's Sense of Place. Essays in American Environmental Writing*, Ed. Richard J. Schneider, Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 2000, 231.
2. Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*, Cambridge, MA-London, UK: Harvard UP, 1995, 208.
3. H. Daniel Peck. *Thoreau's Morning Work. Memory and Perception in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, the Journal, and Walden*, New Haven / London: Yale UP, 1990, 121.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 123.
6. Ibid., 120.
7. See *ibid.*, 24.
8. Nancy Craig Simmons. "Speaking for Nature": Thoreau and the "Problem" of "Nature Writing"..., 233-34.
9. *A New Literary History of America*. Ed. By Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2009, 373.
10. Laura Dassow Walls. "Believing in Nature: Wilderness and Wildness in Thoreauvian Science". In: *Thoreau's Sense of Place. Essays in American Environmental Writing*, Ed. Richard J. Schneider, Iowa City: U of Iowa Press, 2000, 15.

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