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Thoreau's Aesthetics and 'The Domain of the Superlative'

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ABSTRACT

Recently, 'ecocritics' have tried to show how literature might help us weather the global environmental crisis both emotionally and intellectually. Their arguments have been based, in part, on the assumption that despite its obvious strengths natural science has well-defined intellectual and ethical 'limits', and that environmental values are (therefore) best articulated by concerned humanists more in touch with the imagination. This essay addresses some of the problems faced by green humanists in their uneasy, mistrustful relationship with natural science, using passages from Thoreau as touchstone texts and juxtaposing those passages with remarks made by Bachelard, Coleridge, Stevens, Nietzsche, and Kant.

KEY WORDS

Aesthetics, ecocriticism, imagination, Thoreau, values

THOREAU'S AESTHETICS AND 'THE DOMAIN OF THE SUPERLATIVE'

The brilliance of earth is the brilliance of every paradise... . A school of literary ascetics denying itself any indulgence in resemblances would, necessarily, fall back on reality and vent all its relish there.

Wallace Stevens, 'Three Academic Pieces, I'

In recent years, much has been written by students of American environmental literature about its Thoreauvian heritage, which is said to be especially important to so-called nature writing. (See Lueders [ed.] 1989; Cooley [ed.] 1994; Worster 1994, esp. chapters 3–5; Buell 1995; Stewart 1995; Scheese 1996; *et alia.*) Of

course, that generations of American nature writers have been influenced by the author of *Walden*, and that, moreover, they have frequently, deliberately and shamelessly imitated him, is no secret. One easily detects Thoreau's influence in nature writers' meticulous descriptions of natural objects, in their adventurous narratives of excursion into the wild, and in their strenuous attempts to convince their readers that heightened awareness of the natural world has not only intellectual interest but also redemptive power, therefore great cultural and spiritual value. So while the argument for the centrality of the Thoreauvian corpus to an evergreen tradition of writing about nature clearly has merit, much of its merit consists in having stated the obvious. Meanwhile, the shortcomings inherent in the continued use of merely conventional and traditional approaches to writing about any subject matter, be it natural or otherwise, may have been overlooked.

That the scholarly study of environmental literature, or 'ecocriticism' as it is more succinctly called, has so readily confirmed and endorsed the obvious reflects the fact that it is still a comparatively new phenomenon, hence a somewhat shaky enterprise. Ecocriticism originated in the early 1990s in reaction to a global ecological crisis unprecedented in human experience. A handful of environmentally-concerned literary scholars felt they could no longer continue to ignore this crisis in their professional lives, which were relatively insular owing to the division of intellectual labour in the modern academy. The pioneers of ecocriticism hoped that a green reading of literature, especially nature writing, might enable them to lend their counterparts in departments of ecology, earth science, and environmental studies a helping hand by illuminating the ethical and even the epistemological difficulties that have made the effort to protect and preserve the natural world less successful than it needs to be. It is with just these ethical and epistemological difficulties in mind, and taking Thoreau as my test case, that I am here going to raise the sceptic's question of whether literature itself, as one form of human expression among many, may be conceived in terms that make it hard for writers to be as aesthetically responsive to and ethically responsible for the environment as they might be, were they to do something else with their time other than writing: something more immediately valuable, or at least something potentially creative of new values.

I'd like to point out, before I begin trying to answer it, that the question I have just raised should be of concern not only to literary scholars and ecocritics like myself. The importance of the role played by American nature writing in inspiring and shaping the US environmental movement is undeniable: it is enough simply to mention the names of Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold. However, inspiration can produce both purple prose and poor doctrine. Even in enduringly, justly popular or 'classic' writing about nature like Thoreau's, we find as many self-evidently bad models of our relationship to the natural environment as we find discernibly good models of the same relationship. The latter models are ones we might put to use whenever we try to demonstrate why and how it is that

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the natural environment is valuable, both for us and in its own right. Yet given how hard this is for us to do, and do persuasively, 'Give a hoot – read a book!' (I am borrowing this slogan from *The Simpsons*) may not be the most effective call to arms for environmentalists – including ecocritics – to adopt.

Let me try to show you the difference between the self-evidently bad and the discernibly good models of our relationship to the natural environment as they are exemplified in Thoreau's work. I am for the most part going to overlook *Walden*, where the author's interest in 'higher laws', especially purity of body, is at loggerheads with his interest in the natural world (or so it seems to me). Instead I will turn first to a passage from Thoreau's 1851 journal, where he employs what is surely a bad model of our relationship to the natural world, an intellectually impoverished and overly pious one. I will then look at a very different passage, one from Thoreau's posthumous book *The Maine Woods*. I find this passage suggestive, if not of an altogether good model of our relationship to the natural world, then at least of a better model than the one Thoreau employs in his 1851 journal. Better, and by a margin that makes it worth considering, because this second model is less constrained by piety and by prejudice about 'the imagination', that mysterious faculty in which all of the Romantics believed and most of us do not. In short, this second model isn't ascetic. In Wallace Stevens's phrase, it vents 'all its relish' on earth and not in some more transcendental realm of 'resemblances'. It therefore seems 'wilder' in the special Thoreauvian meaning of the term, while being no less available to us for all its wildness.¹

I

Despite the fact that he is himself a serious student of natural history, in his writing Thoreau sometimes complains about his scientific contemporaries and accuses them of being killjoys. For instance, in his journal entry for 25 December 1851, he addresses his thoughts concerning the 'red vision' of the setting sun to a scientific interlocutor he treats as an intrusive and unwelcome adversary:

I witness a beauty in the form or coloring of the clouds which addresses itself to my imagination, for which you account scientifically to my understanding, but do not so account to my imagination. It is what it suggests and is the symbol of that I care for, and if, by any trick of science, you rob it of its symbolicalness, you do me no service and explain nothing. I, standing twenty miles off, see a crimson cloud in the horizon. You tell me it is a mass of vapor which absorbs all other rays and reflects the red, but that is nothing to the purpose, for this red vision excites me, stirs my blood, makes my thoughts flow, and I have new and indescribable fancies, and you have not touched the secret of that influence. . . . What sort of science is that which enriches the understanding, but robs the imagination? not merely robs Peter to pay Paul, but takes from Peter more than it ever gives to Paul?
(Thoreau 1984a, pp. 155–6; my ellipsis)

In this passage, Thoreau invokes a customary philosophical distinction between 'the understanding' and 'the imagination', and speaks in defence of the latter: in defence of the sunset's 'symbolicalness', that is, and against its scientific explanation, which he finds irrelevant to his purposes. But while he disputes its relevance and characterises it as a form of trickery, he provides the scientific explanation of the sunset just the same. He thereby concedes a point, the point being that the imagination is open to (allegedly) reductive explanations of the phenomena it witnesses, which means that it may be checked in its flow of fancy.

So science appears to touch the imagination in a sensitive place after all, and the fact that Thoreau's scientific interlocutor is in all likelihood actually himself only underscores the futility of his protest. He *knows* whereof he speaks: in all probability, he has made a careful study of it. Thus if scientific explanation undermines 'symbolicalness', it does so within the consciousness of just one man and in the prose of only one writer. It therefore is likely that no prophylactic measure Thoreau may adopt will keep scientific explanation and knowledge from seeping through the cognitive membrane that is supposed to separate his imagination from his understanding.

There is another, graver difficulty with the scenario Thoreau has sketched in his journal. Of just what, exactly, is the sunset meant to be a symbol? Thoreau doesn't say, but my hunch is that he sees the sunset as a symbol of 'symbolicalness' in general – and as a suggestion, so to speak, of suggestiveness itself – and hence as something he cannot cash out in any particular terms. This doesn't keep him from describing sunsets again and again in his work, writer that he is. As a New England Transcendentalist and an erstwhile protégé of Ralph Waldo Emerson, he is accustomed to regarding natural facts as 'symbols' of spiritual facts, and inured to thinking of the latter as facts difficult, if not impossible, to characterise in discrete propositions (see Emerson 1983, p. 20). Yet if the symbolism Thoreau favours flirts too much with the ineffable, then his imagination may put an infinite regress in train and might better be constrained, if not allowed to atrophy for lack of exercise, especially when matters more amenable to explanation than 'symbolicalness' appears to be are in the offing: matters such as cloud formation and its atmospheric effects in a solar system and on a planet like ours.

Thoreau readily acknowledges that the imagination has its limitations and its occasions at the conclusion of his journal entry. In a sudden reversal of tack of the sort that can make his writing seem flatly contradictory, but which is better taken, by those who want to continue reading him with pleasure and profit, as an expression of his honesty and pragmatism, he writes, 'Just as inadequate to a pure mechanic would be a poet's account of a steam-engine' (Thoreau 1984a, p. 156). Thus Thoreau reminds us that the imagination is not as universal and universalising, or as productive of immediate value, as he would like it to be when he feels compelled to skirmish with science in defence of Romanticism and Transcendentalism. So in a vital, non-trivial way, the choice between a stultifying

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but 'scientific' specificity and an unconvincing but 'imaginative' generality must be a false one. And this, along with the pitiful spectacle it engenders of a man arguing with himself about the superiority of two faculties neither of which is of use to him without the other, is what makes the model Thoreau seem to be following at the outset of this journal entry a self-evidently bad one.

The allure of the sunset is never exclusively 'scientific' or 'imaginative', but always a rich, indeterminate mixture of each. To cast this matter still more precisely in the terms of the classical aesthetics of Kant and his followers (of whom Thoreau might be counted as one, if only in certain moods), I should point out that the sunset's imaginative allure may not be 'pure' no matter how 'disinterested' or distanced the sunset's observer believes himself or herself to be – assuming that the sunset continues to be a phenomenon equally alluring to the scientist and the aesthete alike.²

For today's atmospheric scientist, red visions of the sort Thoreau witnessed are largely to be interpreted as the effects of polluted air, since the setting sun's rays are now refracted by particulates less benign than the droplets of water vapour that turned nineteenth-century Concord's skies to shades of vermilion. This evening's sunset may be a splendid one, but it is going to be refracted both by droplets of water vapour and by clouds of grit raised by trucks, tractors, and automobiles; by ground-hugging petrochemical fogs; and by greenhouse gases drifting about in the upper atmosphere. Thus it may be a sunset you not only can see, but also can smell, taste, and even feel on the surface of your skin. Who says atmospheric science can't comprehend such ambiguities? Obviously, it can and must.

For the aesthete, on the other hand, the contemporary sunset may seem less a gloomy portent of the death of nature than an outright visual cliché. Arguably, the sunset became a visual cliché as early as, say, 1851. Or even earlier, since landscape artists working under the sway of notions of the picturesque and the sublime had already been attending to the wonders of the evening skies for several generations. In a chapter entitled 'The Wrath of Vulcan: Volcanic Eruptions', the earth scientist Stephen Marshak points out that paintings of sunsets like those by J.M.W. Turner became popular in the decades following the 1815 eruption of Mt. Tambora in Indonesia. This event thus 'left a permanent impact on Western culture' (Marshak 2001, p. 264). The highpoint of painterly depictions of Romantic nature at eventide seems to have been a by-product of air pollution on a global scale, albeit air pollution originating from a natural source. Who says art history can't comprehend such irony? Obviously, it can and must.

That the sunset is effected, or both produced and altered, by a host of environmental factors – many of which are now of artificial origin – ought to remind us that the sunset's meaning and value is far from being a natural or cultural constant. (If, that is, the sunset has a meaning and a value: like, say, mid-afternoon, which so far as I know no one on the planet regards as the witching hour, it need not.) In some environments, sunset is less a time to linger on a hilltop in

aesthetic reverie than a time to bring the cattle into the kraal and peel an eye for lions on the prowl. In other environments, sunset is a time to lower the shades and mix the first cocktail of the evening – a sundowner, if you please. In still other environments, sunset might be a time of sheer indifference (though this third case would be an odd one, since humans are diurnal by nature).

We can further illuminate both Thoreau's and our own difficulties in appreciating sunsets, and all the rest of the natural world, too, in what some traditional theorists of the matter regard as an appropriately aesthetic fashion by considering a few remarks that Bachelard makes about 'the domain of the superlative' in *The Poetics of Space*.³ Bachelard writes, 'To verify images kills them, and it is always more enriching to *imagine* than to *experience*.' He adds, 'To enter into the domain of the superlative, we must leave the positive for the imaginary.' On this account, 'the domain of the superlative' must be the exclusive province of the artist and the poet. Neither is a positivist, yet both are specialists of a sort, who know how to use images fictively and freely, and who never try to pass off the images they use as declarations of (scientific) truth or representations of (natural) fact. Because they are devoted to the imagination, which 'is never wrong', according to Bachelard, 'since it does not have to confront an image with an objective reality', the dissemination of false or perhaps even trite images ought not to be a matter of special concern to genuine artists and poets (Bachelard 1994, pp. 88, 89, 152).

Yet as with Thoreau and the sunset, this isn't the whole story. Bachelard also suggests that there are limiting cases in which a confrontation 'with an objective reality' might be not so much irrelevant as dangerous to the authentic artist's or poet's imagination, which needs to keep objective realities potent enough to overwhelm it at bay, but not because such realities are likely to be raw and unrefined, therefore offensive to aesthetic sensibilities. Quite the reverse, in fact, or so Bachelard insists in his discussion of sea shells: 'After a positive examination of the shell world, the imagination is defeated by reality. Here it is nature that imagines, and nature is very clever. One has only to look at pictures of ammonites to realise that, as early as the Mesozoic Age, molluscs constructed their shells according to the teachings of a transcendental geometry' (Bachelard 1994, p. 105). In one respect, Bachelard's point is well-taken: nature is no dullard, and it outfoxes us more often than not. Yet Bachelard underestimates both the robustness of human imagination and the attractions of imaginative thinking for scientists. Surely the imaginary appeals, if only in circumscribed ways, even to the least transcendental of geometers, not to mention die-hard positivists and outright reductionists intent on the experimental verification or falsification of every hypothesis, barring only those formulated by crackpots and loonies.

Unlike Bachelard's artist and poet, who have been idealised, Thoreau was usually as alive to the suggestiveness of scientific data and theory as he was to that of poetic and other sorts of imagery. He also realised that the vulnerability of the imagination to the empirical could not be an entirely bad thing, since if it

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were never challenged by fact the imagination would become vacuous, therefore just as reductive as science is widely presumed to be – giving the mechanic good reason to find the poet fatuous. Thus Thoreau's tetchiness after watching the sun set on Christmas day in 1851: he is trying to regain his balance. And while his embattled approach to the aesthetics of nature in relation to scientific authority may be confused, the confusion isn't his alone. It arises from transcendental philosophy's treatment of *the* imagination and *the* understanding as separate faculties of the mind, rather than as relatively distinct but otherwise compatible cognitive modes or as differentially-defined aspects of thought generally speaking. On the latter view, the distinction between the imagination and the understanding appears to be a purely *ad hoc* and notional one, which may be useful for hermeneutic purposes but becomes pernicious the moment its terms are reified (as they were by the Romantics). In fact, to employ this distinction at all may be to participate in what is no better than a folk tradition, even though the distinction was first formulated by those erudite but peculiar folk we call 'philosophers'.

Meditating on the (by his day, already quite hoary) distinction between the imagination and the understanding in an essay entitled 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet', Wallace Stevens relates an anecdote about Coleridge which he thought shed light on the presumed conflict between poetic and philosophical truth. (We might add scientific fact to the mix.) 'Once on a packet on his way to Germany Coleridge was asked to join a party of Danes and drink with them', Stevens reports. He then quotes the poet's description of this less than decisive encounter:

I went, and found some excellent wines and a dessert of grapes with a pine-apple. The Danes had christened me Doctor Teology, and dressed as I was all in black, with large shoes and black worsted stockings, I might certainly have passed very well for a Methodist missionary. However I disclaimed my title. What then may you be ... *Un philosophe*, perhaps? It was at that time in my life in which of all possible names and characters I had the greatest disgust to that of *un philosophe* The Dane then informed me that all in the present party were Philosophers likewise We drank and talked and sang, till we talked and sung altogether; and then we rose and danced on the deck a set of dances.

'As poetry goes, as the imagination goes, as the approach to truth, or, say, to being by way of the imagination goes', Stevens insists that 'Coleridge is one of the great figures'. 'Even so', he adds, 'we find in Coleridge, dressed in black, with large shoes and black worsted stockings, dancing on the deck of a Hamburg packet, a man who may be said to have been defining poetry all his life in definitions that are valid enough but which no longer impress us primarily by their validity.' One such definition, Stevens later complains, involves 'the false conception of the imagination as some incalculable *vates* within us' (Stevens 1951, pp. 40–41, 61).⁴

Coleridge, who was given to the dreamlike if not to the vatic, is another of the several influences behind Thoreau's bootless ruminations on the supposed conflict between the imagination and the understanding in his 1851 journal. To Stevens's credit, he has the good sense to appreciate the irony of Coleridge's initial, somewhat puritanical, and arguably quite *unimaginative* resistance to the hard-partying Danish philosophers. Stevens therefore strikes me as also being 'one of the great figures', and I will return to his words at the end of this essay. But at this point, and with regard to the badness of the (merely) appreciative model of engagement with the natural world Thoreau seems to have followed in his diehard Romantic and Transcendentalist moods, I will simply say, *It is demonstrated.*

II

Now for a better model of engagement with the natural world, one suggested by a passage from 'Ktaadn', the first chapter of *The Maine Woods*. In this passage, Thoreau describes the sensations he felt after drinking beer upon his arrival at the frontier outpost of Millinocket during his first trip to upstate Maine in 1846. The beer, which was 'clear and thin, but strong and stringent as the cedar sap', inspires Thoreau to record a pixilated meditation on the special character of the Maine woods, which thanks to his heightened perception he now appreciates more fully. He writes:

It was as if we sucked at the very teats of Nature's pine-clad bosom in these parts – the sap of all Millinocket botany commingled – the topmost, most fantastic, and spiciest sprays of the primitive wood, and whatever invigorating and stringent gum or essence it afforded steeped and dissolved in it – a lumberer's drink, which would acclimate and naturalize a man at once – which would make him see green, and, if he slept, dream that he heard the wind sough among the pines. (Thoreau 2004a, pp. 27–28)

Beer was not Thoreau's usual beverage. This may explain the effect that swallowing a glass of it seems to have had on his imagination, not to mention his inhibitions, though whether the beer he drank had any alcoholic content or not is unclear (it may have been the local equivalent of ginger or root beer, hence a 'soft drink'), and even though he took only a single draught of it.

Regardless of the Millinocket brew's actual chemistry and quantity, when Thoreau drank it his aesthetic perception of the Maine woods was altered by the heady experience of having done something comparable to sucking 'at the very teats of Nature's pine-clad bosom in these parts'. This may be the most suggestive, weirdest image in all his work, blending as it does the arboreal with the mammary in a grotesque way. But having quenched his thirst at so singular a source, Thoreau was, as he put it, acclimated and naturalised at once. This

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later encouraged him, when he sat down to write, to attempt a flight of fancy more unbuttoned than his attempts to soar in words tended to be, despite his habitual insistence on extravagance and wildness. Usually his extravagance or wildness was on the wry side, at once effervescent and acidic. But in this passage from 'Ktaadn', Thoreau ceases to be a teetotaler and a temperance man, with respect both to beer and to prose, and begins to 'see green'. That is, he begins to see as the 'lumberer' sees, the lumberer being both the man with the axe and the man who has had too much to drink. Thoreau also begins to write with more lumbering diction and a heavier hand, stacking up jokes and puns like so many saw logs. A second draught of beer might well have proved to be the fatal glass, after which he could have happily concluded his mortal career – as a Transcendentalist.

In passages like this one from 'Ktaadn', Thoreau shows us just how much ground remains for us to explore (both aesthetically and erotically) between what we have (merely) experienced and what we have (merely) imagined of and about the natural world. His example cautions us against drawing the distinction between the experiential and the imaginary with too much assurance whenever we begin to deliberate on how it is that we know the world, and on what values we ought to assign both to the world and to our knowledge of it. Thoreau balks at committing himself to a single point of view, owing to his persnickety habits of thought, his changeable temperament, and his flair for wildness. When he travels to Maine in 1846, and again in later years, he adopts a fresh outlook on his experiences, an outlook lively enough to deal with the 'objective realities' (in Bachelard's phrase) of the backwoods. While there he also lines his paunch not only with draughts of home-brewed beer, but with hot cakes, fried brook trout, roasted wild duck, and grilled moose meat, too. Thus he expands his mind each time he expands his waistline, and eventually realises that 'the domain of the superlative' is to be found here and now: if not on a Hamburg packet with Coleridge and a drunken party of Danish philosophers, then on the waterways somewhere north of Bangor with Penobscots and lumbermen as companions and guides.

On the account I am offering here the distinction between the aesthetic and the erotic, which I implicitly and parenthetically drew at the outset of the previous paragraph, seems largely circumstantial. But this need not be regarded as a razor-sharp distinction in order to remain serviceable, not so long as we keep our wits about us. In other words, I don't mean to suggest that Thoreau embraced an ethos and an aesthetics of sheer sensual abandon once he was safely north of Bangor, where all was permitted and nothing forbidden. The critic David Shumway makes a point that may not seem directly relevant here, but which will help me explain what I do mean, when he writes: 'That one's liking for Shelley and one's liking for a particular sexual position do not have different epistemological foundations doesn't mean that we can't distinguish between the two' (Shumway 2005, p. 108; also see Eagleton 1990 and Ferry 1993). Thoreau was,

famously, too much of a prude to record his preference ‘for a particular sexual position’, if indeed he ever had experiences that would have led him to develop such a preference in the first place. But this doesn’t mean that his aesthetic and his erotic impulses were severed owing to his puritanical character or bad luck. Chaste Thoreau may have been, but his aesthetic and his erotic experiences were blended as often as not, which suggests that just as Shumway argues they were indeed supported by the same ‘epistemological foundations’.

According to his own testimony, Thoreau was subject to moods in which much like Crispin – the central figure in Stevens’s poem ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ – ‘he savored rankness like a sensualist’ (Stevens 1982, p. 36). Thoreau was in just such a sensual mood when he said in the second chapter of *The Maine Woods* that the conifer-rich northern forests were like ‘the sight and odor of cake to a schoolboy’ (Thoreau, 2004a, p. 86) and, embracing a new set of values, ceased to be a Romantic and a New England Transcendentalist of the orthodox kind. He was in a yet more appetitive and unorthodox mood one day when, while returning to his cabin at Walden Pond from Concord, he suddenly ‘felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour’ a woodchuck raw, if only for the sake of the ‘wildness which he’ – the woodchuck, that is – ‘represented’ (Thoreau 2004b, p. 210).

Yet just as Stevens’s Crispin is said to have done during his sojourn in Carolina, whenever Thoreau ‘savored rankness’ (and woodchuck is very rank meat) he also ‘gripped more closely the essential prose’,

As being, in a world so falsified,
The one integrity for him, the one
Discovery still possible to make,
To which all poems were incident, unless
That prose should wear a poem’s guise at last. (Stevens 1982, p. 36)

Thoreau’s close gripping of ‘the essential prose’ is probably the chief reason why those of us interested in developing new ways to imagine the natural world without disavowing or discounting the insights of science find his example (some of the time) heartening and instructive. Since he did not always treat ‘imagination’ and ‘understanding’ as wholly opposed terms, we might go so far as to say that he was something of an empiricist about the things he imagined. This is why (like both Coleridge and Stevens) he was such an ardent vacationer. It is also why he eventually became an expert natural historian.

In contrast to many of his peers, Thoreau seems to have realised, if only after some struggle, that the evaluation and validation of something he imagined did not have to mean subsuming it under the sway of a symbol. Nor did it have to mean finding a way to take a poetic metaphor literally and verify it, rendering it prosaic. In *The Maine Woods*, Thoreau’s confabulation of imagination and understanding enables him to chart ‘the domain of the superlative’ as if it were the very bastion of the wild, therefore native ground for a writer like himself.

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Thus he affords us a model of engagement with the environment that encourages us to abandon the 'disinterested' and distanced view of the natural world, the sunset view taken from 'twenty miles off' – assuming that we should ever manage to achieve so rarefied a view to begin with. I don't mean to imply, by the way, that a more intense engagement with the natural world is always going to be easy for us to achieve, or necessarily more pleasurable. After all, to spend a whole day chin-deep in a swamp – as Thoreau once said he would like to do – may prove to be more of a torment than an earthly delight, depending on where that swamp is situated.

Nevertheless, 'appreciation' of nature seems wan, and more like inanition, when we realise that immersion in nature, along with its degustation and ingestion, also appears on our menus. As Bachelard puts it, 'Being reigns in a sort of earthly paradise of matter, dissolved in the comforts of an adequate matter. It is as though in this material paradise, the human being were bathed in nourishment, as though he were gratified with all the essential benefits' (Bachelard 1994, p. 7). Seen in this light, 'appreciation' looks like the washing of hands and the wearing of white gloves, which suggests that it may be ethically as well as aesthetically debilitating. What we have to deal with in both our moral and our imaginative relationships to the natural world is the fact that we do dwell in an 'earthly paradise', though how responsibly and for how much longer remains to be seen. And it is our dwelling on earth, be it a paradise or not, that entails the physiological origins of all our tastes, something Thoreau seems to have recognised and that we seek in vain to deny when we 'appreciate' nature from a distance, as if it were separated from us by velvet ropes and the whole world were a gallery. It ought not to require a volcanic eruption, an earthquake, a tsunami, a hurricane, or global warming to remind us that those velvet ropes are figments of our imaginations, and that our tendency to protect and preserve only those landscapes we find beautiful is a sure sign of our folly.

That our tastes all originate in our bodies was also Nietzsche's point in *The Will to Power*, when he insisted that 'value words are banners raised where a new bliss has been found – a new feeling'. Nietzsche disparaged traditional aesthetics for its otherworldliness, and characterised cold-blooded art for art's sake as 'the virtuoso croaking of shivering frogs, despairing in their swamp' (Nietzsche 1968, p. 380, 427). If you don't find Thoreau, Bachelard, Stevens, or Nietzsche persuasive either singly or in combination, consider that early on in *The Critique of Judgment* Kant characterises the concept of 'disinterestedness' by inviting us to chuckle over 'that Iroquois *Sachem* who was pleased in Paris by nothing more than by the cook-shops' (Kant 2005, p. 4). Kant's prejudice, and his devaluing of experiences, like eating, that make human existence both pleasurable and possible, could not be clearer. On 9 August 1850, or just a year and a half before Thoreau recorded his (needless) worries about the imagination and the understanding in his journal, he wrote the following quite sensible words in a letter to his friend H.G.O. Blake: 'I do not dare invite you earnestly to come

to Concord, because I know too well that the berries are not thick in my fields, and we should have to take it out in viewing the landscape. But come, on every account, and we will see – one another’ (Thoreau 1958, p. 266). Kant, that old moralist, may not have approved of the sentiment, much less the irony. But the Iroquois chief would have understood.

NOTES

¹ Thoreau hints about the special meaning he wants to give to ‘wildness’ in his late essay ‘Walking’: ‘I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister and the school committee and every one of you will take care of that’ (Thoreau 1984b, p. 93).

² Kant insists that ‘the pure disinterested satisfaction in judgments of taste’ is more valid, philosophically speaking, than ‘that which is bound up with an interest’ (Kant 2005, p. 5). The former appeals to the imagination, the latter to the understanding. But as Joel Porte points out, recourse to the imaginative and the symbolic wasn’t something a New Englander like Thoreau necessarily had to go to German or British Romantics to learn. ‘Nature as symbol’, Porte writes, ‘was the kind of ‘Romanticism’ that New England had lived with since its founding’ (Porte 1966, p. 67).

³ On the recent revival of traditional aesthetic theory in relation to the appreciation of nature, see the essays collected in Carlson and Berleant (eds) 2004. For a defence of the Kantian concept of ‘disinterestedness’ and of the appreciation model, see Emily Brady’s essay ‘Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature’ (in the volume edited by Carlson and Berleant, pp. 156–69), and also see her 2003 book *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, where her arguments are developed more fully. For a critique of Kantian ‘disinterestedness’ and the appreciation model along lines roughly similar to those I am drawing here, see Berleant’s essay ‘The Aesthetics of Art and Nature’, which appears in the volume co-edited with Carlson (pp. 76–88).

⁴ The passage from Coleridge is reproduced here as quoted by Stevens.

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