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Thoreau: Friend or Foe of the Anthropocene?

As someone whose scholarship is focused on American Transcendentalism in general, and Henry David Thoreau in particular, I'm quite intrigued by the idea of the Anthropocene as an interpretive and critical category, mainly because I'm not quite sure that it can be usefully explained by the 19th century figures that I've spent so much time seeking to understand. This may seem counterintuitive. Isn't it the case that Thoreau was always writing about the relationship between human beings and the natural world? Wouldn't he have been eager to have the depredations and dominion of humanity acknowledged and discussed? But the more that I think about it, the more it seems to me that the most famous of Thoreau's works are too positive in their view of the relationship between humanity and nature to be useful in establishing that we are living in an era where nature as something "wild" has vanished—and the end of nature as a sustaining source for life on Earth is within reach. Thoreau was in many ways a conventional romantic thinker who loves to dramatize the supposed "Order of Nature" beneath any visually apparent disorder. At least in his earlier, completed works, Thoreau couldn't conceive of a world in which nature was entirely overwhelmed by humanity, and he frequently portrays nature as having the ability to out wait (if not outwit!) human beings or even as a force that is sublimely invulnerable to any human violence at all. Humanity may occasionally change nature, but its hold on control will always seem only desperately tenuous to Thoreau.

In the Saturday chapter early in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, for example, Thoreau writes with some concern about how recently introduced industrial and commercial changes to the Concord River have impacted its fish:

Salmon, Shad, and Alewives were formerly abundant here, and taken in weirs by the Indians, who taught this method to the whites, by whom they were used as food and as manure, until the dam, and afterward the canal at Billerica, and the factories at Lowell, put an end to their migrations hitherward; though it is thought that a few more enterprising shad may still occasionally be seen in this part of the river. It is said, to account for the destruction of the fishery, that those who at that time represented the interests of the fishermen and the fishes, remembering between what dates they were accustomed to take the grown shad, stipulated, that the dams should be left open for that season only, and the fry, which go down a month later, were consequently stopped and destroyed by myriads. Others say that the fish-ways were not properly constructed (28-29).

He is aware that the fishes' disappearance was caused by human beings by one mistake or another—either a misconception about seasonal timing or a design flaw in the dams' "fish-ways." And yet, he goes on to note that, "Perchance, after a few thousands of years, if the fishes will be patient, and pass their summers elsewhere, meanwhile, nature will have levelled the Billerica dam, and the Lowell factories, and the Grass-ground River run clear again, to be explored by new migratory shoals, even as far as the Hopkinton pond and Westborough swamp" (29). He has quite a serene confidence that Nature's dominion will outlast that of human beings—Nature only has to bide its time until the works of humanity pass away. But it isn't the case that those fish can simply find a place to wait for human civilization to crumble. How differently those of us who live in the long wake of the Industrial Revolution see things from someone experiencing only its beginnings!

Thoreau betrays a different serenity in the face of the destruction when he celebrates death as a natural necessity in *Walden's* penultimate chapter, "Spring":

I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp, — tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises

and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal. Compassion is a very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will not bear to be stereotyped (576).

The fact that Thoreau celebrates how nature is destructive within itself—not only allowing animals to eat one another for food, but also encouraging them to reproduce to the point that accidental “roadkill” is no real loss—suggests not just that violence is “innocence” within the natural world, but also could present an argument that human beings’ own violence and over-reproduction are “natural” rather than harmful. Is this poison not poisonous after all from Thoreau’s perspective? How can one argue for the preservation of Nature from humanity if one doesn’t acknowledge that Nature can be harmed in the first place? Or even worse that because animals eat one another and die all the time that “compassion” itself is open to question (Is Thoreau welding the natural world to his own distrust of philanthropy as portrayed in the book’s first chapter here)? Surely it is significant that this most “bloody” passage in *Walden* is meant only to show that life will ultimately triumph—we’re far away from an apocalyptic vision that might be inspired by the Anthropocene here.

Perhaps for these reasons, Thoreau scholars (who tend to be, unsurprisingly, quite aware of contemporary eco-criticism and environmental science) are increasingly drawn to Thoreau’s later, unfinished natural history works—here, as Rochelle Johnson has argued, he seems increasingly interested in exploring nature as matter rather than as a metaphor for a human spiritual experiences, a celebration of the material that Johnson feels is even less common in Emerson’s work than in Thoreau’s (3). Julianne Chow also points out in her essay “Partial Readings: Thoreau’s Studies in Natural History’s Casualties,” how these later natural history writings serve as models for Anthropocene scholars who are interested in uncovering local and

experiential changes brought about by the era in a more “bottom up way” than the frequently “top down” methods of academic literary theory. It seemed clear to me that Chow could not base her own project on *Walden* and *A Week* because they participate in the same kind of “top down” theoretical thinking in pushing their own Transcendental ideas (and what Johnson might identify as an overwhelming spiritual metaphor shutting out actual, material nature) that she feels scholars of the Anthropocene should be wary of in their own work. While I hope that Thoreau’s earlier, complete, and perhaps overgeneralizing works will always receive their due in English courses, perhaps a more Anthropocene-centric professor might start a unit on Thoreau with less frequently taught texts like “The Succession of Forest Trees” and “Wild Apples” in their Survey of American Literature course if they wanted to emphasize Thoreau at his least abstract, theoretical, and transcendental. The same texts could also be used to follow Chow’s advice to emphasize the space between the different types of natural realizations and idealizations that Thoreau presents for his readers (129). Indeed, given that Thoreau’s records of “ice-outs” on Walden Pond, flowering times in the spring, and the return of birds to Concord have inspired actual studies showing the local effects of Climate Change where he once lived, perhaps it makes sense to start with the aspects of Thoreau that are closest to the desperation of our current moment, and then to work back to the more spiritual and transcendental viewpoint that he held earlier in this life (Primack 5). Or perhaps the concept of the Anthropocene is just a reminder to treat Thoreau’s early works, in all their humorous irony and serious play, as literary works recreating the world in their own imperfect image—a process that invariably leaves out many other perspectives to focus on the “I” that Thoreau acknowledged we are always speaking through (*Walden* 325).

Works Cited

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