



Literary Criticism



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Selected excerpts from *Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination on "Walking"*

The essay was published a month after his death, but he had been using versions of it for lectures for 10 years. "It shows that what seemed to be a kaleidoscope of insights and revelations must have been unusually coherent at some level below immediate consciousness. But 'Walking' is, finally, an insufficient piece, a brilliant statement made largely in Thoreau's voice. It says nothing about what he knew of nature's otherness or, for that matter, about man's. Thoreau was aware that the essay was one-sided, and he cautioned the well-turned reader in the second sentence. . . . Some elements are going to be stressed beyond their legitimate proportions, with rhetoric displacing acceptable standards of the reasonable. . . . the essay's extraordinary wandering beyond the bounds, the breaking of the barriers which usually hem us in, is an attempt to do in rhetoric what he could not always do in life. That problem also emerges in the intricate structure of the essay itself. 'Walking' has a remarkable organization and significant form. Its inner life grows from a number of interconnected movements that lead inevitably to the brilliant, if qualified, coda of the final pages.

The essay focuses on no particular walk but on the activity itself. Its interests are generic rather than specific, which means that Thoreau's imagination is led more directly than usual to the allegorical forms which so often control the shape of his movements. But he is pointedly particular about his direction. Thoreau indicates that in his walks he inevitably starts out toward the southwest, or at least 'between west and south-southwest,' a partly intuitive, partly canny choice that draws simultaneously on university archetype, American myth, and Romantic precedent. . . . 'Walking' draws part of its paraphernalia from the current (and recurrent) American myth of westering, which by Thoreau's time had taken on specific, predictable contours, associated with Eden and a new, patriotic pastoralism. . . . American images are themselves images of universal inclination, signifying, among other things, not only that America is in tune with the rhythms of mankind but that it is fulfilling the main business of all men . . . And thus Thoreau stands in Concord as a home-grown concrete universalist, simultaneously parochial, patriotic, and archetypal. . . . Thoreau's personal explorations are themselves reiterations of a prevalent Romantic habit, that of making the breaking of new ground into a fertile image for the examination of self.

The newness which Thoreau breaks into is part of a series of interconnected perceptions which associate the new with the West and with wildness. They are also involved with forms of exploration that bring both essay and walker within sight of a new Elysium. Thoreau's series of associations echo those aspects of American myth which always put the pristine out in the wilderness, no matter how old and familiar the wild areas may have been to others (Thoreau, like Cooper, was sometimes bothered by the fact that the wild was new only to white men, but he was never disturbed enough to shred his spiritual map). Such American myths usually included some agent of the old who forced his way into the place of newness, so that his activity always kept him out beyond the boundary where the new and the wild began. . . . The extravagant walker is one who pushes out boundaries. He is continually driving himself against the edge where the walked-upon or the cleared meets its opposite, forcing the perimeters of the known farther toward the west. . . ."

In this essay, "walking becomes an activity of consciousness, indeed one of the primary tasks of the mind. . . . Walking brings him to the edge where mind and nature meet; and when he can be extra-vagant, it puts him out beyond all the old boundaries: 'For my part I feel that with regard to Nature I live a sort of border life, on the confines of a world into which I make occasional and transient forays only.' Out there he can know the new, even if such knowing means only to touch at nature's vast strangeness. In his most successful walking he breaks out of every kind of clearing, every place that has previously been redeemed; and this includes not only those cleared areas he had to perambulate in his business as surveyor-- 'these bounds which I have set up'--but also those areas within consciousness into which he had temporarily been confined because of the minor but necessary business of making a living. Walking is a way of getting out beyond personal limits, and walking into wildness is perhaps the fullest possible way of making that happen.

. . . . Thus, if wildness and westering mean freedom for Thoreau . . . , they also draw heavily for some of their most complex implications on his reiterated association of the West with ideas about exceptional fertility. The West is the ground out of which new creations spring at a rate and with an abundance and intensity which are awesome to those whose focus is bound to the East. . . . Wildness comes to be imaged as primordial life not yet made into forms of civilization, but with an immense, somewhat ambiguous promise inherent in its burgeoning fertility. The civilized, the East, covers over the wild, gets between us and the intense vitality within it; . . . and this vitality comes from the energy within the fertile world toward which the walker moves.

When civilization takes over and covers the wild with its layers, the energy still springs out of the fructifying mold from which the civilized world derives its sustenance. The layers on top draw their life out of those below. . . . Wildness, then, is aboriginal muck that is used to create more advanced societies. . . .

'Walking' thus turns the static contrast of the urbane and the unexplored into an interplay of varied movements, all of which are dominated by one, the infinitely expansive impulse for westering. As Thoreau frames it, there are no longer two fixed polarities, but shifting points on a tract that goes toward the west or southwest. The points shift because whenever the explorer gets beyond the wild that has been just ahead of him the wild changes character, or at least ceases to be the only mode available. Civilization moves on behind the one who walks ahead. It covers over the wild with successive layers as culture follows the walker down the track toward the west. This comes to mean that the further westward of civilization one can say, the closer one gets toward the sources of vitality, the ultimate stratum, the absolutely wild. The move west--or into the Maine woods or even the woods around Concord--is therefore a drive toward the creative center of being, the warm hearth of absolute potential out of which all creativity (culture and the civilized) emerges. THAT move is a radical gesture of considerable import to the life of Thoreau's imagination.

In fact, many of Thoreau's movements, and particularly the search for wildness, are variant forms of the essential quest for the creative center of being. It is his need to be at the edges of experience or to get out toward them and down toward the beginning of energy that drives Thoreau, the walker in his microcosm, out of Concord toward the fields and swamps Thoreau is edging up once again to some paradoxes: his passion for pristine wildness is countered by his admiration for those who respect the possibilities for growth in the root sources of energy, those who know its true value and would use it accordingly: 'I think that the farmer displaces the Indian even because he redeems the meadow, and so makes himself stronger and in some respects more natural.' The contrast to the passage from the *Week* concerning the Indian's respect for his own and nature's independence is startling. It reveals with absolute clarity the basic tensions between Thoreau's twin desires--one for radical wildness and another for reclamation--and the paradoxes and contradictions to which the tensions will lead him. Here as elsewhere the farmer is a natural redeemer, whether of meadows or of swamps. He is the counterpart in the fields to the one whose imagination works with the swamps of the spiritual wilderness. For a while Thoreau was both: that is, this job in the sojourn at Walden was to bring together the work of his arms and the work of consciousness, reclaiming a piece of land and at the same time getting down toward the center where all the warm life is Thoreau knew that those activities of consciousness which root toward the core of reality (or face it in a fact) are the most creative because they have worked out the difficult mode by which one gains access to the center of being. Since the encounter with the center is the most exact task of all, it requires consciousness to operate at full stretch and with all the adequacy it can must. Fronting is one of those activities of consciousness; opening a clearing beside the pond is another; and so too is the act of writing, the gesture by which consciousness seeks to make sense out of what it has learned about 'the marrow of life.'"

Thoreau's walks were "sacramental movements, gestures of diurnal redemption." Each walk was "an opportunity to cleanse off the crust made by his life in the town. Walking in itself refreshes, but the journey westward toward the edge where the wild begins takes him further, into the area of renewal where he can restore from its bed underneath what the day and the town had covered over The walk itself is a movement out toward nature's own marrow, the sacred place where he can dis-cover what is most truly his The gesture through which one reaches out beyond the edges of the cleared world is an attempt at reconciliation as well as regeneration. It is a bid toward bringing oneself together with the core of wildness. More precisely, it is an attempt to affiliate the inmost layer of his own self, his private stratum of wildness and incipient fertility, with its counterpart outside. . . . In the essay the movement westward into the wild is paralleled by another movement--interlocked, complementary, and yet paradoxically opposed--a motion within the self which goes down toward the wild underlying the layers of civilized ego. . . .

Further, to keep all the well-established associations intact, Thoreau has to acknowledge that the wildness concealed within him and imaged by the name emerges from the sources of all fertility, which is always to be found in a westerly direction. . . . The underworld, whether in its private or external segments, is therefore a prime source of rejuvenation for Thoreau. His trips down and within are nothing like those of Odysseus or Aeneas, who found the dark places to be full only of memories and anticipations. Thoreau's burrowings are the acts of a hungry consciousness which wants confirmation of the bedrock of reality and then a coalescence with it, a linkage of its wildness with his own. The way to self-understanding, which is also an understanding of universal fertility, leads below through layers imposed from above. If we want to grow we must always be groping toward the deepest place: 'Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild'.

The homology of consciousness and nature, articulated in layers and cores, makes possible an intricate interplay of dispartateness and identity which is brought out fully in 'Walking.' Because of the parallel structures we can protect the privacy and idiosyncrasy of genius and still, through the process of analogy, stay intimately tied to the world we find so fascinating. Thoreau looks for an association which, by its nature (or actually by *his*) cannot be permanent but will at least bring him together for a while with vital depth. The town will dull his awareness of wildness, but he can 'redeem the day,' and therefore reclaim the wildness within the self, whenever he chooses. In effect, this means that he need elastic or permeable boundaries, not fixed ones. They have to give under the drive of his hunger to partake of wildness, though in the end they draw back to their original shape, the perimeters of Concord and the self. The homology does not resolve the tensions between privacy and association, but it does contain them. It satisfies just so long as what we see out there is something we would not object to seeing in ourselves."