Literature, Writing, and the Natural World

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Edited by

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We had fun, and we learned a lot as well. Dig in.

INTRODUCTION

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The English Association of Pennsylvania State Universities held its annual meeting on October 20-22, 2006, at Mansfield University in Mansfield, Pennsylvania. The conference theme was "Literature, Writing, and the Natural World." Over sixty papers were presented, on topics ranging from canonical nature writers like Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, and Wendell Berry to representations of nature in children's literature, from Latin American, and German literature to implications of nature and environments in the composition classroom. This collected work grows out of the conference, and it indicates the desire to understand all aspects of the nature of our relationship with the natural world, the function of literature in clarifying that relationship (in ways that science and politics cannot), and the role of the literature teacher-scholar wanting to respond to the pressures of environmental change.

Environmental concerns have impressed themselves into the public consciousness since Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and developments over the last ten years regarding global warming have raised the profile and pitch of the public conversations about the issues. Much of this conversation seeped into academic scholarship and teaching—witness the organization of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in the 1990s and the conferences and symposia associated with its formation. As such, a concern with textual representations of nature has made its way into college and university classrooms as scholars seek to understand the complex relations at work between humans and nature. This ecocritical or "green" perspective offers a way to read texts that questions human assumptions about nature and grows humans' understanding of their role in the world.

Thus, at root, this collection proceeds in part from David Orr's notion

that "[a]ll education is environmental education,"[1] with a special emphasis on the knowledge that accompanies the humanistic act of interpretation. In these times, interpretation is a vital task, not only for the way it educates us about our attitudes toward nature, but because it involves and reflects the crucial process of looking closely, engaging, reflecting, and responding. One could argue that, as a culture, Americans are behind the curve in understanding the ways we depend upon a healthy relationship with nature, and one way (among many) of working toward that health depends upon examining it through texts and textual representation. For instance, when contributors to this collection dig into *The Maine Woods*, *Jayber Crow*, the poetry of Pablo Guevara, or the movie *Crash*, they are contributing to our understanding of the ways in which we view nature and how that view plays a role in the way we relate to it.

This is important work, because, as Kenneth Burke suggests, attitudes are "incipient act[s],"[2] though as Burke points out, we may choose to act on these attitudes, or not. To paraphrase Carson, we're still choosing which road we will travel, although it can be argued that we are running out of time. Without the close examination of our attitudes, we will not be able to map our view of the world and our place in it nor choose the direction in which we will proceed. This places Tom and me at odds with David Gessner's assertion: "Being honest (one of the nature writer's supposed virtues), I have to admit that an essay is a much less effective way of protecting the land than a cudgel. In other words, I have to admit to impotence."[3] Gessner's questioning of the conventions of nature writing and his humorous forays into skewering the genre show precisely what is powerful about examining these texts from the perspective of understanding the human relation to nature and environment—it's the attention that accompanies examination and re-examination, a concern with the process of representation.

Even the terms themselves are in flux. What is nature? What is culture? As Michael Bérubé states, a large part of our job as professors in the humanities is "the business of interpretation, of understanding the meaning of meaning, and it is useful only to the extent that humans need

[1] David W. Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994), 12.
[2] Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (CA: University of California Press, 1962), 20.
[3] David Gessner, *Sick of Nature* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2004), 4.

to know the meaning of human affairs, past and present."[4] We could argue that Bérubé's observation is too anthropocentric, but, as ecocritical perspectives suggest, we can't escape our perspective. In order to see human affairs in the context of nature, our bounded human perspective requires that we first view that nature in the context of human affairs. Such an act of interpretation requires that we take up two perspectives at once, hold them in tension, aware that one of them is imaginary. But that means that literary texts hold some promise (though they are in embedded in human affairs) of shifting our frame of reference so that we may look at our own perspective from a different angle. Interpreting that power of literature will be an important part of what criticism and teaching of literature will do as the world around us changes. Personification and other literary tropes provide ample fodder for our interpretive impulses, but they also often hit us in the gut, which makes us care about those, human and otherwise, whose perspectives we are not privy to. In this collection, then, the "meaning of human affairs" centers on the way our health as a species depends upon interpreting how our attitudes and actions are shaped by our understanding of nature and natural processes. As such, this collection is not about swamps *per se*, but the meaning of swamps.

In *The Gutenberg Elegies*, Sven Birkerts asks the archetypal ecocritical question, "Where am I when I am involved in a book?"[5] By forcing the issue of the "place of literature in our lives" out of the metaphorical and into the literal, we are, in turn, forced to answer the question in environmental terms. On the one hand, through the operation of the imagination, we think as if we are someplace else—with Elizabeth and Darcy walking in the garden in early 19th century England—but on the other hand, we are sitting at our desks or in our chairs with books in our hands. In one sense we are detached from the place where we actually are, have transcended, perhaps, or fled the limits of the actual place to an imagined place where we are bounded by the collaborative efforts of our own minds with the mind of another person.

In another sense, though, we have immersed ourselves in the place where we are: we are not physically attached to any other place as we are even on a cell phone disturbing electrons through the air and wires over great distances. We look at an object in our hands and are thoroughly engrossed. Of course, reading an electronic version of a book on-line

[4] Michael Bérubé, "The Utility of the Arts and Humanities," *Rhetorical Occasions: Essays on Humans and the Humanities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 86.

[5] Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (NY: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 79.

makes clear that the detachment is not inherent in the act of reading; it is an accident of the paper book. But even so, there are two places involved in the act of reading: the place where the body and the text are and the place the mind goes to.

This there/not-there paradox raises issues of representation. As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, "Representation is an extremely elastic notion,"[6] and we must take care in how we read representations, even to the point of questioning their worth. Yet Mitchell allows that representation is the way that reality inserts itself into a text, and the important thing is in part for us to read our own act of interpreting. As the essays in this collection suggest, this act of interpretation will give us insights into how we should live, because studying the action of representing gives us insights into our attitudes and behaviors. For instance, nature or environment as seen in texts used to be primarily thought of as static, but literary scholars probing the representations of nature have argued that that is not always the case. The shifting perspective of our understanding of representation can, it could be argued, affect and reflect the way we see our relationship to and with nature. But representations of place entail a special problem because while we imagine characters and events that are not there without creating a conflict, imagining the not-there requires us to distance ourselves from where we actually are. It's ironic that turning our attention to the way nature is represented in texts—to the not-there—has corresponded with an increased awareness of human-driven climate change. This is not to say we are close to solving any problems—we're not—but a problem has to be seen before it can dealt with—a crucial act of interpretation.

Kenneth Burke argues that literature is "equipment for living." For him, works of art should be considered "as strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off evil eye," etc.[7] His approach begins by separating engagement with the work of art from the world we live in: the work of art is not life; it is something shaped outside of life that must be brought to bear on it. Neuroscientists are finding that there is more to this phenomenon than one might suspect. They are learning that what we read causes the brain to enlist those parts used during physical activities. If we have walked in a thunderstorm and we read about being caught in one, for instance, our brain enacts those regions

[6] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Representation," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13.

[7] Kenneth Burke. "Literature as Equipment for Living." *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. (New York: Vintage, 1941), 262.

used during the walk.[8] Burke believed that we should never lose sight that the symbol system or language that constitutes works of art is embodied. In short, we are symbol-using animals. Burke brings the literature that lives inside the mind into the world as equipment—like a shovel or an axe—its sharp edge digging into and splitting apart the solid earth, the actual world.

But Burke's metaphor obscures as much as it clarifies, as do all metaphors. In the same sense that literature is equipment for living, toads too are equipment for living. Sometimes in the spring, when Tom is turning over the soil in his garden beds, he digs up a toad. For an instant it is a lump of dirt, but then some oddness of line casts a spell on it and the dirt disappears and in its place is a brooding presence, its legs drawn up tight to its warty, mottled brown body. It is a talisman of the season to come, of the emergence of hidden things originating in the landscape. It's always a surprise to find a toad that way, but it is not a miracle; it is a surprise like a gift, both expected and unexpected. And a toad is a great piece of equipment in the never-ending struggle of living with insects, probably our most dangerous enemies, after bacteria and viruses.

Do we need to explicate the toad allegory? Explain how toads are those epiphanies in what we read, how something in the text that was words transforms into a moment of grace? And how we might then take it in our hand, feeling the surprising coolness of its body as it absorbs the warmth from our hands as we move it to the overgrown broccoli bed where it can be of use as the weather warms? Toads are equipment for living, yes; they eat bugs, but they are also themselves; they are a crucial part of an ecosystem, but they are also themselves; they are a small part of a larger whole, but each one is also the center of the universe. All of this suggests there is much to be learned from the continued exegesis of texts with a focus on the environmental attitudes and actions contained in them.

These days, political, economic, scientific, and ethical discourse engage global warming and other environmental issues routinely, and it is becoming practically compulsory to address in the classroom the themes clustered around those issues, as we would any other fundamental theme. Just as in the course of things, we read literature and ask, "What does it mean to love?" or "How do we develop identity?" we should also be asking, "What is my responsibility when I decide what resources to use?" Love and identity represent who we are, they are shaped by our views of

[8] Nicole K. Speer, Jeremy R. Reynolds, Khena M. Swallow, and Jeffrey M. Zacks, "Reading Stories Activates Neural Representations of Visual and Motor Experiences," *Psychological Science* 20.8 (2009): 989-999.

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ourselves and others, and they motivate us to act in certain ways. By examining such actions in texts, we can come to understand whether our conception of love or identity is big enough to encompass all it needs to. If we understand literature as equipment for living in a warming world, we may be able to help students of literature make some sense out of their world and some decisions about how to act, provided that in the process, we don't kill the toads.

Bringing such a perspective into the classroom is decidedly an activist approach, and a necessary one. After all, literature does something for us that no other thing can do, and we need to explore it in all its permutations. As we discussed before, the humanities can only present a partial view of our experience dabbling in human affairs. We also need the discipline of science to explore those aspects of human affairs that the humanities cannot. But we must show care in how we handle these complementary forms of knowing. As Burke reminds us, we need to be wary of expertise for the way it often asks us to shut out our morality as, say, physicists who will release technological forces like nuclear bombs even though they experience severe moral and ethical misgivings as parents and spouses.[9] Thus, our largest problems, like global warming, require expertise to solve, but such expertise needs to be tempered by the humanistic and interdisciplinary pursuit of what it means to be a human being in a rapidly deteriorating world. Literature helps us figure out how to live by asking us as teachers and students to step outside the carefully constructed boxes of our own perspective. In this manner, the essay becomes Gessner's cudgel.

The weight of these essays grows from readings of texts that spread in several directions in scholarship in general and in this collection. The essays join the on-growing conversation about what it means to read texts from an ecocritical perspective as they seek to incorporate new perspectives and interpretations of canonical and other writers. In part one, The Nature of the American Nature Writing Canon, scholars add new perspectives on canonical writings of Henry David Thoreau, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, and Wendell Berry in hopes of promoting a fuller understanding of the significance of their accomplishments in the current environmental consciousness. In "Thoreau and the Higher Uses of Nature," Daniel S. Malachuk uses *The Maine Woods* as a means to discuss how Thoreau may not be as biocentric as many ecocritics presume him to be. In fact, Malachuk argues, Thoreau believed that humans could only know nature from a human perspective, that we must by our natures put it to use, but that "use" for a transcendentalist would involve some higher

[9] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1952), 30.

purpose beyond our own physical needs. Malachuk suggests that Thoreau's notion of the "higher use" of nature may be a way to shift the discussion of the environment in a new direction. Focusing on the same text in "From Nativism to Cosmopolis: Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*," Bruce Plourde points to the development of Thoreau's attitude about the relationship between humans and the natural world by analyzing how his attitude toward Native Americans changes over the course of his time in Maine. He discovers, after disappointing experiences with two earlier guides, that Joseph Porus serves as a model for a new *polis*, a new sense of community that fits the openness of the wild spaces of North America. In "Nurturing the Earth: Mixing Metaphors in Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow* and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy," Nancy Barta-Smith shifts the attention to Wendell Berry's *Jayber Crow* and the manner by which Berry "ficitionalizes the ecological philosophy . . . developed" in *The Unsettling of America*. Barta-Smith explores the echoes between these texts via the metaphors of marriage and the umbilical bond from the perspective of phenomenology. In the end, Barta-Smith argues that Berry's metaphors read through Merleau-Ponty's philosophy offer a much needed corrective to the ways that motherhood and the earth have defined the private sphere.

Shifting the focus from land to sea, Marnie M. Sullivan examines borders in "Remembering Rachel Carson: An Ecofeminist Reading of the Three Sea Books." As Sullivan points out, Carson was working from a different perspective and aesthetic in the sea books than in *Silent Spring*, and the metaphor of borders plays an important role in understanding Carson's hope for "attentive love" of readers and landscapes. Sullivan examines how Carson's portrayals of sea life offer alternative social structures in light of which to contemplate current social structures and patterns. According to Sullivan, Carson's contribution to discussions of patriarchal social structures emerges in the way Carson emphasizes connection and community in her sea books informed by scientific observation and exploration. Sullivan suggests that Carson's approach challenges traditional definitions of domesticity because her "concept of the home extended beyond the borders of discrete dwellings" (81). Thus, Carson's sea books offer models by which to re-think patriarchal social structures criticized by ecofeminists.

Part one ends by coming back to nature in Pennsylvania in Brian D. Cope's "The Poetics of Western Pennsylvania Space: Environmental Perception in the Writings of Edward Abbey and Tawni O'Dell." Cope's essay examines the relationship of western Pennsylvania geography to the psychology of literary characters in Edward Abbey's *The Fool's Progress* and Tawni O'Dell's *Back Roads* and *Coal Run*. His analysis looks at the

sense of deprivation that pervades the novels as a result of external forces that change the places in which the novels are set and the ways the authors explore methods (via their characters) for coping (or not) with these changes. In addition, Cope brings his own experiences of western Pennsylvania into the essay in ways that enhance his articulation of the poetics of western Pennsylvania space. Containing a canonical nature writer and a regional Pennsylvania writer, Cope's essay serves as a nice transition to part two of *Literature, Writing, and the Natural World*.

The Nature Outside the American Nature Writing Canon includes perspectives and analyses of a slave narrative, South American poetry, a Dutch novel, a Canadian novel, children's literature, and film, and asks us to consider the benefits of applying an ecocritical approach more broadly. In "To the Wilderness and Back: The Role of Nature in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life*," William R. Hunter explores how Douglass's slave narrative encompasses both Puritan and Romantic views of nature, and he argues that the text reveals Douglass to be caught between competing philosophies. But by drawing on both philosophies, Hunter suggests, Douglass is better able to position his anti-slavery argument to his Northern white audience. Hunter's essay provides us with an important but little contemplated perspective of an African-American slave's views of nature, both as a place of threat and a place for finding oneself.

William P. Keeth turns his attention to South American poet Pablo Guevara in "Disaster, Modernity, and the Poetics of Pablo Guevara." After presenting a brief history of the "Latin American literary movement *modernism*," Keeth discusses how Guevara's poetics work to disrupt notions of modern culture in a collection of prose-poems called *La Colisión, Ópera Marítima en 5 Actos* that hinge on the sinking of the Titanic. Keeth argues that Geuvara's use of the time and space when constructing the poetic voice enables the poet to challenge cultural beliefs about nature and class in ways that show poems themselves to be nature. The poem-as-nature breaks through cultural illusions to reveal things as they really are—an important step when considering some of the problems with politics and power in South America. Shifting genres in "Natural Phenomena in A.F.Th. van der Heijden's *Het leven uit enn dag* (*One Day's Life*), Bradley A. Holtman examines how the Dutch writer's novel uses the manipulation of natural phenomena to draw attention to the way natural cycles often dull human attention. Using his own translation, Holtman shares the story of Benny and Gini, two lovers caught in a world in which a lifetime spans twenty-four hours, and their attempt to repeat their most treasured experiences.

In "Villa San Girolamo: The Oasis of Caged Birds," Lori Hobkirk examines how bird imagery and symbolism in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* reinforces themes of freedom and constraint. Ondaatje's use of bird species and behaviors provides, Hobkirk suggests, a foil to "what it means to live in a world that is heavily laden with borders, rules, and constraints." Next, Danelle Conner offers an insightful look at the way children's literature can be used in the classroom to affect—positively or negatively—children's attitudes toward nature. In "The Moon Tugging on the Sun: Nature in Children's Literature," Conner draws on Richard Louv's notion of "nature-deficit disorder" and psychology's notion of "learned helplessness" to discuss the need for introducing children to nature through nature-oriented texts that match their developmental stages. Drawing on a range of children's literature, Conner's essay recalls Rachel Carson's idea that a sense of wonder must be taught to children before they learn about the scientific underpinnings of natural phenomena, though Conner's essay suggests how to undertake this process through the written word in an analysis that will be useful for teachers and parents. Moving to the silver screen, David Randall challenges readers' views on pop cultural representations of sex, violence, and technology in "Evolutionary Film Theory: *Crash* and the End of the Road Film." Using J. G. Ballard's *Crash* and David Cronenberg's film based on the book, Randall articulates how the two work together to challenge complacent audiences and accepted grand narratives about cars by connecting eroticism with car crashes. Randall argues that art must challenge its consumers to step outside of their safety zones, if it is to be meaningful, and he reads the novel and the film through the lens of evolutionary aesthetics to show how these works function as cultural critiques.

Our final section is The Nature of Pedagogy and Writing. This section turns our attention away from literature and toward pedagogical practice and rhetoric by examining the intersection of nature and culture as it occurs in these contexts. In "When Worlds Collide, Writing about Work in a Composition Course," William A. Hendricks explores the nature of work and school, and the way the two environments collide in contemporary students' lives. The essay focuses on a composition course he teaches called "Looking into Work," and he relates what he and his students have learned about the all-too-common situation students find themselves in as they rush from school to work and back. Hendricks's essay offers a subtle defense for his pedagogy by demonstrating how students recognize the contradictions inherent in juggling the worlds of work and school, thus demonstrating critical literacy, yet it also shows how students refuse to reject completely the bootstraps myth. In her interdisciplinary article

called "A Chaotic Understanding of Language: Using Chaos Theory to Interpret Rhetorical Discourse," Sandra Stanko brings a different perspective to the study of rhetoric by examining it through the "terministic screen" of chaos theory. Riffing on such terms as strange attractors and the butterfly effect, Stanko ponders what it means to look at the way written and spoken language behaves to impose order out of chaos. Her view offers possibilities for thinking about how to introduce students to the situatedness of writing, because effective student writers must understand that their texts need to be sensitive to audience and context. Hendricks's and Stanko's articles lead writing teachersin different directions for helping students explore the environmental implications of writing.

As these essays suggest, the study of literature, writing, and the natural world is a vibrant, expanding, and expansive field, with room for new perspectives and voices. The essays add to a conversation began in such texts as *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996), *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and the Environment* (1998), *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism* (2000), *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (2001), *Coming into Contact: Explorations in Ecocritical Theory and Practice* (2007), and ongoing in the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. It is a testament to the power and interest in the study of literature, writing, and the natural world that a small regional conference would dedicate its time and resources to exploring these issues. But these issues matter for many scholars and teachers and as Lawrence Buell suggests in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, the body of environmental criticism will be formed by a "constellation" of works rather than a single work or person.[10]

Given the extraordinary pressures placed on our places these days by the threat of drastic environmental change, it is imperative to understand how and where our attitudes about the natural world are generated. As Bill McKibben states, "[w]e are forced, for the first time, to understand that we are a truly titanic force, capable of affecting and altering the operation of the planetary whole."[11] McKibben goes on to discuss how communities will become more important as people grapple with what it means to live in a changing world. These essays, and the ongoing conversation to which they add their voices, constitute one important community seeking to do

[10] Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 133.
[11] Bill McKibben, "The Challenge to Environmentalism," *Dædalus* 137 (Spring 2008): 6.

the right thing. Thus, what emerges from these essays is a collective voice that wants to understand how and why the humanist perspective is a window into understanding our relationship with nature, with natural processes. And why it is so important to open this window on texts and nature even wider, to lean out, and take a good look around.

THE NATURE OF THE AMERICAN NATURE WRITING CANON

THOREAU AND THE HIGHER USES OF NATURE

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Thoreau's status as the first modern environmentalist often rests on the idea that he challenged the prevailing ideology that nature is merely an instrument for human progress with a radical counterclaim: that nature is intrinsically valuable, independent of any human uses. In the last decade or so, scholars associated with ecocriticism have probably done the most to establish this reading of Thoreau's ecology. Many ecocritics deem Thoreau's celebrations of "wildness"—where humans are by definition absent—to be presciently "biocentric," the theory that all forms of life have intrinsic value. Lawrence Buell has developed the most influential reading of Thoreau along these lines, contending that in the ten years of Thoreau's "Walden project" (by which Buell means the event as well as the composition of the book) we find "a record and model of a Western sensibility working with and through the constraints of Eurocentric, androcentric, homocentric culture to arrive at an environmentally responsive vision." "Thoreau," Buell explains, "became increasingly interested in defining nature's structure . . . for its own sake, as against how nature might subserve humanity, which was Emerson's primary consideration."[1]

As well-intentioned as their efforts are, Buell and other ecocritics are wrong about Thoreau. Thoreau consistently valued nature not in itself but in relation to humanity, often explicitly stating that nature is for our use: not our "wise use" (as cynically advocated by free-marketers today), but (in his words) our "higher use." In this essay, I explore what Thoreau meant by the higher uses of nature, not in *Walden* but in his lesser known book *The Maine Woods*, which I believe to be Thoreau's more complete statement of higher use environmentalism. Specifically, I make and defend three claims about *The Maine Woods*: (1) that throughout the book Thoreau insists that nature can only be known in relation to humans; (2)

[1] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 23, 117.

that throughout the book Thoreau emphasizes the many different uses to which humans *should* put nature; and (3) that each of the book's three chapters culminates in passages outlining what (in Thoreau's words) a "higher use" of nature should be.[2]

My first claim is the opposite of Buell's: that Thoreau consistently offers us not an "ecocentric" but a homocentric vision of nature. In *The Maine Woods* specifically, Thoreau dramatizes in two ways how nature can be known only in its relation to humans. The first way he does this is by showing how the Maine woods, despite their "wildness," almost everywhere reveal evidence of human presence. This is a constant refrain in all three chapters of the book: "Ktaadn," "Chesuncook," and "The Allegash and East Branch." For example, in "Ktaadn," as he and his companions enter Ambejijis Lake, Thoreau notices that loggers had left some timbers around for use next spring to make booms and remarks that "it was always startling to discover so plain a trail of civilized man there. I remember that I was strangely affected," he continues, "when we were returning, by the sight of a ring-bolt well drilled into a rock, and fastened with lead, at the head of this solitary Ambejijis Lake" (42). This passage is typical in its studious neutrality about that human presence; Thoreau provides no indication how we should read "strangely affected." Elsewhere in the chapter Thoreau notes the presence of "large wooden crosses, made of oak, still sound, . . . found standing in this wilderness, which were set up by the first Catholic missionaries who came through to the Kennebec" (45), and "the skeleton of a moose here, whose bones some Indian hunters had picked on this very spot" (55), neither of which, again, calls forth any opprobrium from Thoreau. Similar moments occur in the other two chapters: surprising traces deep in the woods of previous camps in "Chesuncook" (106), for example, and, especially, in "The Allegash and East Branch," evidence of human presence even further north including still burning fires (169), dams (170), wrecked bateaus (210), and

[2] Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 121. Additional references are cited in the text. *The Maine Woods* was published posthumously in 1864, per a rough plan left by Thoreau; his friend Ellery Channing and sister Sophia Thoreau assembled the book from three essays about his trips to Maine and an appendix of technical terms. The first chapter, "Ktaadn," describes Thoreau's first trip to Maine to climb that mountain in August and September of 1846; it was originally serialized in some 1848 issues of *Union Magazine*. The second chapter, "Chesuncook," describes Thoreau's second trip to Maine in September 1853 and was first published in the June-August 1858 issues of *Atlantic Monthly*. The third chapter, "The Allegash and East Branch," describes his third and final trip to Maine in July-August 1857.

arrow-heads (269). "It is surprising on stepping ashore anywhere into this unbroken wilderness," Thoreau writes in that last chapter, "to see so often, at least within a few rods of the river, the marks of the axe, made by lumberers who have either camped here, or driven logs past in previous springs" (273). Again, Thoreau passes no judgment about the human presence. The few times he does render one it is positive, as in this passage, also from the last chapter:

> Ktaadn, near which we were to pass the next day, is said to mean 'Highest land.' So much geography is there in [the Indians'] names. The Indian navigator naturally distinguishes by a name those parts of a stream where he has encountered quick water and falls, and again, the lakes and smooth water where he can rest his weary arms, since those are the most interesting and memorable parts to him. The very sight of the *Nerlumskeechticook*, or Dead-Water Mountains, a day's journey off over the forest, as we first saw them, must awaken in him pleasing memories. And not less interesting is it to the white traveler, when he is crossing a placid lake in these out-of-the-way woods, perhaps thinking that he is in some sense one of the earlier discoverers of it, to be reminded that it was thus well known and suitably named by Indian hunters perhaps a thousand years ago. (270)

Nature's familiarity pleases the Indian, but neither is it "less interesting" to the white traveler to discover that other people have been there before him: the implication, at least, is that the human omnipresence within nature is a source of pleasure to us all.

The opposite is true as well: nature void of any traces of humanity is often described in gothic terms of horror. The chapter "Ktaadn" is full of such examples. When Thoreau and his companions first enter into the wild he announces that "[t]his was what you might call a bran-new country; the only roads were of Nature's making, and the few houses were camps. Here, then, one could no longer accuse institutions and society, but must front the true source of evil" (16). This is a remarkable statement for a Transcendentalist (as opposed to a Calvinist, say) to make, and I will return to it below. Suffice to say that Thoreau sets the tone for the rest of the book which consistently describes the wilderness that is truly devoid of human presence as evil. Listening just a bit later, for example, to "some utterly uncivilized, big-throated owl hoot loud and dismally in the drear and boughy wilderness," Thoreau remarks that the owl at least is "plainly not nervous about his solitary life, nor afraid to hear the echoes of his voice there" (38), reinforcing a point made in a number of other places that the absolute wild is indeed a place of terror for humans. Similar reflections will lead to the famous "Contact" passage at the end of the "Ktaadn"

chapter, to which I turn below.

The second way Thoreau dramatizes that nature can only be known in relation to humans is more fanciful but nonetheless important: Thoreau delights in showing himself—as the narrator—to be incapable of understanding the wilderness's significance *without* imagining human settlements there in the near future. In "Ktaadn," Thoreau announces his arrival at North Twin Lake with the thought that "[t]his is a noble sheet of water, where one may get the impression which a new country and a 'lake of the woods' are fitted to create" (35-36). Thoreau quickly makes clear that by "country" he means something combining "wilderness" and "nation":

> There was the smoke of no log-hut nor camp of any kind to greet us, still less was any lover of nature or musing traveler watching our bateau from the distant hills; not even the Indian hunter was there, for he rarely climbs them, but hugs the river like ourselves. No face welcomed us but the fine fantastic sprays of free and happy evergreen trees, waving one above another in their ancient home. . . . [T]he red clouds hung over the western shore as gorgeously as if over a city, and the lake lay open to the light with even a civilized aspect, as if expecting trade and commerce, and towns and villas. . . . (36)

Thoreau can hardly be said to bemoan that "civilized aspect" of the woods or the imminent arrival of trade and towns. Nor, when he samples some of mountain cranberries later in the chapter, does Thoreau seem to regret in any way his conclusion that "[w]hen the country is settled, and roads are made, these cranberries will perhaps become an article of commerce" (66). Indeed, the chapter concludes with a paean to the wilderness that is not only surprisingly domestic in its vocabulary but is careful to include the Indian among other mammalian inhabits, and is, furthermore, immediately conditioned by his wish that more humans might live there and so thrive.

> It is a country full of evergreen trees, of mossy silver birches and watery maples, the ground dotted with insipid, small, red berries . . . [and so forth in a single glorious sentence of twenty or so detailed lines]. . . . Such is the home of the moose, the bear, the caribou, the wolf, the beaver, and the Indian. Who shall describe the inexpressible tenderness and immortal life of the grim forest, where Nature, though it be mid-winter, is ever in her spring, where the moss-grown and decaying trees are not old, but seem to enjoy a perpetual youth; and blissful, innocent Nature, like a serene infant, is too happy to make a noise, except by a few tinkling, lisping birds and trickling rills?
>
> What a place to live, what a place to die and be buried in! There certainly men would live forever, and laugh at death and the grave. There

> they could have no such thoughts as are associated with the village graveyard,—that make a grave out of one of those moist green hummocks! (80-81)

The presumption seems to be that the humans and nature are inextricably close, and that grasping the significance of either requires knowing them in their relation to each other.

The same thing happens in the second chapter, "Chesuncook." Here, at one point, Thoreau describes the Moosehorn river as "a narrow, winding canal, where the tall, dark spruce and firs and arborvitae towered on both sides in the moonlight, forming a perpendicular forest-edge of great height, like the spires of a Venice in the forest" (102). Thoreau pursues a similar comparison of nature to civilization in the sentences that follow:

> In two places stood a small stack of hay on the bank, ready for the lumberer's use in the winter, looking strange enough there. We thought of the day when this might be a brook winding through smooth-shaven meadows on some gentleman's grounds; and seen by moonlight then, excepting the forest that now hems it in, how little changed it would appear! (102-03)

A little further upriver, Thoreau notes a clearing on the bank of about twenty or thirty acres and notes "[t]his was the only preparation for a house between the Moosehead carry and Chesuncook, but there was no hut nor inhabitants there yet. The pioneer thus selects a site for his house, which will, perhaps, prove the germ of a town" (107-08). Lest one think that some condemnation must follow this observation, Thoreau in the very next sentences only remarks upon the beauty of that part of the forest, noting that "[t]he hard woods, occasionally occurring exclusively, were less wild to my eye [and] I fancied them ornamental grounds, with farm-houses in the rear" (108). Again and again, in short, Thoreau seems to find it impossible to register the significance of wilderness without reference to its past, present, or future relationship to human beings.

I now turn to my second claim about *The Maine Woods*, which is that Thoreau emphasizes in this book the many different uses to which humans should put nature. Leaving the "higher uses" for my third and final claim, I mean here just the diversity of more workaday uses nature has for us. The point to emphasize is that if some uses are criticized by Thoreau, many uses are not, and he seems content often to jumble both the good and bad uses together. In the opening pages of "Ktaadn," he begins by noting his surprise at just how far north trade still thrives, again in the same studiously neutral tone. Remarking on the scarcity of the population on the road to Molunkus, Thoreau describes how potato fields are cleared,

including multiple burnings of the felled trees so that the ashes can serve to fertilize the new clearing. The potatoes grow like weeds then, Thoreau remarks, and that kind of abundance leads him to these more critical reflections:

> Let those talk of poverty and hard times who will, in the towns and cities; cannot the emigrant, who can pay his fare to New York or Boston, pay five dollars more to get here,—I paid three, all told, for my passage from Boston to Bangor, 250 miles,—and be as rich as he pleases, where land virtually costs nothing, and houses only the labor of building, and he may begin life as Adam did? If he will still remember the distinction of poor and rich, let him bespeak him a narrower house forthwith. (14-15)

Thoreau is critical, in other words, of those who do *not* make better use of nature, celebrating the same self-reliant pioneer spirit to which so many less astute nineteenth-century American commentators paid tribute. A page later, remarking how extensive these burnt-over future potato fields are, Thoreau again remembers the poor, but now to criticize that this log-burning in Maine does not warm their houses in New York and Boston:

> We crossed one tract, on the bank of the river, of more than a hundred acres of heavy timber, which had just been felled and burnt over, and was still smoking. Our trail lay through the midst of it, and was wellnigh blotted out. The trees lay at full length, four or five feet deep, and crossing each other in all directions, all black as charcoal, but perfectly sound within, still good for fuel or for timber; soon they would be cut into lengths and burnt again. Here were thousands of cords, enough to keep the poor Boston and New York amply warm for a winter, which only cumbered the ground and were in the settler's way. And the whole of that solid and interminable forest is doomed to be gradually devoured thus by fire, like shaving, and no man be warmed by it. (17)

That forest is "doomed" to burn, but what seems unfortunate about the burning is that no one will be warmed by it.

Immediately following the passage above, Thoreau notes that "[a]t Crocker's log hut, . . . one of the party . . . distributed a store of small cent picture books among the children . . . and also newspapers . . . among the parents" (17). The market as a mechanism for distributing goods—be they logs or books—comes in for no disparagement here. In fact, the market of ideas is richer in the woods than on the farm.[3] Thoreau makes this

[3] Later Thoreau notes that one of the bits of reading material he finds at a lumber camp is Emerson's 1844 *Address on the West India Emancipation* (34). I have noted elsewhere how Emerson himself advocated the distribution of reading

argument more explicitly shortly after the passage just quoted. Admiring a local man, McCauslin, who keeps remote lumbering outfits supplied, Thoreau confesses that this man evinced "a general intelligence which I had not looked for in the backwoods." Thoreau continues:

> In fact, the deeper you penetrate into the woods, the more intelligent, and, in one sense, less countrified do you find the inhabitants; for always the pioneer has been a traveler, and, to some extent, a man of the world; and, as the distances with which he is familiar are greater, so is his information more general and far reaching than the villager's. If I were to look for a narrow, uninformed, and countrified mind, as opposed to the intelligence and refinement which are thought to emanate from cities, it would be among the rusty inhabitants of an old-settled country, on farms all run out and gone to seed with life-ever-lasting, in the towns about Boston, even on the high-road in Concord, and not in the backwoods of Maine. (22-23)

That is just one more of a number of tributes Thoreau pays in this book to the "pioneer," particularly as against the "city-dweller," "townsman," or even "citizen," and all of these virtues are traceable to the pioneer's productive relationship with the wild. To give just one more example from later in the book, Thoreau notes with admiration the resourcefulness of the pioneer—his readiness to make full use of nature's bounty, for "[w]here the citizen uses a mere sliver or board, the pioneer uses the whole trunk of a tree" (125). And, it is not only the comprehensiveness but the intelligence of the pioneers' use of nature that is to be praised.[4]

At times, Thoreau seems overwhelmed by the abundance of life available for human use that he finds in the Maine woods, and in several places he waxes poetic about those woods as a kind of new Eden. Tipped off by McCauslin about a good spot for trout-fishing, Thoreau's prose moves into a worshipful register while never renouncing the practical reason for this encounter with the fish. Describing the white chivin, silvery roaches, and cousin-trout that "fell upon our bait," Thoreau then proclaims the arrival of the true trout:

> Anon their cousins, the true trout, took their turn, and alternately the speckled trout, and the silvery roaches, swallowed the bait as fast as we

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material into the backwoods of America in order to cultivate civic virtues in the new nation: see "The Republican Philosophy of Emerson's Early Lectures," *New England Quarterly* 71.3 (September 1998): 404-428.

[4] See also the wrongness of gallows in a new country not yet corrupt (88), the excellence of sleeping outdoors (105), the diversity of vegetable life for human use beyond white pine (129), and the frontiersmen who, more than the Mexican War veterans, deserve government pensions for their sacrifice and hard work (130).

> could throw in; and the finest specimens of both that I have ever seen, the largest one weighing three pounds, were heaved upon the shore, though at first in vain, to wriggle down into the water again, for we stood in the boat; but soon we learned to remedy this evil: for one, who had lost his hook, stood on shore to catch them as they fell in a perfect shower around him—sometimes, wet and slippery, full in the face and bosom, as his arms were outstretched to receive them. While yet alive, before their tints faded, they glistened like the fairest flowers, the product of primitive rivers; and he could hardly trust his senses, as he stood over them, that these jewels should have swam away in that Aboljacknagesic water for so long, so many dark ages;—these bright fluviatile flowers, seen of Indians only, made beautiful, the Lord only knows why, to swim there! I could understand better, for this, the truth of mythology, the fables of Proteus, and all those beautiful sea-monsters,—how all history, indeed, put to a terrestrial use, is mere history; but put to a celestial, is mythology always. (53-54)

It is true that Thoreau's depiction of hunting and butchering the moose in "Chesuncook" is less celestial in reach ("about as savage a sight as was ever witnessed" [135]); this is not surprising given what Thoreau writes in the "Higher Laws" chapter of *Walden* about fishing succeeding hunting in the "history of the individual."[5] Still, this does not keep Thoreau from recognizing the array of human virtues cultivated in hunting.[6] So, while Thoreau describes in riveting detail the butchering of the moose as "a tragical business" (115-16), he is led by his disgust to make this condemnation *not* of the use of nature but of the *poor use* of it. Recalling his disgust at the slaughter of the moose, Thoreau first concedes that nevertheless "I think that I could spend a year in the woods, fishing and hunting, just enough to sustain myself, with satisfaction. This would be next to living like a philosopher," he adds, "on the fruits of the earth which you had raised, which also attracts me." There is, in other words, a responsible kind of hunting. His objection is to the kind of hunting that makes poor use of "God's" creatures:

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[5] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992), 142.

[6] Thoreau notes in "Chesuncook" that "[t]hough I had not come a-hunting, and felt some compunctions about accompanying the hunters, I wished to see a moose near at hand, and was not sorry to learn how the Indian managed to kill one. I went as reporter or chaplain to the hunters,—and the chaplain has been known to carry a gun himself" (99). "Higher Laws" in *Walden* also finds virtues in hunting, which is why "when some of my friends have asked me anxiously about their boys, whether they should let them hunt, I have answered, yes—remembering that it was one of the best parts of my education" (142).

> But this hunting of the moose merely for the satisfaction of killing him . . . without making any extraordinary exertion or running any risk yourself, is too much like going out by night to some wood-side pasture and shooting your neighbor's horses. These are God's own horses, poor, timid creatures, that will run fast enough as soon as they smell you, though they *are* nine feet high. Joe told us of some hunters who a year or two before had shot down several oxen by night, somewhere in the Maine woods, mistaking them for moose. And so might any of the hunters; and what is the difference in the sport, but the name? In the former case, having killed one of God's and *your own* oxen, you strip off its hide . . . cut a steak from its haunches, and leave the huge carcass to smell to heaven for you. It is no better, at least, than to assist at a slaughter-house. (119)

More, Thoreau endorses hunting not only for sustenance but even for true sport (involving "extraordinary exertion or running any risk yourself"). This is a far cry from the kind of monastic appreciation of nature in itself with which Thoreau is too often saddled by today's commentators. Thoreau extracts from this lesson—that hunting is useful for sustenance as well as sport—a more general conclusion: there are higher uses of nature, uses that some know better than others.

> This afternoon's experience suggested to me how base or coarse are the motives which commonly carry men into the wilderness. The explorers and lumberers generally are all hirelings, paid so much a day for their labor, and as such they have no more love for wild nature than wood-sawyers have for forests. Other white men and Indians who come here are for the most part hunters, whose object is to slay as many moose and other wild animals as possible. But, pray, could not one spend some weeks or years in the solitude of this vast wilderness with other employments than these,—employments perfectly sweet and innocent and ennobling? For one that comes with a pencil to sketch or sing, a thousand come with an axe or rifle. What a coarse and imperfect use Indians and hunters make of nature! No wonder that their race is so soon exterminated. I already, and for weeks afterward, felt my nature the coarser for this part of my woodland experience, and was reminded that our life should be lived as tenderly and daintily as one would pluck a flower. (119-20)

Thoreau is in no way objecting to the use of nature; he is advocating a more refined use, one that is ennobling, perfecting, sweetening. Thoreau's ecology demands his true pioneers, those self-reliant individuals and not "hirelings."[7]

[7] Thoreau's reflections upon the Indians as a race are much more complex than this passage would suggest. Here I can only note that "race" in this passage applies