

## Thoreauvian Narcissism in *Walden*

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### Abstract

*Walden* seems to be a relatively straightforward text that achieves a unanimous comprehension about Thoreau's embrace of pastoral idealism and refutation of urban materialism. Under the surface of this common interpretation, however, lies the author's narcissistic tendency that disrupts the moral messages inculcated into the minds of the inferior others. The purpose of this study is to explore Thoreauvian narcissism in *Walden* through the synthesis of scholarly critiques on his life and thought. As a paradigmatic figure of Romantic and Transcendentalist thought, Thoreau advocates the reverence for nature and exploration of inner depth in his Walden experiment. However, the passionate search and urgent pleas for spiritual freedom are inseparable from his self-consciousness. The Transcendental vision in *Walden* implicates the appropriation of nature and discrimination of others. The two strands of narcissism constitute the contents of this study. Thoreau not only sublimates natural phenomena through his intense perception but also intends to soar above the modern world by criticizing its commercial values. Thoreau's self-attachment has an implicit presence throughout *Walden*, triggering all his idiosyncratic ideas about nature and humanity.

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### Thoreauvian Narcissism in *Walden*

On hearing the classic quotes like “The sun is but a morning star” or “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” who wouldn’t know that it is *Walden* and nothing else! Every schoolchild knows that this book is all about the embrace of pastoral idealism and censure of urban materialism, but what they may not know is that in the eyes of distinguished writers and critics, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* is an epitome of failure. Through the synthesis of the scholarly critiques on Thoreau’s life and thought, this study detects two strands of Thoreauvian narcissism that pervade *Walden*: the appropriation of nature and the discrimination of inferior others.

In “Walden and the Curse of Trade,” Michael T. Gilmore comments that “[p]ersonal and historical disappointment determine the shape of Thoreau’s masterpiece. In important ways, it is a defeated text” (223). The retreat to Walden, according to Gavin Jones, is “provoked by his [Thoreau’s] failure to settle down into a conventionally productive life” (63). The two critics share the similar view that the real life failure of Thoreau contributes to the gestation of *Walden*. Richard Bridgman reinforces this idea by stating that Thoreau’s absorption in nature is to seek relief from the “quotidian irritations” of social reality (“Rags and Meanness” 183). The failure of *Walden* finds the most sonorous and reverberating expression from his spiritual mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson. In his 1862 oration for Thoreau’s funeral, Emerson illustrates vividly the failed ambition of *Walden* as follows:

He referred every minute fact to cosmical laws. . . . I can’t help counting it a fault in him that he had no ambition. Wanting this instead of engineering for all America, he was the captain of a huckleberry-party. Pounding beans is good to the end of pounding empires one of these days; but if, at the end of years, it is still only beans! (587)

With a derisive tone, Emerson points out Thoreau’s limitation as a captain of a huckleberry party with nothing else to do but “pounding beans” ! For Emerson, Thoreau is a symbol of “epistemological failure”: “Thoreau fails to generate supplemental knowledge from natural facts. We are left with small details, with a process of reduction to the trivial and insignificant, which ultimately has a comic effect (Jones 67). Emerson summarizes his objec-

tion to Thoreau's indulgence in small details with the remark that "[t]o him [Thoreau] there was no such thing as size!" (587) Thoreau's obsession with extracting profound meanings from trivial details seems to invite more censure than affirmation.

Emerson is not the only intellectual that disparages Thoreau's Transcendental vision. In the introduction to the critical reviews on Thoreau, Harold Bloom heaps on Thoreau such negative attributes as a "prig" or an "elitist" haunted by the "self-consciousness" to practice native arts and crafts in the woods (8). Bloom endorses Leon Edel's judgment of Thoreau as an "American Narcissus" and quotes his observation as follows:

Of the creative spirits that flourished in Concord, Massachusetts, during the middle of the nineteenth century, it might be said that Hawthorne loved men but felt estranged from them, Emerson loved ideas even more than men, and Thoreau loved himself. . . . He was a fragile Narcissus embodied in a homely New Englander. (qtd. in Bloom 3)

Loren Eiseley similarly regards Thoreau as the American counterpart of Narcissus, so biased and provincial that he would call a Canadian lynx as indigenously New England (51). The insistence on renaming the Concord lynx reverberates with his persistence in pounding Walden beans. Either the lynx or the beans transcend from their ordinariness to signify something significant.

As the Greek Narcissus has a false view of himself, Thoreau the nineteenth century Narcissus harbors a distorted view of nature: "Thoreau strove with an unequalled intensity to observe nature in all its forms, whether in the raw shapes of mountains or the travelings of seeds and deer mice. . . . The more objects he beheld, the more immortal he became" (Eiseley 58). In *Walden*, he prescribes a draught of morning air for the modern illness. The hum of a mosquito in the morning is "Homer's requiem," an "Iliad and Odyssey in the air" singing Achilles' wrath and Odysseus' wanderings (Thoreau 60). When Thoreau moves into his house that still lacks a chimney and plastering, he feels himself a god on Olympus. His cabin, however shabby and humble, is like the palace on Olympus. The landscape is a paradise with the winds carrying the message of creation: "The morning wind forever blows, the

poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth everywhere” (Thoreau 57). Thoreau sees himself as one of the few elites that can detect the immortality of nature. Not only can his ears hear the celestial music of winds, but his body is empowered by the “small Herculean labor” of raising beans: “[m]y beans --- attached me to the earth, and so I got strength like Antaeus” (Thoreau 103-104). The humble setting of his Walden cabin and the manual labor of planting crops lend him wings over the earthly life, providing the best palliative for the vices of the modern society.

The problem of Thoreau’s *Walden* is the distortion of nature as Bridgman points out: “nature wore the colors of the spirit; the world could but reflect his moods” (“Rags and Meanness” 183). When the central “I” imposes its will on all that it sees, nature becomes the subjective projection of human values. Thoreau’s assertion of the depth of Walden pond illustrates this point. In “The Pond in winter,” Thoreau is determined to measure its depths as it is rumored to be bottomless. When he cuts through its icy top and gazes into the “perennial waveless serenity” within, he concludes that “[h]eaven is under our feet as well as over our heads” (Thoreau 187). The pond is transfigured into the human soul at the juncture between earth and heaven. The bottomless pond becomes a metaphor of the depth of human soul: “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” (Thoreau 189). Thoreau regards the water as the double shadow of himself and reads divinity into natural phenomena. So, every time he goes for a drink of water, he communes with the timeless aspect of his own self. Walden Pond is transparent and bottomless to bear witness to purity and inner depth. Not only the pond but all the universe is infused with his idiosyncratic values. As Perry Miller comments, “Thoreau never saw nature as nature” but as “something instrumental”: “had he [Thoreau] achieved what he intended, he would have become pure act, and his beloved nature could have been consigned to oblivion” (33). Sherman Paul echoes Miller’s view by saying that Thoreau “began with surface before he spoke of depth, with the transcendent rather than the permanent, with complexity before simplicity” (301). Based on the critiques of Bridgman, Miller and Paul, Thoreau expresses appreciation of nature in *Walden*, but he doesn’t grasp the suchness of nature. In fact, he is more interested in generating the

expressions associated with nature than enjoying nature for its own sake. Thoreau's nature is only a surface to be penetrated so that something permanent and divine can be released.

As a fervent spiritual seeker, Thoreau is gifted in perceiving the metaphysical correspondence between nature and spirit. But in the eyes of Bloom, "it is Thoreau who considers things as books, for whom a fact was an epiphany of God. . . . the rebel Thoreau remained a Wordsworthian, reading nature for evidences of a continuity in the ontological self that nature simply could not provide" (8). For Bloom, Thoreau is a Romantic child that misinterprets or overly interprets nature. Not only Bloom but Robert Weisbuch recognizes Wordsworth's "incognito" presence throughout *Walden*: "Wordsworth appears throughout *Walden*, though always incognito" (249). Comparing Thoreau with his Romantic predecessor, Weisbuch concludes that Thoreau "enacts what Wordsworth contemplates" (250) and that he "takes a far more public stance, that of a Jeremiah haranguing his neighbors, all of the nation" (255). There is no denying that Wordsworthian Romanticism has a strong influence on Thoreau's Transcendental insight and that Transcendentalists share the Romantic themes of inner depth, spontaneity and creativity. *Walden* is the exemplar to extol the Romantic communion with nature.

In David McMahan's view, Thoreau is one of the most visible Transcendentalists that "placed a high spiritual value on the solitary contemplation of nature" (167). The life philosophy as advocated in *Walden* springs from the Transcendental period when the new ways of understanding nature are ushered to defy the harsh conditions of modernity. Wilderness is sublimated as a wholesome spiritual refuge and solitude serves as an antidote to the materialism and alienation of a commercialized society. William Rounseville Alger, one of Thoreau's contemporary Transcendentalists, describes the then urban life as a cauldron of anxiety and greed characterized by an "overtaxed," "weary," and "uneasy" condition (168). Facing such a society featuring "incessant throbs," "multiplicity," and "change," Alger considers solitude the best remedy as it is an "unfaltering unity" to be allied with the infinite (170-1). Thoreau shares with the Transcendentalists' insight in the 19<sup>th</sup> century America, where the market-driven life was flourishing with the consequence of competition, reification and alienation. Through the communion with nature, individuals blend with the landscape and be-

come part and parcel of nature. Thoreau's *Walden* is the manifesto of his success in the union with nature wherein everything is interrelated and animated. The seeming oblivion of self in the perfect unison, however, is disrupted by his self-consciousness all the time.

Thoreau sees nature, transfigures it into something sublime and further allies his selfhood with it so that his life becomes celestial. He blends nature writing and religious writing, instilling the language of religion into the observation of nature. Going into woods is to visit shrines. Getting up early and bathing in the pond is a "religious exercise" and one of the best things that he did (Thoreau 59-60). Thoreau as well as his contemporary Transcendentalists "confused nature with a hypostatized divine reason which man could activate within himself" (Eiseley 56). Behind the description of natural details lurks his self-consciousness. While William Blake sees a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower, Thoreau sees himself in everything in nature: "As I walked on the railroad causeway, I used to wonder at the halo of light around my shadow, and would fain fancy myself one of the elect" (Thoreau 135). The alliance of himself with the elect and immortal shapes his self-assumed identity as a prophet "to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning" to wake up his neighbors (Thoreau 57). This opening sentence of *Walden* foretells the infiltration of Thoreauvian narcissism into the Romantic self-exploration. He is the sober and persistent "chanticleer" in charge of awakening the materialistic world out of its shallowness.

According to Geoffrey Hartman, what the Romantics seek and fail to achieve is "anti-self-consciousness" (51). It is self-consciousness that alienates Romantic artists from life and imposes the burden of a self which religion or death might dissolve. Thoreau is afflicted with the same self-consciousness so that his efforts for spiritual liberation turn out futile. The search for the pastoral idealism leads to a restlessly unsettled mind, which in turn deprives him of serenity and spontaneity. Despite his close relation with the fish in Walden pond, Thoreau doesn't lead a peaceful and tranquil life. Otherwise, James Russell Lowell wouldn't have remarked that "Mr. Thoreau had not a healthy mind, or he would not have been so fond of prescribing. His whole life was a search for the doctor" (qtd. in Bloom 5). Lowell's criticism may be too harsh, but it activates a closer scrutiny of whether Thoreau deserves the labels of a "misanthrope," "moralizer," and "supreme egotist" (Eiseley 52), or a "mystic,"

“transcendentalist” and “natural philosopher” as he himself claims (qtd. in Seybold 15-16). Actually, Thoreau is all of these labels combined together. He is the egotistic Transcendentalist equipped with the mystic vision to moralize nature and meanwhile decry social corruption. As a natural philosopher, he has a sensitive mind to observe nature, which resonates with today’s environmental concern and ecological discussions. Recent scholars, Lawrence Buell being one of them, consider Thoreau a mirror of American environmental writing (115). Earlier, Eiseley has also perceived Thoreau’s vision as the “foundation of the then-unnamed science---ecology” (60).

Despite the scientific dedication to observing and recording nature, Thoreau fails to be a real scientist. What he sees in nature is the higher law, like the fallen humanity or spiritual renewal instead of nature itself. In Buell’s opinion, Thoreau’s “ideational level of contemplation” is influenced by Emerson’s “religiophilosophical” mode of reflecting on nature (117). For Branka Arsić, Thoreau is less an ecologist than a thinker obsessed with the problem of life (19). Arsić perceives radical vitalism in Thoreau’s writing, tracing it back to the scientific theory around 1840 and the anguished response to his brother’s death. Pervading the science of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century is “materialistic vitalism,” which regards all natural phenomena as alive and energetic: “Metal, rocks, stones and dust particles were all considered to be vitally animated” (Arsić 118). While Thoreau’s vitalism is rooted in science, it emerges as a central issue in the wake of his brother’s death. The intense grief prompts him to ponder the meaning of death, which in turn leads to his conception of life as a “germinal matter” with the capacity to change and transform into something else (Arsić 126). In his world, death does not have the power to interrupt life but instead “functions as the force of its transformation, enabling us to experience the worldly finitude while ushering us into the animated infinity” (Arsić 19-20). Thoreau’s scientific imagination triggers all sorts of metamorphosis throughout *Walden*: “Animation, alteration and transformation are inherent not just to vegetal, animal or human life but to the inanimate” (Arsić 118). Despite Arsić’s affirmative reading of Thoreau’s vitalism, the tendency to have a metaphysical reflection on nature not only deters him from being an empirical scientist but also intensifies the attachment to what has been lost to him. The yearning for immortality is derived from the agony

and anguish of bereavement.

Thoreau's obsession with immortality finds a vivid illustration in the anecdote of a "beautiful and strong bug" near the end of *Walden*:

Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in Connecticut, and afterward in Massachusetts — from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn. Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and **immortality** [my own emphasis] strengthened by hearing of this? (Thoreau 220-1)

The revival of the bug demonstrates Thoreau's belief in vitalism. Life is seen as a generative force that never ceases but evolves into something else. Thoreau discerns in this bug a symbol of resurrection and immortality, while for Bridgman, it is simply a model of "prolonged gestation" rather than "immortality." (*Dark Thoreau* 154). Thoreau's faith of eternal life and perpetual growth finds other expressions in *Walden*. When the ice of the pond is melted with the coming of spring, the pond will be transformed from stasis to movement and fluidity. Spring and the flowing water of the pond suggest spiritual rebirth and the dynamism of life. Furthermore, the light of the spring morning is the strongest "proof of immortality," which drives away death and awakens the dead from the grave (Thoreau 209). Vitalism explains Thoreau's tendency to break the boundary of the animate and inanimate, life and death.

Seen from Thoreau's vitalistic vision, any anecdotal experience can be transformed into a spiritual symbol in *Walden*:

One day, when my axe had come off and I had cut a green hickory for a wedge, driving it with a stone, and had placed the whole to soak in a pond hole in order to swell the wood, I saw a striped snake run into the water, and he lay on the bottom, apparently without inconvenience, as long as I staid, or more than a quarter of an hour; perhaps he had not yet fairly come out of the torpid state. It appeared to me that

for a like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life. (Thoreau 27-8)

A moment of wielding his axe leads to the analogy of spiritual torpor. The natural fact of a snake's seeking shelter reflects human degradation. Thoreau is a vehement preacher wielding the axe as his pen with Walden project as his sermon. In the "Bean-Field," he declares that he is practicing an agriculture of morals, sowing "such seeds ... as sincerity, truth, simplicity, faith, innocence, and the like" (Thoreau 110). For him, planting beans is to plant the seeds of truth into people's minds. The beans are not merely agricultural products to be cultivated and eaten. They are "tropes and expression" utilized by Thoreau the parable maker:

Not that I wanted beans to eat, for I am by nature a Pythagorean, so far as beans are concerned, whether they mean porridge or voting, and exchanged them for rice; but, perchance, as some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day. It was on the whole a rare amusement, which, continued too long, might have become a dissipation. (Thoreau 108)

The "rare amusement" of being a "parable-maker" exhibits Thoreau's ambition of appropriating his farmland as a pulpit and his labor as a sermon. While drawn to a spiritual life, he questions and doubts its efficacy. That's why Eiseley calls him a "double agent" who never wholly belongs to the Transcendental camp (59). This "rare amusement" of planting beans for preaching morals might turn out ineffective if continued too long. At the end of this passage, Thoreau acknowledges implicitly the failure of using nature as tropes or expressions. The optimistic hope of mankind's recovery from spiritual poverty is intertwined with the pessimistic foreboding of its failure. The dark side of Thoreau questions and doubts his own faith. The confident tone does not persist but shifts to the uncertain. The misanthropic view of humans as wreckers doomed to the onslaught of savagery is another instance to show his wavering and pessimistic thought. He detects the resemblance of ants' war to human wars, and concludes that humans are the brutes seeking food, shelter and survival just like the ants. The hope of spiritual recovery is threatened by the darkness of savagery.

He oscillates between the affirmation of human potential and the disappointment of human atrocities. Thoreau's Transcendental insight may transform the profane into the profound, bequeathing celestial light on natural facts. But the same Transcendental impulse may turn the other way around, chasing something dark and evil beyond the comprehension of ordinary eyes. Thoreau sees in nature what he wills to see rather than the suchness of nature.

Besides the appropriation of nature for the moral purpose, Thoreauvian narcissism finds another expression in his identification with the savage animals:

I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound, with a strange abandonment, seeking some kind of venison which I might devour, and no morsel could have been too savage for me. The wildest scenes had become unaccountably familiar. I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good. The wildness and adventure that are in fishing still recommended it to me. I like sometimes to take rank hold on life and spend my day more as the animals do. (Thoreau 140)

Wilderness becomes his spiritual refuge, and the oblivion of self is achieved through the union with animals. This passage shows Thoreau's reverence for the spiritual and savage, and his complacency about their coexistence in his identity. He affirms the role of a hound roaming woods for venison and likes to spend his day more as the animals do. The admiration of the savage impulse exhibits his aversion to the urbane and commercialized culture.

In "The Ponds," he denounces trade and expresses hostility to the process of exchange, to what he calls the "curse of trade" (Gilmore 224). Named after a business-minded farmer, Flint, Flint Pond represents the prevalence of plundering nature for commercial use. For Thoreau, Flint is a commercialized farmer who never saw the pond, bathed in it or loved it. The vulgar man "loved better the reflecting surface of a dollar or a bright cent in which he could see his own brazen face" (Thoreau 131). On his farm everything has a price; he doesn't love the beauty of fruits but cares about their market value. Thoreau curses the marketing system, because "fruits do not yield their true flavor to the purchaser of them, nor to

him who raises them for the market” (Thoreau 116). The only way to obtain the true flavor of fruits is to pluck them by one’s own labor as the cowboy or partridge does, because “the ambrosial and essential part of the fruit” will be lost in the market cart (Thoreau 131). In “Conclusion,” he urges that his country folks “be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds . . . opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought” (Thoreau 212). But in “Bean-Field,” Thoreau grants the usage of beans as porridge or means of exchange although they are also cultivated to express something abstract and lofty. While he opposes the reification of natural objects under capitalism, he validates the exchange value of beans for rice.

However hostile to the market logic, Thoreau has to rely on the strategy of trade to build his heavenly kingdom on earth:

I have always endeavored to acquire strict business habits; they are indispensable to every man. If your trade is with the Celestial Empire, then some small counting house on the coast, in some Salem harbor, will be fixture enough. You will export such articles as the country affords, purely native products, much ice and pine timber and a little granite, always in native bottoms. (Thoreau 13)

Thoreau congratulates himself on being a Salem businessman “peddling a ‘Celestial Empire.’” Such an empire, in Weisbuch’s opinion, is the one that “refuses history’s claims and reverses time’s decay” (255). Out of the “native bottoms” of Salem are produced such “native products” as ice, pine timber, and granite that are to be sold to his neighbors and the whole country. All these products signify his faith of immortality that defies the fleeting time. Yet, to establish his “Celestial Empire,” he cannot dispense with the “counting house” and the business skills. Thoreau’s spiritual revolution needs nourishment from the old world that he despises. The earthly paradise as Thoreau conceives is inescapably anchored in the past. The house near the pond is built from the materials transported from someone’s house in the civilized world (Paryz 111). To sell his ideas, he has to adopt the market strategy: “Paradoxically, the temporary imaginary erasure of civilization is accompanied by an implicit re-acknowledgement of its permanence and validity” (Paryz 104-5).

Thoreau reiterates numerous times in *Walden* that the process of exchange erodes the

true essence of things and results in the reification of humanity by converting everything into money: “But lo! men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper” (Thoreau 25). He declares that “trade curses everything it handles” and confesses his wrong behavior of teaching for a livelihood instead of for the good of his fellow-men (Thoreau 47). Yet, he debunks his ideal of self-sufficiency when he, as a parable-maker, has to “earn” his metaphor by dwelling “near enough to Nature and Truth to borrow a trope from them” (Gilmore 229). As his writing has to earn or borrow something from nature, he is exploiting nature in the sense that he transfigures it into a useful tool for moralizing or to heal the social illness. His composing a text amounts to the merchant’s production of commodities, only that his is the commodity meant for spiritual uplifting while others’ meant for practical uses. The purpose of writing *Walden*, if Thoreau’s account in the beginning chapter can be trusted, is to answer the townsmen’s “particular inquiries” about his living mode (1). With the readers’ curiosity as the driving force of his writing, Thoreau follows the market logic of demand and supply. Commercialism creeps in as his book has to be published and accessed by the public, which highlights the failure of his anti-trade posture and the preoccupation with his influence in society. The lofty ideal of awakening his readers relies on the circulation of his text in the marketplace. When the values of self-reliance and inner exploration are promoted in a shrill pitch, they become a commodity to coerce the public into spiritual universalism and conformity. In the beginning of *Walden*, Thoreau declares that this book is “particularly addressed to poor students” (1). The motive of writing *Walden*, therefore, is to enlighten those still seeking the true meaning of life. He doesn’t leave his *Walden* experiment alone; instead, he brings back its recording of nature to the civilized world and tries to leave a strong impact there. Gilmore rightly observes that “*Walden* is a book at odds with its own beliefs; it is to point out Thoreau’s complicity in the ideological universe he abhors” (224). To write for the purpose of exerting influence on others erodes the spiritual freedom that Thoreau had been striving for, let alone the recourse to the market logic for the circulation of the book.

Nature is an instrument for Thoreau to get the truth he wants. The purpose of going into

the woods is “to front only the essential facts of life” as well as “to live deliberately”: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life . . . and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (Thoreau 61). For Thoreau, to live deliberately is to live a mindful life with only the “essential facts” to confront. Such a life sets him apart from the traditional life. Elsewhere, the so-called “essential facts” that need immediate fronting become the “hard bottom and rocks,” “reality,” “This is,” and “*point d’appui*” waiting to be explored and settled:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance . . . till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a *point d’appui*, below freshet and frost and fire, a place where you might found a wall or a state. (Thoreau 66)

The words “settle” and “work” evoke the image of colonial settlement. Thoreau takes on the role as a Puritan settler with the mission to “substitute a spiritual frontier for the vanishing physical wilderness” (Rowe 154). The tone is urgent as Thoreau feels the imminent threat of death after his brother died. The so-called “reality” or “This is” represents the spiritual values which are real and exemplary instead of the “appearance” of human institutions like church and state (Michaels 85). Contrasted with the hard bottom, church and state represent the mud and slush of traditional opinion that Thoreau determines to wedge through. The search for the hard bottom points to the American mindset, which is “framed in terms of the Puritan errand into the wilderness” (Jones 158). This passage shows Thoreau’s consciousness of Puritan legacy. To “found a wall or a state” on the hard bottom echoes his intention to create a “Celestial Empire” near the Salem harbor; both signal his yearning for a promising new country after the success of American Revolution. The act of moving to Walden and building a house there parallels the colonizers’ going west for a new settlement, only that Thoreau focuses on the spiritual gain while the latter on the material.

The metaphoric landscape here reveals the correspondence between “Thoreauvian microcosm” and “American national macrocosm” (Paryz 99). The quest for the bottom equals

the national condition. As Stanley Cavell indicates, “Walden experiment becomes the site of transition from political status of colony to that of empire” (*Senses of Walden* 116). July 4, 1845 is the date when Thoreau moves into his Walden cabin to substantiate his faith of simplicity and self-reliance. The special day highlights his determination to shake off social norms and conventions, just as his nation declares independence from the old world. But the dawning of the new life is inseparable from the darkness of the old world. As Nietzsche perceives sagaciously, “Whoever at any time has undertaken to build a new heaven has found the strength for it in his own hell” (251). The hard bottom and rocks must be accompanied by mud and slush. The Celestial Empire, after all, is to be built on the market principle and imperial mentality. The corruption of commercialism together with the indiscriminate progress of the modern age compels Thoreau to seek the secluded life at Walden. The setting of the new state contrasts the old world, as the “hard bottom” of Walden pond is distinct from the “mud” and “slush” of a capitalist society. He shuns colonial mentality and opposes slavery, but he borrows its language for his new settlement: “I am monarch of all I survey” (Thoreau 55). This outburst of self-elevation evokes Julius Caesar’s famous quote, “I came, I saw, I conquered.” All the natural scenery he sees from his abode belongs to him: “Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly” (Thoreau 55). He abhors ownership, but he boasts of the possession of the natural landscape nearby.

Like the white colonizers he detests, he is possessed by the same imperial fantasy and has his subjectivity constructed through the negation of the Other. For Frederick Garber, Thoreau is the Adamic figure looking out from a fresh paradise at the old fallen world (52). He adopts the patronizing stance when examining the Other, which includes the fallen people and world, the world that he identifies as the “restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century” (Thoreau 218). As he comments, “Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprise?” (Thoreau 215) The incessant denial of materialism shows Thoreau’s strong aversion to the rapid strides of his age. What he cannot achieve in the civilized and urban life, he manages to regain in the rustic and solitary wilderness. The pastoral idealism finds embodiment in his description of a Canadian wood-

chopper. He pays tribute to the illiterate man, seeing in him the virtues of simplicity and primitivism lost in the world of rapid industrialization: “When Nature made him [wood-chopper], she gave him a strong body and contentment for his portion, and propped him on every side with reverence and reliance” (Thoreau 99). The unsophisticated and self-reliant man, in Thoreau’s eyes, is not only solitary but genuine and happy: “Such an exuberance of animal spirits had he that he sometimes tumbled down and rolled on the ground with laughter at anything which made him think and tickled him” (Thoreau 98).

Thoreau regards the woodchopper as a noble savage working hard and independently in the backwoods. On the other hand, he despises him as he is incapable of higher conversation and intellectual development: “But the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant” (Thoreau 98). What he depicts earlier as a virtue becomes an irredeemable defect later. Through his narcissistic mindset, the woodchopper can be a “genius” with a noble and primitive thinking. Yet, he can also be a crude savage with “dark” and “muddy” thoughts:

Yet his thinking was so primitive and immersed in his animal life, that, though more promising than a merely learned man's, it rarely ripened to anything which can be reported. He suggested that there might be men of genius in the lowest grades of life, however permanently humble and illiterate, who take their own view always, or do not pretend to see at all; who are as bottomless even as Walden Pond was thought to be, though they may be dark and muddy. (Thoreau 101)

This passage illustrates Thoreau’s double perception and oscillation between the spiritual yearning and animal instinct. The woodchopper becomes the “genius in the lowest grades of life” just because he cannot participate in the intellectual and spiritual matters like Thoreau himself. Moreover, the primitive man is so simple-minded that he is impervious to his education: “Yet I never, by any manoeuvring, could get him to take the spiritual view of things; the highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate; and this, practically, is true of most men” (Thoreau 100). The word “animal” has a contradictory meaning. It refers to the positive side of the

woodchopper ridding himself of traditional mandates. Yet, the later application of the word to him suggests the negative traits. For example, he “rarely ripened to anything” except for his “simple expediency.” The woodchopper can be deep and shallow, mysterious and naïve at the same time, depending on the observer’s wavering mood. The function of the woodchopper, therefore, is a “colonized subject” to highlight Thoreau’s “personal refinement” and justify his claim to authority (Paryz 116-18). Thoreau projects his pastoral idealism onto him, but simultaneously subverts it through his attachment to intellectuality. The ambivalent attitude toward the woodchopper validates Eiseley’s view that Thoreau is a double agent “drawn both to the spiritual life and to that of the savage” (59). The episode also endorses Bridgman’s comment on Thoreau’s dark side, which always disrupts the intended morality he wishes to inculcate into his readers’ minds.

The encounter with an Irishman, John Field is another example to reveal Thoreau’s condescending attitude toward the Other. He despises John as a “honest, hard-working but shiftless man” and his child as a “poor starveling brat” (Thoreau 136). He disdains the culture of the Irish as “an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe” (Thoreau 137). While condemning the poverty and degradation of John, Thoreau extols the virtue of simplicity and self-reliance by using himself as a model. He tries to help him with his own experience of living a simple life and suggests to John that he build his own house and do without such luxuries as tea, coffee and meat: “[T]he only true America is that country where you are at liberty to pursue such a mode of life as may enable you to do without these” (Thoreau 137). On hearing this advice, John heaved a sigh. Implicated in the sigh may be the disapproval of Thoreau’s definition of true America as the country freed from material pursuit. Thoreau claims the liberty to discard material comforts in his society. Yet, as an immigrant, John leaves his poor country to live the life furnished with meat, coffee and tea. Rebuking John’s pursuit of material gratification is to deny him the freedom of realizing American Dream by the Irish way. Thoreau utilizes him as a foil to highlight his superior mode of thinking and living. The obsession with material success lurks behind the statement that he can catch a string of fish while John disturbs only a couple of fins. “Poor John Field,” Thoreau laments, “thinking to live by some derivative old country mode in this primitive

new country, --- to catch perch with shiners” (Thoreau 139). In his view, the Irish family cannot escape from the inherited poverty unless “their wading webbed bog-trotting feet get talaria to their heels” (Thoreau 139). They represent the mud and slush of tradition, and the wings that can help them soar above the poor life are his ideological values.

Thoreau’s relentless seeking of his true self ends up the reinforcement of the narcissistic self that discriminates other people and their culture. The secluded life at Walden pond provides him with the favorable condition to exercise his will to power. The way he practices solitary contemplation echoes the ancient sages like the Brahmans. As McMahan remarks, “Thoreau drew parallels between his own retreat to Walden Pond and the asceticism of the ‘Hindoos’” (168). A passage in *Walden* demonstrates Thoreau’s embrace of the Hindoo philosophy. He retold a story in a Hindoo book, interpreting it as an allegory on human soul which often “mistakes its own character until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher,” and then it “knows itself to be Brahme” (65). For Thoreau, to restore the purity of soul is to “be Brahme” again. Living the ascetic life in the cabin at Walden pond is his way to release the nobility of soul. Asceticism on the part of the Hindoo sages is synonymous with a mindful living Thoreau devotes himself to in his retreat: “Nothing was too trivial for the Hindoo lawgiver, however offensive it may be to modern taste. He teaches how to eat, drink, cohabit, void excrement and urine, and the like, elevating what is mean, and does not falsely excuse himself by calling these things trifles” (Thoreau 147). In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche has a scintillating view on the Brahmans, which serves to illustrate the motive of Thoreau’s hermetic life. For Nietzsche, the Brahmans’ practice of asceticism is to inspire awe and endow their existence with a solidity and depth of meaning (250). Following the path of the Brahmans, Thoreau seeks the solid bottom of the pond and explores the inner depth in the woods. Both strive for the perfection of life, and both live out the ascetic ideals in order to assert themselves as true philosophers. Equipped with self-assurance and freedom of will, Thoreau places himself one mile from any neighbor, which distance is “far enough to be seen clearly” (Cavell, “Words” 18). The pursuit of spiritual freedom is achieved through the appropriation of nature and discrimination of people. He not only sublimates natural phenomena by his intense eye but criticizes the thought and behavior of the inferior

others like the woodchopper and the Irish family.

*Walden* is all about a Celestial Empire established by Thoreau to advocate his life philosophy. In the two-year retreat to the pastoral environment, Thoreau prescribes a spiritual medicine for the corrupt and commercialized world. The antidote he offers is called Transcendentalist vision, which springs from the intellectual climate of the 19<sup>th</sup> century America and possesses such ingredients as Romantic sensitivity, scientific vitalism and oriental religion. For this Transcendentalist thinker, every trivial and mundane phenomenon in nature can be transfigured into something cosmic and extraordinary. Walden Pond must be bottomless because human soul is deep beyond measure. Flints' Pond, on the contrary, is shallow and impure as it reflects the commercialized and reified culture. Cultivating beans, catching fish, and gathering huckleberries transcend from ordinary activities to represent the lofty ideals of simplicity, independence and diligence. The Transcendental impulse to expand the limited self into the cosmic whole is to exploit nature without leaving it alone. There is nothing wrong to see the infinite within the finite, only that Thoreau sees the infinite within himself. He merges the limited selfhood with the divine and sublime. Imposing his ideological whims on natural phenomenon, Thoreau fails to see nature as it is. Agriculture is a symbolic and transcendent activity with a constant and imperishable moral. Beans are not merely beans, nor is pond a pond---all scenes in *Walden* are appropriated as tropes and expressions to demonstrate his ideological values. While the farmer, Flint exploits the farmland for money, Thoreau extracts from Walden scenery the spiritual food to feed his readers. Commercialism sinks in when the language of the marketplace is borrowed to sell his ideals. The new empire, while refusing the capitalist ideology, falls into its complicity.

In attacking social corruption, Thoreau implicitly acknowledges himself as an Adamic figure and preacher devoted to replacing the fallen world with the spiritual one. To insist on his infallible truths and impose them on others show his narcissistic temperament. The Walden pond together with its hard bottom and rocks stands for the essential facts of life as opposed to the mud and slush of traditional opinions. The simple and ascetic life is meant to awaken the mass of men from their quiet desperation. What is beyond Thoreau's expectation is that his egotistic mindset fastens him to the same state of distress. The way he wavers be-

tween optimism and pessimism, spiritualism and savagery shows a disturbed and unsettled mind. The outburst of optimism is mingled with pessimism; doubt and uncertainty pierce the complacency of his spiritual life. As he strives for self-realization, he falls into the discriminatory thought of self and other, good and evil. Beneath the surface of Thoreau's Transcendental insight lurks his self-consciousness. The communion with nature is propelled by the aversion of modernity. The holistic and vitalistic thought is inseparable from the anguished response to death. *Walden* is not as simple as is generally recognized. More than an index of universal spiritualism and ecological writing, it implicates Thoreauvian narcissism that threatens the ideal of an autonomous self freed from cultural constraints.

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## 《湖濱散記》中的梭羅式自戀

許惠芬\*

### 摘 要

《湖濱散記》似乎是簡單的文本，讀者對其中的主題，總能達成一致性的理解，例如梭羅懷抱田園式的理想主義以及對都市物質主義的譴責。然而在此表面性的詮釋底下，卻隱藏作者思維的自戀傾向，干擾並破壞他對無知大眾的道德訓示。本研究目的在於整合批評家們對於梭羅其人及其思想的見解後，從中探討《湖濱散記》如何反映梭羅式的自戀情結。梭羅是浪漫主義及超越主義的代表性人物，在體驗湖畔的獨居生活中，倡導對自然的崇敬及自我內在的探索。然而，他對心靈自由的熱情追尋及迫切疾呼，和強烈的自我意識密不可分。他的超越主義精神，蘊含對大自然的挪用和對他人的分別心。自戀情結所衍生的這兩大層面，是本研究內容的主軸。梭羅透過敏銳的觀察，將自然現象神聖化，同時也批判現代世界的商業價值觀，藉此凸顯自己異於常人的高度。他的自我執念深植於《湖濱散記》中，由此衍生出對人性和大自然的特異觀點。

**關鍵詞：**湖濱散記、梭羅、自戀情結、超越主義、大自然

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