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Thoreau's Poetics of Nature¹

Abstract

Thoreau's descriptions of natural phenomena display the care and acuteness of scientific observation, and this may have overshadowed recognition of his aesthetic sensibility. The perceptual details of Thoreau's observations are pervaded by a sensitive appreciation of natural beauty. Moreover, the aesthetic in his account consists not only in the visual appreciation of visual beauty but is multi-sensory and engaged. Thoreau's writings document a rich yet uncustomary understanding of the appreciation of nature as aesthetic engagement. Moreover, we find in his work ideas and themes that carry us in the direction of Dewey's aesthetics and existential phenomenology, and the tenor of his perceptions becomes explicit in the emerging interest in environmental and everyday aesthetics.

Key Terms

aesthetics, appreciation, art, beauty, engagement, everyday life, nature, perception

I

As an icon for a broad array of political and environmental protest movements, Thoreau's presence and influence are ubiquitous. He has been taken up by passionate and sometimes mutually incompatible advocates, from anarchists, civil rights activists, and environmentalists to novelists, poets, and essayists. His work is well known both in the United States and abroad, and not only in the Western world but in the Far East, as well. So much has been written about Thoreau that it is improbable that much can be said that is new. Still, it may refresh our understanding of his deep well of ideas by dipping into it from time to time to find clarity and renewal in a fresh draught of his words.

Often associated with environmental concerns, Thoreau's ideas have been used to support values found in the natural world, such as respect for and appreciation of natural

processes and of nature not oppressed by human purposes. His mode of life has long been seen as a standard for our unique personal experience of the natural world. But while Thoreau's sojourn at Walden Pond may stand as the epitome of practical independence, it has also served as a model for the scientific organization of community in the interests of economy and efficiency. Its influence continues in the growing effort at sustainable living, both individually and in community.²

Few other writers have been so bold or perhaps so foolhardy as to attempt so much. Yet as a result of his range of interests, Thoreau's accomplishments were extraordinary in a milieu of extraordinary people, and his influence has become ubiquitous. He may be said to represent the irreverence and broad competence, as well as the inveterate moralism of the American character. But because Thoreau's writings encompass such a wide assortment of topics and disciplines, one cannot deal briefly with his work as a whole in a way that avoids laudatory generalities or critical disapproval. Looking over this work, one may be struck by the detail and precision in his descriptions of natural phenomena and see him as a classical naturalist. Or one may take Thoreau as a writer and social critic, considering his writing as a literary enterprise or a nascent political program.³ At the same time, it would not do justice to the full force of its scope to focus a microscopic eye on a single aspect alone.

For there is much to be heard in the range and timbre of Thoreau's voice, unique in American literature. Congenitally critical, his work combines philosophical ruminations, moral adjurations in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, and social criticism, all informed by wide reading that included distant and past cultures, including Eastern ones. At the same time, he combined this intellectual scope with an irrepressible scientific curiosity that found expression in precise descriptions of nature and a perception of detail and nuance characteristic of the best nature writers. The breadth of Thoreau's interests and his moral passion could obscure the vehicle of his words were it not that their distinctive eloquence is irrepressible. One commentator has even gone so far as to claim that "Thoreau's chief importance to us [is] his writing," proclaiming that "At his best, Thoreau wrote the only first-rate prose ever written by an American, with the possible exception of Abraham Lincoln" (Hyman 324, 317). Reactions to Thoreau are characteristically extreme.

Yet the strong moralism and epigrammatic force of Thoreau's literary efforts meld, perhaps improbably, with the care and acuteness of his scientific observations at Walden Pond and on his various excursions. But the literary, the scientific, and the moral are diminished

when they are separated. Moreover, these aspects have been taken to represent Thoreau so commonly that they have tended to overshadow other, equally central characteristics. One of these is the author's aesthetic sensibility.

It is easy to overlook how thoroughly the perceptual details in Thoreau's observations are imbued with a sensitive appreciation of natural beauties. Moreover, the aesthetic reflected in his accounts consists not only in the appreciation of visual beauty but, more broadly, in its multi-sensory and engaged character. His experience of nature is active, constructive, creative. Indeed, Thoreau's practice can tell us much about the aesthetic appreciation of nature. It might respect his intent best by emulating his example of working on a small scale and seizing on this theme --Thoreau's poetics of nature. Let us see where it can lead us.

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I call this a *poetics* of nature because Thoreau's aesthetic sensibility appears not only in the rich perceptual detail of his observations of nature, but in his active engagement in discerning and activating those sensory details. A striking passage early in *Walden* identifies the germinal impulse that pervades his writing.

It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts ("Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" ¶ 15).⁴

One may be tempted to dismiss this as romantic excess, but that would be a trifling response. It would be pure condescension to mistake this remarkable passage as merely poetic hyperbole evoked by unrestrained enthusiasm. This is no ordinary encomium to nature's beauties but a testament to the creative act of nature appreciation: for Thoreau, appreciating nature is comparable to an artistic process.

It would belittle Thoreau not to listen to what he says, for his language is not merely figurative. Indeed, it is revealing to read such comments just as literally as the scientific data he cataloged. They can tell us much about the quality and character of natural experience. This passage, like another when he describes the earth as "living poetry ("Spring," ¶9)," is revealing enough in itself. Yet such comments anticipate by

more than a century and a half the emergence of an important new interest in the aesthetics of environment. And this, along with the broad scope of Thoreau's sensibility, may be seen as prefiguring the increasing attention to urban aesthetics and to the aesthetics of everyday life in contemporary scholarship.

The influence of environmental experience on aesthetic theory is perhaps the strongest motive behind the present effort to expand aesthetic appreciation and understanding beyond their customary scope of the fine arts. Writers on aesthetics are now likely to include in their consideration first the practical arts and crafts, and then the various environments as part of which humans carry on their many activities. Thus the range of appreciation has grown from nature to include the urban environment, from the appreciation of natural beauty to the aesthetics of human artifacts, from the enjoyment of works of art to an aesthetic sensibility in engaging the objects and activities of domestic life. Thoreau was one of the first to take us beyond the ultimate and overwhelming in nature and art to the beauty in the prosaics of the world. Sometimes, moreover, Thoreau wrote as if the beauty in nature exceeds that in art. Art can never match the luxury and superfluity of Nature (A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers, 1849). Indeed, Nature is a greater and more perfect art.... (A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers, 1849).

In their veracity and minute detail, Thoreau's descriptions of nature prefigure phenomenological description. His account of the scenery of Walden Pond includes the color of the water, which he described for nearly eight hundred words as it changed from a yellowish tone to green and took on various shades of blue when seen from different distances and under a changing sky ("The Ponds" ¶ 5). Nor is the water taken in isolation, for Thoreau saw the pond in its larger setting, albeit without grandeur, as he described the shore, the trees that border it, and the hills beyond. This contextual, perceptual appreciation of nature is typical of his descriptions. His eye is not that of the clinician who evaluates things dispassionately or of the anatomist who dissects objects into ever-smaller parts. It is rather the vision of the rhapsodist who carries forward the sweep of his story, or the landscape painter who conveys the quality of an entire scene by what he chooses to place on his canvas.

In reading his detailed descriptions as purely visual observations, it is easy to overlook what I think is a crucial feature of Thoreau, the naturalist. One might imagine him looking with scientific detachment at "the cranberries, small waxen gems, pendants of the meadow grass,

pearly and red," ("House-Warming" ¶ 13) or examining the bubbles trapped in the ice of the pond. But Thoreau is not an ocular scientist. His engagement with the natural world is, on the contrary, full-bodied. It involves learning, to be sure, but reading alone is never enough. For speaking as if he were a phenomenologist, Thoreau makes the critical observation that "we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor...." ("Sounds" ¶ 4). There were times of cleaning his house when he set even his books, pens, and ink out-of-doors "amid the pines and hickories," as if to balance their abstractions and scholarly associations with nuts and cones. And of course there were the hours spent hoeing beans. These were not dull chores relegated to a mindless routine but, Buddha-like, activities worthy of mindful attention, part of his life and therefore valuable. "How much of beauty—of color, as well as form—on which our eyes daily rest goes unperceived by us." (August 1, 1860).

Thoreau's world is also filled with sounds, and he devotes an entire chapter in *Walden* to them: the whistle of the locomotive passing within earshot and the varied sights and sounds of the train at different times of the day and season. It is as if this were another natural phenomenon that demanded a description of its cars and cargoes. His aural horizon included animal and bird sounds, rumbling carts and bells, the sound of raindrops, even the soft rustle of the forest growing around him. And if, sitting in his boat, the stillness became too great, he would rap against its side planks and raise up echoes from the surrounding hills and vales (The Ponds" ¶ 2).

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Part of the perennial appeal of Thoreau's sensible mentality, if I may identify his distinctive manner of ruminative activity, lies in the ethical insights he discerned in nature, both by simple observation and from scientific inquiry. One might be inclined to dismiss his criticism of the prudential behavior of the local farmers and townspeople as the inverse arrogance of a backwoods moralist were it not that his judgments were so penetrating and sound in their measure. Calculating the various depths of the pond is a characteristic instance. It led Thoreau to a similar rule for judging the dimensions of a man's character ("The Pond in Winter"). Higher laws include building the temple of one's body ("Higher Laws"). Thoreau lived, too, with the traces of the past on the land and the lore of its former inhabitants: its history was ever-present. All this was part of his world, a living present constantly adding a palimpsest of fresh perceptions, literary and historical associations, and personal memories. Is Thoreau being

inconsistent here, turning nature into a metaphor for morality? This might seem so, except that the vividness and force of his perceptions of the natural world clearly stand on their own and not as mere crutches for a figurative moralism.

Recognizing in nature a source both of beauty and of moral insight had implications for both. Thoreau's nature is not a passive object of contemplation but a domain of activity: walking in the woods, hoeing his beans, playing his flute while floating on Walden Pond, engaging with full responsiveness in the tasks and pleasures of living in nature. This points to an essential characteristic of Thoreau's poetics of nature. It is not an aesthetics of contemplation but of life lived actively, and constructed, like his house, to his own dimensions. He grasped the beauty in everything, from the tops of the evergreens and the mountain ash to the tree-cranberries in his stew and the wild ground he walked on.⁷ His was an active aesthetic, an integral part of the processes of living, an aesthetics of engagement. I call it that advisedly because the prevalence of an aesthetic sensibility in Thoreau's writing is markedly different from the ways in which the aesthetic is usually sequestered and etherialized by separating such appreciative experience from the course of daily life. The concept of aesthetic engagement centers on the unity of aesthetic experience in which active involvement in the aesthetic process involves a unity of perceiver and object in appreciative experience.

This, then, is no disinterested observation of an isolated scene but active participation in the process of appreciation.⁸ It reflects both the temper of the man and the temper of the country. For the beauty Thoreau discovered was in relation to an individual person actively engaged, so that we find "as much beauty visible to us in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate,—not a grain more. The actual objects which one person will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those which another will see as the persons are different." Thoreau's writings bring the reader both objects: his actual and our possible ones. Moreover, his words are not of antiquarian interest only but carry us to the very present, for they stand at the leading edge of an emerging movement called "eco-aesthetics," which "emphasizes the ecological continuity or interrelatedness between the human appreciator and objects." ¹⁰

Thoreau's life, often associated with his stay at Walden Pond, is mistakenly thought of as reclusive and sedentary, but this is misleading. His time there was filled with the many activities of daily life: going to the pond for water, fishing for pickerel, walking about, and occasionally visiting with friends and neighbors. Walking was his transportation of choice, before and beyond his two years at Walden Pond. Working and rambling about, Thoreau was

an inveterate pedestrian.¹¹ He frequently walked around Concord, surveying the land about and studying intensively the natural history of the place, putting into practice his adulation of the ordinary and embracing the world from his doorstep. As the bard of the local, Thoreau is unmatched. Yet he was also fascinated by accounts of travels and wrote some of this own.¹²

IV

An idiosyncratic writer, Thoreau cannot be constrained by any school of thought: a Transcendentalist by category more than content, a naturalist who moralized, a loner who valued social relations and was fiercely political. Like Spinoza, another thinker whose originality was disconcerting, Thoreau left no direct descendents. But like that seventeenth century independent, he continues to be an influence, more as an icon of political individualism and an inspiration for the environmental movement than through any particular doctrine. Thoreau's persistent presence in American culture confirms the continuing allure of living close to nature. The ripples he stirred on Walden Pond have traveled far beyond its shoreline. Without exercising any direct force, their undulations carry us to Dewey's aesthetics, to existential phenomenology, and especially to the growing interest in environmental and everyday aesthetics.¹³

Although Thoreau's aesthetic sensibility is often overlooked, we have seen that it is not only pervasive in his writing but an inseparable part of his life and work. In his appreciation of a natural aesthetic, Thoreau could write with characteristic eloquence, especially in his *Journal*. This passage from his journal is not unique:

"All nature is classic and akin to art. The sumach and pine and hickory which surround my home remind me of the most graceful sculpture. Sometimes their tops, or a single limb or leaf seems to have grown to a distinct expression as if it were a symbol for me to interpret. Poetry, painting, and sculpture claim at once and associate with themselves those perfect specimens of the art of nature,---leaves, vines, acorns, pine cones, etc. The critic must at last stand as mute though contented before a true poem as before an acorn or a vine leaf. The perfect work of art is received again into the bosom of nature whence its material proceeded, and that criticism which can only detect its unnaturalness has no longer any office to fulfill. The choicest maxims that have come

down to us are more beautiful or integrally wise than they are wise to our understandings. This wisdom which we are inclined to pluck from their stalk is the point only of a single association. Every natural form --- palm leaves and acorns, oak leaves and sumach and dodder – are untranslatable aphorisms."

Direct engagement with perceptual detail and immersion in intrinsic sensibility are, as I have claimed, 15 at the heart of aesthetic appreciation, and Thoreau was especially responsive to the aesthetic dimension of natural experience. As a poet of nature, he taught us how to "paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts." Emerson recognized Thoreau's universal sensibility: "His eye was open to beauty, and his ear to music. He found these, not in rare conditions, but wheresoever he went. He thought the best of music was in single strains; and he found poetic suggestion in the humming of the telegraph-wire."

While this discussion of Thoreau's aesthetic has highlighted a feature of his writing that is generally overlooked, it is important not to think of it as a distinct and separate element of Thoreau's unique voice. Emerson observed, after Thoreau's death, that "He was a speaker and actor of the truth." And while this unflinching commitment lay at the core of his moral standard, it was equally part of his aesthetic awareness. Thoreau's aesthetic was true to his experience of nature and it pervades his writing as an essential part of his message on how to live. That is a moral message and his moral call reverberates throughout. More than simply a combination of factors, the moral and the aesthetic are inseparable, and this is nowhere more explicit than in his assertion that "the perception of beauty is a moral test." 19

There is special significance in the coincidence of the moral and the aesthetic. While it is often argued that moral and aesthetic values are separate and must not be confounded, Thoreau's moral message is embedded in his aesthetic one. He believed that just as living a moral life demands active attention and resolve, so does the poetics of beauty: "How much of beauty—of color, as well as form—on which our eyes daily rest goes unperceived by us,"²⁰ he observed trenchantly, for there is only "as much beauty visible to us in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate,—not a grain more."²¹ What shall we say of a natural philosopher who has beauty in his heart?

But not only does the aesthetic infuse the moral life, and the moral the aesthetic. One of the most striking things about Thoreau's writing is that its various features fuse into an inseparable stream: scientific naturalism, moral adjuration, personal iconoclasm, political independence, aesthetic sensibility, autobiographical incident. The common penchant for separating and isolating such factors misses their homogeneity, which his writing constantly celebrates. Thoreau wrote about his life as a seamless, active, responsive unity, as living engagement in his immediate world. This is the key feature of engagement: the aesthetic unity of experience. Experience is aesthetic when it is direct, perceptual, undivided, active, lived, 22 and the aesthetic is an inseparable presence in all experience. It is the ever-beating heart of Thoreau's message.

Thoreau stands as a unique figure in the American pantheon. It is gratifying to think of him still beckoning us to move in unaccustomed directions. As with other philosophical beacons in world civilization, such as Lao Tzu, Aristotle, Spinoza, and Marx, Thoreau continues to radiate light.

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Notes

¹ I want to express my appreciation to Donald Jeweler, from whose suggestion this essay originated.

² B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948); Kathleen Kinkade, *A Walden Two experiment; the first five years of Twin Oaks Community*, foreword by B. F. Skinner (New York, Morrow, 1973). It is probably no exaggeration to regard Thoreau's undertaking as a principal inspiration for the broad array of intentional communities established worldwide beginning in the second half of the twentieth century and continuing into the present.

³ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, expanded edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Theodore Baird, "Corn Grows in the Night," in Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), pp.400-409; George Hendrick, "The Influence of Thoreau's 'Civil Disobedience' on Gandhi's *Satyagraha*, *op. cit.*, pp. 364-371; Richard Drinnon, "Thoreau's Politics of the Upright Man," *op. cit.*, pp. 410-422.

⁴ Since Thoreau's works appear in many different editions, depending on the degree of specificity, references will be to the title, chapter or part, and paragraph number. References to his journal will be to the date.

⁵ "The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit — not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic."

⁶ See Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (Aldershott: Ashgate, 2007).

I have developed the concept of aesthetic engagement in numerous places. A recent statement explains,

Aesthetic engagement rejects the dualism inherent in traditional accounts of aesthetic appreciation and epitomized in Kantian aesthetics, which treats aesthetic experience as the subjective appreciation of a beautiful object. Instead, aesthetic engagement emphasizes the holistic, contextual character of aesthetic appreciation. Aesthetic engagement involves active participation in the appreciative process, sometimes by overt physical action but always by creative perceptual involvement. Aesthetic engagement also returns aesthetics to its etymological origins by stressing the primacy of sense perception, of sensible experience. It reconfigures perception itself to recognize the mutual activity of all the sense modalities, including kinesthetic and somatic sensibility more generally.

The concept of aesthetic engagement, then, epitomizes a holistic, unified aesthetics in place of the dualism of the traditional account. It rejects the traditional separations between the appreciator and the art object, as well as between the artist and the performer and the audience. It recognizes that all these functions overlap and merge within the aesthetic field, the context of appreciation. The customary separations and oppositions between the functions of artist, object, appreciator, and performer disappear in the reciprocity and continuity of appreciative experience.

"What Is Aesthetic Engagement?", Contemporary Aesthetics 11 (2013) (www.contempaesthetics.org). Also see Arnold Berleant, Art and Engagement (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), Aesthetics and Environment, Variations on a Theme (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) and Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997).

⁷ The Maine Woods, Ktaadn, Part 1; Chesuncook, Parts 2 and 5.

⁸ See my discussion of aesthetic unity in "Aesthetics and the Unity of Experience," Academia.edu, https://www.academia.edu/3783262/Aesthetics_and_the_Unity_of_Experience.

⁹ The Journal of Henry David Thoreau (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906) Journal XI, Ch. IX, November 4,1858.

¹⁰ 'Ecoaesthetics' may be defined as "the theory of ecological aesthetic appreciation," i.e. environmental aesthetic appreciation construed in the context of a system of interrelated and interdependent natural forces that "emphasizes the ecological continuity or interrelatedness between the human appreciator and objects." See Xiangzhan Cheng, "Aesthetic Engagement, Ecosophy C and Ecological Appreciation," in *Contemporary Aesthetics* 11 (2013), §1. (www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/journal.php)

[&]quot;I have told many that I walk every day about half the daylight, but I think they do not believe it." *Op. cit., Journal IX*, Ch. VI, January 7, 1857. Also see Thoreau's essay, "Walking."

¹² These included not only his early expedition down local rivers (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers*, 1849), but a more extended trip to Quebec (*A Yankee in Canada*, 1866), four trips to Cape Cod (*Cape Cod*, 1865), and three excursions in Maine (*The Maine Woods*, 1864). At other times he visited cities from New York and Philadelphia to Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, and more.

An extensive literature in environmental aesthetics has grown over the past four decades. See the Introduction and Notes to *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, edited by Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant. Broadview Press, 414-815 1st Street SW, Calgary Alberta Canada T2P 1N3, and to Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson, eds., *The Aesthetics of Human Environments* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2007).

Everyday aesthetics is a more recent development. In addition to Mandoki's *Everyday Aesthetics* cited in endnote 4, see Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Peterborough,Ont: Broadview Press, 2012); "Artification," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Special Volume 4 (2012).

- ¹⁴ *Journal*, vol. I (undated). Quoted in Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), pp. 251-252.
- ¹⁵ See "Environmental Sensibility," *Ambiances in Action: Proceedings of the 2nd International Congress on Ambiances*. International Ambiances Network, 2012, pp.53-56.
- ¹⁶ Walden, II. "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For," ¶ 15.
- ¹⁷ Emerson, *op. cit.*, p. 276.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau," (*Atlantic Monthly,* August, 1862) in *Henry David Thoreau, Walden and Civil Disobedience, Authoritative Texts, Background Reviews, and Essays in Criticism*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), p. 269.
- ¹⁹ Op. cit., Journal IV, Ch. II, 6/21/52.
- ²⁰ Op. cit., Journal XIV, Ch. I, 8/1/60.
- ²¹ He continues, "The actual objects which one person will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those which another will see as the persons are different." *Op. cit., Journal XI*, Ch. V, 11/4/58.
- ²² See " Aesthetics and the Unity of Experience," op. cit.