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A Framework for the Love of Nature:

Henry David Thoreau's Construction of the Wild in *Walden* and the Gift as an Ethos for Architecture

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ABSTRACT

Walden (1854), by the American author Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), is explored as a work of literature with significant implications for environmental ethics in contemporary architectural practice. This reading challenges ethical models which depend for their legitimacy on determining a static representation of the world around us. Thoreau's literary discussion of the construction of his shelter and the subsequent revealing of a view of nature is offered as a more complete approach to finding a significant discourse concerning the relationship between humanity and the earth. The relevance of the poetic imagination is asserted through exploring the many aspects of the metaphors of verticality and flight in *Walden*. Thoreau's effort is extended into a brief discussion of Australian architect Glenn Murcutt (born 1936) and a consideration of the natural world in light of the phenomenon of a gift.

ABREGÉ

Walden (1854), de l'écrivain américain Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), est exploré, dans ce memoire, comme un texte ayant une portée significative sur la réflexion éthique entourant la dimension environementale dans la practique architecturale contemporaine. Il s'agit, par une telle lecture de l'œuvre litteraire de Thoreau, de mettre en question certains modèles éthiques dont la validité est fondée sur des représentations statiques du monde. Les écrits de Thoreau portant sur la construction de l'abri dans Walden, de même que la conception de la nature qui se trouve ainsi révélée, proposent une démarche plus complète en vue de générer un discours approprié sur les rapports entre l'homme et la nature. La pertinance de l'imagination poétique est mise en lumière par l'exploration des métaphores de la verticalité et de l'envol. De Walden, cette réflexion s'élargit enfin, d'abord par un bref examen de l'œuvre de l'architect australien Glenn Murcutt (né en 1936) et ensuite, par une réflexion sur la question de la nature à la lumière du phénomène du don.

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PREFACE

The relationship that exists between our architectural creations and the natural world is the topic addressed in this thesis. This investigation challenges the idea that ethical action with respect to the realm of nature can be defined through reference to quantified investigation alone. It turns to a discussion of nature in literature to consider how other definitions of nature may be created and how they may open a space for ethical action. This space, it suggests, creates the opportunity to reveal to others, through our individual insights into the order of nature, the deepest part of ourselves—our imaginations.

Literature is as intimately bound within the conditions of modernity as architecture is. However, expression through the written medium, it seems, has been more resistant to dependence on positivist science for its legitimisation than our built environment has been. Within architectural theory, literary discussions exist in a border condition between the necessity of expression and communication and a recognition of the legitimacy of the imagination. In this study, therefore, we follow Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and the questions he asks about inhabitation, about the meaning of his experience in a world receding from mythical understanding, and about the conditions of authoring a meaningful relationship to the earth both for one's own benefit and as a way of presenting oneself to others.

In *Walden*, Thoreau communicates his perception and experience of nature. Through our investigations we come to understand that Thoreau crafts his understanding of nature through writing. This authorial act encourages us to consider how we think of the natural world: in what way is our knowledge mimetic? what difference does representation make? For architecture, the importance of these questions rests in the idea that the task of building and the understanding of the world that building provides us with is also the task of determining, at least in part, the meaning of the natural world and the possibility for both its significance and ours. We may consider this task a gift, the gift of being human: the ethics of giving and receiving creating a means through which we may find ourselves able to mediate our other gifts and find ourselves at home in the world.

In chapter one, Hal Levin provides a typical contemporary discussion of how architects can protect the environment. An attempt is made to show that, while necessary

for practice today, such models are inadequate in themselves because they rely on a limiting conception of human knowledge. In chapter two, an historical figure, Henry David Thoreau, and the context of his work is introduced as the reference point for questioning the boundaries of our understanding of nature.

Chapter three focuses on Thoreau's authorship in relation to his discussion of how he built his shelter. In chapter four, Thoreau's development of the metaphor of flight, in various forms, in his discussion of "winged life" is considered. Rather than attempting to finalize a way of building or of seeing nature, Thoreau's discussions open up our understanding of potential relationships between buiding and nature; Thoreau's definitions continue to expand, inviting our own imaginative participation. The special worth of Thoreau's conversation is in the way his writing appeals to the human imagination; *we* add the final layer to Thoreau's dwelling and to the depth of the natural world that he conveys.

Thoreau's writing leads, in the conclusion of this thesis, to a desire to offer a view of nature—an experiment concerning our ability to speak about the significance of the world around us in terms that are familiar and yet preserve the character of the unknown. Australian architect Glenn Murcutt, whose designs remind us of nature's gifts, displays an understanding of the importance of the work of art as a mediator between us and the world around us. Murcutt's understanding challenges, as *Walden* does, ideas of nature in which all we can do is calculate how much nature is left. Rather, we must make room for visions of how much more there could be. It is on the basis of these visions that the possibility of ethics arises.

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CHAPTER 1

Facts collected by a poet are set down at last as winged seeds of truth..., tinged with his expectation....Facts fall from the poetic observer as ripe seeds.[1]

The Question of Contemporary Environmentalism

The discussion of environmentally sustainable building in the practice of architecture today is dominated by the idea of creating more exact scientific models, more efficient building techniques, and of the perpetual improvement of knowledge of an objectified world. It cannot be denied that, given our historical position in the realm of technology, this is in some ways a responsible, ethical position. But the discussion fails to take into account many human realities. What is missing from such discussions is the need for architecture to create the productive tension in which, in the absence of a meaningful consensus of what nature is, individual conceptions of the significance of the natural world can flourish.

Summarizing a critique of Western science by philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), Alberto Pérez-Gómez writes:

> One result of the crisis of [European science] has been an unprecedented inversion of priorities: Truth—demonstrable through the laws of science—constitutes the fundamental basis upon which human decisions are made over and above 'reality,' which is always ambiguous and accessible only through the realm of 'poetics.' Today, theory in any discipline is generally identified with methodology; it has become a specialized set of prescriptive rules concerned with technological values, that is, with processes rather than ultimate objectives, a process that seeks maximum efficiency with minimum effort. Once life itself began to be regarded as process, whether biological or teleological, theory was able to disregard ethical considerations in favor of applicability. Modern theory, leaning on the early nineteenth century model of the physico-mathematical sciences with their utopian ideals, has designated the most crucial human problems illegitimate, beyond the transformation and control of the material world.[2]

The exclusion of the possibility of poetical content makes these modern theories incomplete. An example from within discussions of "green" building—or building in a manner that is ethically responsible towards the non-human world—illustrates the

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[1] *The Journal of Henry D. Thoreau*, Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen eds. (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), IV: 116.

technological and scientific direction in which architects are led.[3] The example presented here is typical of the discourse surrounding this approach to building.[4] The need for these aids in decision-making concerning building materials and systems is evident in contemporary practice as architects struggle to make responsible choices; architects *are* responding to the reality of a finite material world. Such models are not wrong as much as they are limited—separated from a necessary part of the answers we seek. While providing a means of building in contemporary society—which is necessary for our survival—these systems rely on assumptions which need to be challenged if the true potential of technology is to be revealed. Philosopher Karsten Harries writes:

> To be sure, we live in technological world, a world shaped by science and its pursuit of objectivity, but not all dimensions of the world we live in are circumscribed by technology. Technology must be affirmed and put in its place. That means to recognize its liberating potential as well as the threat it poses.[5]

It is as an affirmation of the power of technology to facilitate, at many levels, our engagement with the world around us that we should approach technology. But we must do so wearily, attentive to the possibility of what is being excluded if we try to make every ambition realizable.

In a paper entitled "Ten Basic Concepts for Architects and Other Building

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[2] Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983): 5.

[3] More general commentaries on architecture's relation to the environment are indeed more open but still look to the physico-mathematical science as "Truth." A few examples are provided here for reference. In 1969, Ian McHarg published *Design with Nature* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969). It was a significant work in calling attention to the role of design in environmental conservation. More recent studies include: David Pearson's *The Natural House Book* (New York: Simon & Shuster/Fireside, 1989), dealing with personal, building, and environmental health; James Steele's *Sustainable Architecture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997) begins with a helpful explication of the Earth Summit's *Agenda 21* and reviews projects as a means of defining "sustainability;" Laura C. Zeiher, in *The Ecology of Architecture* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1996), reviews projects by and profiles of contemporary practitioners such as William McDonough, James Wines, and Robert Birkbile as a means of forwarding a "deep respect for natural and human resources and ecological consciousness in the practice of architecture" (6). See also Dorothy Mackenzie, *Design for the Environment* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1991). Other such contributions to the conversation on building and the environment are cited through this text.

[4] Presented in this thesis, Hal Levin's project is typical of attempts to quantify and regulate a building's effect on the environment. Levin cites other such attempts: BRE, 1993, "Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM): New Offices, Version 1/93, An environmental assessment for new office designs," Building Research Establishment, Garston, UK; BEPAC 1993, Building Environmental Performance Assessment Criteria: Version 1, Office Buildings, British Columbia. Vancouver: University of British Columbia School of Architecture. It is these studies that, at the level of government agencies and funded research, are looked to as the truth of environmental solutions.

Designers: Best Sustainable Indoor Air Quality Practices in Commercial Buildings," Hal Levin presents a "method...to examine the total environmental impact of buildings."[6] Levin specifically treats sustainable building practices for achieving indoor air quality; it treats such issues as "Construction procedures," "Ventilation system design and operation," and "Material selection and specification" for the design of commercial buildings. His topic is how design decisions related to the systems which manage the quality of the air in a building can be integrated so as to reduce the impact that a building has on the environment. Levin is interested not just in defining and achieving an acceptable quality of indoor air but in minimizing the harmful effects the systems and practices which achieve that level of air quality have on the natural world. It participates, therefore, in the contemporary discussion of "green" building.

Levin locates the development of "green" building— which he defines as "the "adaptation of various technologies and solutions to perceived environmental problems" —in the effort to "reduce harmful environmental impacts," a movement that, he says, is gaining momentum (2, 2). In Levin's discussion, green building means modifying the technological development involved in architecture, "including the construction, operation, use, and disposal of buildings," in order to protect the environment (2). Implied in this assessment is an understanding of the environment as a complex of systems the qualities of which are revealed through measurement and the gathering of information. To enact his modifications, Levin relies on the evolution of regulations, presumably based on increasingly accurate scientific information, to guide the industry towards "greener" or more sustainable building practices.

Levin's article introduces the pertinence of the discussion for architects in practice. Architectural creation today increasingly necessitates work among specialized fields. Levin begins to point out simple principles which will help deal with the reality of

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[5]Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997): 158.

[6] Hal Levin, "Ten Basic Concepts for Architects and Other Building Designers: Best Sustainable Indoor Air Quality Practices for Commercial Buildings," *Environmental Building News* (http://www.ebuild.com/ Greenbuilding/Halpaper.com., 1997): 3. I cite Levin's article in particular because Levin specializes in indoor air quality. It is intended to draw a contrast between the modern conception of air, strictly functional and defined in scientific terms, and one made use of in the present study which seeks to open up the definition and reflect on its poetical possibilities.

construction and its potential effects on its occupants. Since poor air quality can result in the spread of infectious diseases such as cold, flu, and pneumonia, Levin suggests, the systems that move air through a building must be isolated from areas of contamination. Where it is impossible to avoid using highly toxic materials, the air must be filtered to remove pollutants and such filters maintained to assure their effectiveness (5).

With respect to the quality of indoor air Levin explains ten such concepts through which architects and designers can categorize the issues involved in measuring air quality and minimize the pollutants that threaten it. His own attempt, termed "Systematic Evaluation and Assessment of Building Environmental Performance," or SEABEP, aims at determining building decisions that make for acceptable air quality according to the latest standards and that establish sustainable practices within the design of buildings. These are the tools of the architect in contemporary society, the reality in which she must work, and both the challenge and the opportunity for making places in which find themselves at home in the technological world around them.

Levin's discussion *is* helpful in trying to make decisions within the context of contemporary building industry. However, without disregarding completely the relevance of his effort, it is necessary to question some basic assumptions in his approach. For instance, following the principles Levin gives here which aim at solving the increasingly complex problems between a building and the environment does not necessarily result in, and in fact tends to question the legitimacy of, solutions through which in a relationship between humanity and nature can be established. To be at home, humans must be able to define this relationship on many levels. These solutions are numerous. The individual insight into the relationship between the human condition and the world around it is lost in the struggle to achieve an indoor atmosphere perfected through planning and control. This understanding reduces the potential for ethical participation of the individual imagination. We might argue with Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, that we "must recognize that there are dangers present in the technological world that are more subtle, yet more serious, than humanity's potential for

self-destruction and the threat of ecological disaster."[7] In Levin's approach, ethics is reduced to a systematized attempt to lessen the measured impact that heating, ventilation, and air conditioning systems have on the environment; this approach tends to exclude the possibility, for instance, of critiquing the technological condition in which we find ourselves.[8]

Again, there is no question that refusing to take into account the issues Levin presents is unethical and inept action on the part of the architect who indeed must work amidst the realities around us. But the realization must be made that even if the quality of indoor air were to be perfected according to some model of harmlessness or benign indifference, the living, breathing, finite human being can be no part of such an environment. Certainly, we are not searching for a kind of building which has no impact on the world around it—an obviously impossible task. Rather, the issue is to consider the possibilities—technical, philosophical, and poetical—that our actions and our buildings have to orient us to the world in which we live rather than to make our estrangement from it more benign.

Further, part of what is missing from the models on which Levin's investigation is based is the capacity of the individual to contribute meaningfully to more than just the advancement of the consensus system. It lacks the space for participation on an individual level beyond technical or specialized knowledge. Throughout his investigation, Levin cites the lack of sufficient analysis, the absence of adequate data, that fact that better designed, more comprehensive models are "presently years away from full development" (10). The faith that Levin has in the development of these systems and of the knowledge that they will present is based on the success that such systems have had in making the world, or a map of it, that seems more predictable, better organized, and safer than it has been in the past or than it is in other parts of the world. Without acknowledging, however, that the human condition is to be at once at home in the world

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[7] Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and The Perspective Hinge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997): 386.

[8] Such a critique is offered in Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964). Though Ellul's predictions for the year 2000 have not come true (disease has not been eliminated, the world's population has not been stabilized) his insight into the relation of technique to human will are still valuable. Our technological problems necessitate technological solutions, and more than that.

and yet to have to confront—as individuals—our mortality, our buildings may be safe but largely mute. In the end, even taking into account the fact that Levin address a specific audience, Levin's proposal suffers from a failure to acknowledge that human knowledge is finite, immediate, and that in his "Systematic Evaluation and Assessment of Building Environmental Performance," room could be made for poetic truth.

As stated earlier, Levin's understanding of "green" building is typical within the industry. Many of these soutions characterize themselves as scientific, other solutions are rooted in systems of understanding largely outside the scientific model as developed in Europe in the 17th and 18th century and brought forward, particularly in the United States and industrialized nations, today. But I am searching for a more open-ended ethical stance towards the natural world: whatever specialized knowledge it requires me to gain cannot obscure my understanding and connection to the world—that I am at home here through the human capacity to imagine rather than through isolated rationality.[9]

Thus my first step with regards to defining an ethical stance in architecture is to place myself at the edge of the discussion—at the boundary between our reductive understanding of "environment" and an attempt at dialogue with the natural world. One of my assumptions is that rationalized approaches to building such as the one that Levin presents will not, in themselves, result in meaningful places for human habitation in relation to the world around them. I believe that my own anticipation of how such a relation might be offered must begin with an attempt at defining what nature is, poetically. Accordingly, the environmental ethics I wish to circumscribe is rooted in my individual imagination and capacity for expression. That this is characterized as an individual effort does not isolate me from others and does not preclude one's vision from having relevance for others. Rather, "otherness" is a necessary condition for such efforts and a motivation for reaching beyond ourselves. What technology reveals to me, therefore, must coincide with my understanding of nature as a gift; it must make sense of

[9] The fundamental irrationality of death may serve as a starting point for our consideration of the completeness of what is put forward as truth. See Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, ch. 20, which treats the architecture of the grave. Also, with a voice particularly resonant for the student of archtitecture, David Farell Krell's *Architicture: Ecstasies of Time, Space, and the Human Body* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997) suggests a revisiting of generative origin of our technical ordering.

the mutuality of the relationship that gift-giving implies. As an architect, revealing the natural world as a gift is the task through which I envision the possibility of providing a place for human dwelling.[10]

It is through literature, particularly in Thoreau's *Walden,* that I will flesh out this poetic construction of nature, in the hope of incorporating it into architectural theory. This shift from one area of discussion to another is only an apparent one, however. The boundaries which are clearly perceived in the academy are less clear in my experience. The world around me, which I learn about through reading literature, is the same one in which my architectural interventions must find significance.

The investigation into literature implies an understanding as well of the role of theory in the practice of architecture. The value of theory lies not in its applicability, a "one-to-one" correspondance, but in its accessibility to the imagination and to the stimulus out of which a reason for building can be achieved. While many critics move from Thoreau's discussion of his shelter to a conception of the development of the American sensibility to building, my approach has been to consider Thoreau according to the craft in which he exerts most of his effort. Perhaps this too speaks to the condition of architectural theory—that our engagement with the world is not just as architects but primarily as humans, mortals even. The ethos—that is, our motivation—for building results not from grafting technical discussions into technical requirements, but in creating work that speaks directly to us and challenges categories that limit our engagement with the world.

This is less a call to invention of myths than a consideration of how our current discourses of nature are themselves mythologized. Here, an historical discussion of nature seeks to reveal the kind of mythology set into play. The individual imagination provides a means to put work forward which functions ethically in relation to others and the world.

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[10] In his book *The Concept of Dwelling* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1985), Christian Norberg-Schultz cites a story by Norwegian writer Tarjei Vasaas in which dwelling—a place of permanence and of "at-homeness"— appears to the character Knut as a gift: "Vesaas also implies that Knut's experience is nothing merely personal. it is an objective "truth" which is accessible to everybody, if only the mind is open. When that is the case, existence becomes what 'is.' Therefore Vasaas says that Knut receives a 'precious gift.' This gift is something he *shares* with others" (9). This idea will be more fully pursued in the "Conclusion" of this thesis.

CHAPTER 2

"I cannot cause light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam."[1]

Viewing the Question through the Eyes of History

Only through questioning can we determine the role of science and technology in the environmental crisis. True, the technological and scientific conception of the world is the one in which we live; it is part of the means of sustaining our daily lives. To come to the conclusion, therefore, that what is necessary is more than simply an expanded scientific program and better technology requires that we gain some distance—that we step back from our immediate conception of things.

Paradoxically, it is exactly from within our experience that such a critique can first be raised: am I as healthy as I could be? could I feel more complete than I do? what is the extent to which I am free to make my daily decisions, and how am I determined by the world-view that I have inherited? Such questions arise out of our daily lives and suggest, at least, a serious questioning of science and technology and their role in thinking about the environmental crisis. That technology is a condition of contemporary existence is fully evident and is, perhaps universally, recognized as having both life affirming and destructive effects. The possibility of critique arises from our ability to see ourselves through the eyes of another culture, another place, or another period.

We are not able to place the technological characteristics of our understanding in one hand and with the other experience an alterity through which we might better be able formulate choices for ourselves. A true encounter can only be made by acknowledging that one's view is tainted. Rather than an excuse for a one-sided "dialogue," it is only through such acknowledgment that a meaningful engagement becomes possible. From a phenomenological conception of epistemology, the expectation is that the common basis of our humanity, of the world we inhabit, and the constancy of the questions we ask, will provide the ground on which meaningful engagement between distinct cultural, geographical, and historical positions can be made.

It is as a bewildered student of architecture that I approach the work of Henry

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[1] Annie Dillard, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," *Three by Annie Dillard* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990): 39.

David Thoreau, searching pointedly for insights with regards to the question of the environmental crisis. It is with the position that, without being mediated through the human capacity for productive fiction, science is unable to improve my well-being at the highest level and unable to provide encounters through which my humanness is most powerfully realized. It is with the suspicion that there lies behind Thoreau, the prophetic voice of ecological destruction, a deeper Thoreau whose interests were more specifically rooted in his own struggle to define a meaningful relation to his neighbors and to the world.

For Thoreau, the work of art and the ability of the individual to create meaning through informed imagination are of utmost importance. My contention is that Thoreau, investigated from a viewpoint in which it is nearly absurd to speak of a realm of nature outside of human influence or conceptualization, can provide a basis for speaking about the meaning of nature. This contention is based on the likely stories that the imagination forms—the means through which what seems strange is made to feel close at hand.

Henry Thoreau

Analogies are never exact. The distance between out world and that of the historical figure must itself be regarded as an asset in our search for self-understanding.

Thoreau was born on July 12, 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts. Though his older brother, John, also held promise for further education only Henry, the youngest, went on to further study. He attended Harvard College on the family's limited means which was derived from their pencil-making business. He graduated in 1837 without distinction except in essay work. In the years after his graduation, he continued his interests in learning and expression by documenting his readings and writings poems. With his brother John, Henry taught briefly at a school they had set up but they were forced to abandon this endeavor when John became ill with lockjaw in 1840. When John died in January 1841, Henry was profoundly affected and even developed a sympathetic case of lockjaw a few weeks later. The young Henry Thoreau, then 23 years old, took on a type of literary apprenticeship; he lived with Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), an established academic, and contributed to *The Dial,* a Transcendentalist magazine of "Literature, Philosophy, and Religion." It was on Emerson's recommendation that he

began keeping a literary journal of his own as a means of improving his writing. *The Dial,* edited at first by Transcendentalist Margaret Fuller and then by Ralph Waldo Emerson, ran from 1840 to 1844. When it ceased publication, Thoreau needed to find another means to forward his literary ambitions. It was at that point that he decided to take a sabbatical from the various activities that had kept him busy—such as working for the family business—to become a writer in earnest.

In July 1845 he moved to the famed cabin that he had spent the previous few months constructing. By this time, he had spent eight years reading the scriptures of Eastern religions, had continued his interest in the English metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century (whom he had encountered while a student at Harvard), and was familiar with the reformatory rhetoric of the Transcendentalists, whose Gnostic insistence on self-culture mixed conveniently with Thoreau's interest in cultivating his capacities as a poetic thinker. Thoreau's vision of nature was part of his self-culture, his attempt to see poetically through careful observation. Through being awake to the world, Thoreau attempted to lay claim to his observations and to create through those observations a world that he could make special and livable. This self-culture was part of the displacement of the divine—from something that was "out there" to something that could be realized in every person—that was an important part of Thoreau's project.[2]

Until he moved to his shelter at Walden Pond, Thoreau had been living with Emerson and working as a handyman in Emerson's residence. Similarly, Emerson owned the land on which Thoreau built which, as a former woodlot, had been cleared and needed to be reseeded. Thoreau earned his keep on the land through a promise to re-seed the property. The move to the pond was thus an extension of a relationship that already existed. Thoreau aimed to improve the land in his sojourn there, to establish himself as a writer, and to pay tribute to his brother by commemorating a trip they took together in 1839.

With this move, his literary ambitions were launched. The first book that resulted

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[2] The relationship between the transcendentalist idea of self-culture and the Nietzsche's idea of self-overcoming has been noted in Ian Box's "Why Read Thoreau?," *Dalhousie Review* Vol. 75.1 (Spring 1995): 5-24.

from his efforts at Walden was *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849).[3] At the end of this work, Thoreau promised another book, *Walden*. Thoreau reworked versions of *Walden*, however, for many more years until it was finally published in 1854. In the meantime, he published various other essays. The most famous of these is known today as "Civil Disobedience" though it was first published as "Resistance to Civil Government." in *Aesthetic Papers* (Boston, 1849). Thoreau also kept a journal from shortly after his graduation from Harvard College to his death in 1862. This immense work is considered an important part of his literary *œuvre*.[4]

The context in which Thoreau wrote provided him with the tools he would use to understand the world around him. As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau believed in the capacity of a person to apprehend truth through intuition. This freedom from doctrinal prescription encouraged a confidence in individual expression. The dignity and potential of every individual rested in the potential of each person to cultivate his or her divine qualities. These divine qualities were taken to be the capacity not just for learning but for knowing, for a life of fresh, or renewed, relation to the world.[5]

This fresh relation reflects the changes that occurred as the Romantic Movement shifted to North America. In the 1820's and 1830's, especially in New England, Transcendentalist thought and expression drew people away from the conception of the individual as a divinely determined being. Early in the nineteenth century, new theological ideas had transformed the Calvinist doctrine that was once prominent there—a concpetion in which the individual is dependent on divine grace for eternal salvation—into a theology in which the individual is able to improve himself or herself. Wesley

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[3] A seemingly too ambitious work, Thoreau takes a simple summer voyage and burdens it with all the energy he has held in store the long years since his graduation. The reverie which the Thoreau sons must have experienced drifting down the river is reenacted in the reader as the author allows himself to drift from accounts of the things they did and saw to the many thought excursions Thoreau had been on in his journals. The book was not a monetary success but is treated regularly in contemporary scholarship in American literature. See Philip F. Gura, "'A wild, rank place': Thoreau's *Cape Cod*," in *A Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, Joel Myerson ed. (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995): 142-151.

[4] The authoritative commentary is Sharon Cameron's *Writing Nature; Henry Thoreau's* Journal (New York, Oxford UP, 1985).

[5] For a complete discussion of the context, see Lawrence Buell's contribution to *The Transcendentalists* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1984): 1-36. See also Wesley Mott and David Robinson, "Transcendentalism," *Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism*, Wesley T. Mott ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996): 224-229.

Mott and David Robinson provide some background when they write:

> Assertion of the worth of the individual is in part a cultural logical conclusion of the political independence established in the American Revolution. Many of the leading Transcendentalists had been Unitarian ministers, and 'Liberal Christianity,' as the denomination was often called, had itself been in large part a reaction against Calvinist...concept of human depravity and God's sovereignty, doctrines that seemed to limit human agency. The liberals within the New England Congregational churches had begun to revise, or simply ignore, Calvinist dogma in the late 18th century. In the early decades of the 19th century, the tension between the Calvinist 'Orthodox' and the Liberals broke into the more open schism of the Unitarian Controversy, with the Unitarians espousing a theology of self-culture that affirmed human potential and human means against what they perceived as the deterministic disposition of Calvinism.[6]

It is instructive to see Transcendentalism as an extension of the Unitarian movement, for in Transcendentalism the idea of a metaphysical deity becomes the idea of a metaphysical element of the individual and of the realm of nature. As a part of this transition, Emerson and others adopted elements of European Romantic and Idealist culture. From English Romantics such as William Wordsworth (1770-1850), the value of the individual insight became more current among these thinkers than doctrinal truths. Romanticism, a reaction to Enlightenment models of society and knowledge,[7] was taken up in New England—an intellectual culture more thoroughly steeped in Calvinist theological terminology—as an opposition to a theology which made the human realm powerless. The term "transcendental" was adopted from German philosopher Immanual Kant (1724-1804) by Emerson who interprets Kant to mean "whatever belongs to the class of intuitive thought."[8] Transcendentalism can most readily be thought of as a religious movement though its most enduring influence has been in literature, "partly," adds Lawrence Buell, "because of the literary tastes and abilities of those associated with the movement."[9] This theological development concerning the potential of the individual

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[6] Mott and Robinson, "Transcendentalism," *Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism*, 225.

[7] Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed. defines "romanticism," as "a literary, artistic, and philosophical movement originating in the 18th century, characterized chiefly by a reaction against neoclassicism and an emphasis on the imagination and emotions," (Thomas Allen & Son Limited, Markham, Ontario, 1993): 1016.

[8] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," (1842) quoted in "Transcendentalism," Mott and Robinson *The Encyclopedia of Transcendentalism*, 224.

[9] Buell, "The Transcendentalist Movement," 1.

had the implication of encouraging individual conceptions of the meaning of nature and social life. It speaks of a confidence on the part of a person to make sense of the world around himself or herself; collectively; "if there was a central credo of Transcendentalism," writes Lawrence Buell, "it was a faith in the boundless possibilities in human nature."[10]

The self-culture that Thoreau and others strove towards had to take into consideration such challenges as the frontier, the savage, and the latent potential of the land they inhabited. Emerson and Thoreau sought a religious life that was different from what they had received from the European tradition. They repositioned the divine from the realm of an eternal heaven to an earthly realm and conceived of the deity as pluralistic rather than monotheistic. In so doing, the Transcendentalists redefined the question of authority. For them, intuition was inside the individual and was a faculty of his or her perceiving consciousness. The realm of special attention for this perceiving consciousness was nature. The significance of the natural world in Transcendentalism is explained in Lawrence Buell's account of Emerson's aesthetic:

> Man and the physical universe, Emerson says, are parallel creations of the same divine spirit; therefore natural and moral law are the same and everything in nature, rightly seen, has spiritual significance for man. The universe is thus a vast network of symbols—a Bible or revelation purer than any written scripture—which it is the chief task of the poet to study, master, and articulate. [11]

Emerson's account would form the basis for much of the Transcendentalist movement. Thoreau would expand this definition, as we will see, so that the poet's articulation bears an even greater importance.

Walden

Thoreau published *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* in 1854.[12] In it he documents his stay in a shelter that he built himself on the shore of Walden Pond in Massachusetts. Historically, this endeavor lasted a little over two years, from July 4, 1845 to September 6, 1847. Thoreau's retelling of this experiment, however, is recounted in 18 chapters which detail the passing of only one cycle of seasons. As Robert Kuhn McGregor points

[10] Buell, "The Transcendental Movement," 2.
[11] Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1973): 149.

out, this is a hint concerning the experiment and the book:

> Many of our impressions of Thoreau's life in the 1840s come from his description of himself living in that cabin near the pond. Yet large portions of *Walden* were written after 1850, written in the period in which he began to devote his attention far more fully to nature's behavior. In *Walden*, Thoreau essentially recreated himself, creating a character far more familiar with nature's ways than the historical Thoreau who actually lived in the woods for two years, two months, and two days.[13]

The book that Thoreau was on his way to writing by spring of 1847 was, according to McGregor, about the unnecessarily complicated lives of his contemporaries.[14] In two lectures in the winter of 1847, Thoreau gave an account of his life in the woods. These lectures became the anchors of the first draft of *Walden*: the first six chapters of which were titled "Economy," "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," "Reading," "Sounds," "Solitude," and "Visitors."[15]

Thoreau's rewriting of this work opened up the poetical possibilities in the conversations about his house and about the world around him. Thoreau constructed a vision of nature and at the same time tried to understand how to translate this vision into the medium of words and how to comprehend the meaning of this vision for his own life. Thoreau is famed for his extensive notes on the plants and animals around Concord, Massachusetts. But he did not offer these notes alone as his legacy to his neighbours or his readers. In *Walden* he offered an understanding of life which depended on the information he collected as a basis, but which also depended on his artistic vision of how that information might be retold so that it took on significance on a broader scale. In her book *Seeing New Worlds*, Laura Dawson Wells illuminates the context of Thoreau's investigations. She notes that: "The 'two cultures' may seem a truism today, but in the 1840's and 1850's, the relationship between 'literature' and 'science,' while complex,

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[12] Subsequent editions were simply titled *Walden*.

[13] Robert Kuhn McGregor, *A Wider View of the Universe: Henry Thoreau' Study of Nature* (Urbana and Chicago: Illinios UP, 1997): 4.

[14] McGregor, *A Wider view of the Universe*, 76.

[15] The remaining 12 chapter are: "The Bean-Field," "The Village," "The Ponds," "Baker Farm," "Higher Laws," "Brute Neighbors," "House-Warming," "Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors," "Winter Animals," "The Pond in Winter," "Spring," "Conclusion."

was hardly hostile. Science was neither so monolithic nor so intimidating as now."[16]

That Thoreau, as I have mentioned, originally presented this material as lectures to a public interested in a kind of moral conversation explains to us a little of the tone. Today we might find such a tone grating. Though it must certainly have had its opponents in his own time, its voice of opposition was situated within a more general movement of critique. As pointed out already, many Transcendentalists were Unitarian ministers who had stepped outside their tradition. Though Thoreau had his own understanding of the significance and meaning of a move away from Christianity as it was inherited from Calvinism and passed down to Unitarianism, his own interpretation was unique and he sought to define for himself a life worth living and a morality that would suite it.[17]

The vision of nature that Thoreau constructed in this book reflected his desire to give order to the confusion of the religious tradition he inherited, the social structure with which he struggled, and the economic requirements of the culture in which he found himself. But the vision is not wholly constructed. It is not arbitrary but rather, as I have indicated, is based on his experience of living in the woods and of a long-term interest in understanding nature. Thoreau would say that he sought to speak nature's native tongue. I am interested in his attempt to translate that native language into meaning for human life. The comprehension Thoreau encounters surprises him; it is the poetic revelation to which he cannot do more than open himself up but which, even after having laboured for such openness, is still always a gift and a shocking blow somewhere deep inside.

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[16] Laura Dawson Wells, *Seeing New Worlds* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin UP, 1995): 5.

[17] With respect to the context in which Thoreau wrote, Buell explains: "In short, by the 1830's the state of affairs of liberal religion in New England was such as to disaffect a significant number of young men and women of altruistic and/or aesthetic bent who just a generation or so before would have been able to find enough satisfaction in conventional piety, for whom art and personal rapport with nature were more uplifting than sermons and church worship and for whom writing, lecturing, and social action were more rewarding and effectual when done outside the church than within. This was the state of mind underlying Transcendentalism and the vision of the self-reliant poet-priest." (*Literary Transcendentalism*, 50).

CHAPTER 3

When the finishing stroke was put to his work, it suddenly expanded before the eyes of the astonished artist into the fairest of all the creations of Brahma. He had made a new system in making a staff, a world with full and fair proportions; in which, though the old cities and dynasties had passed away, fairer and more glorious ones had taken their places.[1]

The Discussion of Nature through his shelter.

Thoreau built a shelter at Walden Pond. His writing about his structure has attracted the attention of architectural historians in different ways. The general tendency is see *Walden* merely as a manual for building and to project it into later aesthetic developments and trends in the American architectural sensibility.[2] While this approach has its merits, my interest is not to arrive at an understanding of Thoreau's role in the evolution of an American architectural sensibility but to read his work *Walden* for the many layers it holds.

I shall also avoid references to the influence of Thoreau on Frank Lloyd Wright or Louis Sullivan. Rather, this investigation treats Thoreau's discussion of the building of his shelter as a prelude to the vision of nature that he offered. This study, therefore, tries to address issues in the "natural environment" through literature and to consider the importance of the insights we gain there for architectural practice. In architectural discussions, the opportunity to discuss the metaphorical intentions of Thoreau's discussion of his dwelling are often overlooked.[3] The embeddedness of his account in the

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[1] *Walden*, 375.

[2] See Lewis Mumford: *Roots of American Architecture* (New York: Reinhold Publishing, 1952): 84-92. Also, *The Literature of Architecture: Evolution of Architectural Theory and Practice in Nineteenth Century America*, Don Guillford, ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1966): 172-195. More in line with my own reading is Kim Kipling's "The Art of Dwelling," *Kinesis* 10 (Fall, 1989): 13-24 and Donna L. Gerstenberger's "*Walden*: The House that Henry Built," in *Emerson Society Quarterly: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 56.3 (1969): 11-13. Other discussions of Thoreau's observations on architecture include: Ernest A. Connally, "The Cape Cod House," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* XIX (May 1960): 47-56.

[3] Such is generally the case in Theodore W. Brown "Thoreau's Prophetic Architectural Program, *New England Quarterly* 38.1 (March 1965): 3-20. It is true of W. Barksdale Maynard's study of the Picturesque. Maynard argues that Thoreau's construction embodies the American version of the Picturesque's discourse of the primitive hut: the log house. In his study, Maynard traces Thoreau's origins through the picturesque to Neoclassicism in France and England —the "Greco-primitive" hut in Marc-Antoine Laugier's *Essai sur l'architecture* (1753) and the "Romanist-primitive" hut in William Chambers *Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture* (1791). The way that Maynard delineates this history

literary context in which he sought to attain recognition is lost in favour of reading the seemingly straightforward "description" of how he built his house. I hope that the logic of delaying this act of tracing the lineage of Thoreau, for instance, to Sullivan or Wright will prove itself in the course of my investigation.[4]

What sort of structure did Thoreau build? Within the first line of the book he composed about his stay there, Thoreau himself refers to his structure as a house: "When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone,...in a house I had built myself" (45). Later we are told that it is fitted with boards attained from Thoreau's purchase of what he calls a shanty. We think of structures of different indigenous groups throughout history according to their indigenous names: tepees, igloos, wigwams, urts. But what of Thoreau's structure? One word, "hut" seems appropriate; it conjures up images of the forest-dwelling indigenous or "primitive" groups anthropology has made Western culture familiar with. But these adjectives do not very well describe Thoreau, whose project is to write. With this in mind I will refer to the structure Thoreau built as a shelter and sometimes as a dwelling. To my ears these names bear more than a simple aspect of a place to perform daily functions. They also speak about a "stay" against the difficulties of Thoreau's experience and his attempt to meet these difficulties through his creative construction. In this way, speaking of Thoreau's dwelling refers as much to the building he built as to the need in his experience for this shelter.

Is there a way in which we can think of Thoreau as an architect? Or at least, can we count his structure as something significant in the history of the profession? The answers to these questions imply very different understandings of the value of

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is helpful and convincing. The historical element alone, however, is not enough to explain *Walden*. Maynard refers to the first draft of *Walden*; the implication is that he see the following revisions as obscuring the historical picturesque elements in Thoreau's experiment. It was in these revisions that *Walden* established a more oblique critical comment on architecture and became a work of art accessible to our own time. See W. Barksdale Maynard, *The Picturesque and American Architecture: A reassessment.* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Delaware, 1997).

[4] References which do make this connection are Sherman Paul's *Louis Sullivan: An Architect in American Thought* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962). Paul, who is also author of a touchstone work in criticism of Thoreau: *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1958), speaks less of Thoreau directly and more of Transcendentalist ideas in general. Also, exploring Sullivan's supposition that : "The union between man and nature through art would reinstate [the quality of genius of which every human being is possessed]" is Narciso G. Menocal's *Architecture as Nature: The Transcendentalist Idea of Louis Sullivan* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin UP, 1981): 93.

architecture for us in our historical situation.[5] Thoreau's structure seems something less, however, than the notion of house that many typically think of as the domain of architecture. But in what follows I would like to propose a vision of Thoreau as an architect—not because he built a structure which kept out the cold and the rain and provided a place to store his belongings. What makes him an architect in the sense that is important with respect to the tradition is that through his structure and his proposal for a possible way of life he sought to bring order to what he saw as the chaos of his experience. This chaos affected the choices both he and his contemporaries made about how to express themselves, about the kind of urban environment they sought to create for themselves, and their decisions about what the most important aspect of their experience might be.

Thoreau sought meaning in his own dwelling through its relation to the natural world and its relation to his own history: it related to his own hands as a builder and writer. Significant to my reading and to understanding Thoreau is the fact that there is a coincidence of built and written projects in Thoreau's shelter.[6] In constructing it, Thoreau paid attention to the poetic potential both in the process and the inhabitation. Through critiquing the work around him, through offering his own attempt, and through the imaginative projection that this process of offering enables, Thoreau would learn that, like writing and the stories people make to explain their experience, building can temporarily make us at home in the world.

The Shelter as Criticism

"What does architecture amount to in the experience of the mass of men?" Thoreau asks (89).[7] This question is one of a series that Thoreau formulates in the leading chapter,

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[5] Karsten Harries argues that architecture must provide means of orienting humanity to its world—an ethos, a way of dwelling. See *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Boston: MIT Press, 1997): 4. See also Alberto Pérez-Gómez "The Myth of Dedalus," in *AA Files* 10 (1985): 52. As a modern, Thoreau seeks in his task of authoring a place and the possibility of self-knowledge through making.

[6] Kipling writes: "[P]articipation in the literary art was not the only work in which Thoreau was engaged at Walden, nor is it the whole art of dwelling. The activities of cultivation and construction are also ways in which dwelling is articulated" (17). See "The Art of Dwelling," *Kinesis*, cited above, n. 2.

[7] I have tried, where possible, to speak of Thoreau in the present tense as I find that it puts the weight of our consideration on his writing rather than the historical event of the move to the pond. While I do argue that the process of writing was preceded by the process of building, these actions are both discussed in terms of authoring.

"Economy." His questions concerning the meaning of shelter, clothing, and food, effectively ask: "What is life?" The typical answers concerning the necessities of life seem inadequate to Thoreau. "These things are taken care of most effectively," he seems to say, "by the least civilised people and by nature itself." The basis of Thoreau's criticism here is that the richness that one spends is not money but rather one's life—one's thoughts, one's heat, one's blood. Speaking about life through a system of economic terms, he says, creates a great deal of confusion about the essence of who we are.

Thoreau's consideration of the architectural traditions of his contemporaries shows that his own aesthetic was in part a criticism of what he saw around him. Though these were improvements in physical comfort, they were improvements only in the calculative terms of economics; in Thoreau's view they were not matched by developments in the characters of the people within them and were often not synchronous with the physical features of the landscape around them. This "organic principle" is perhaps best explained by F.O. Matteissen, who traces the inheritance of this principle from the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Emerson and from Emerson to the American sculptor Horatio Greenough and Thoreau. In Coleridge's terms the principle is that the"organic form...is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life, so the form is."[8] Matteissen points out how each of Emerson, Greenough, and Thoreau, this principle is adopted and altered. Mattheissen assigns Thoreau a very functional aesthetic—which is accurate—and does not fail to point out that this functionalism is a part of Thoreau's strategy of criticism. It is important to bring out more fully than Matteissen does, however, that Thoreau's functionalism is judged in poetic terms. In Thoreau's writing, the efficiency and functionality of a word depends on its multiple references, the way the poetic image exceeds itself, rather than direct correspondence. What is true of Thoreau's literary functionalism is true, as we shall see, of his preferences in building—that the shelter he constructs opens up the possibility of dwelling in the world around him.

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[8] See F.O. Matteissen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1941): 134.

Part of Thoreau's criticism of the time and energy spent by his contemporaries on attaining the wealth through which they attain their dwelling places is that they lack the time to spend improving their ability to dwell.[9] But here Thoreau begins a long comment on what he sees as the excesses of mere calculative building compared to the benefits of poetic thought which, in this quote, Thoreau sees as exemplified in literature:

> It should not be by their architecture, but why not even by their power of abstract thought, that nations should seek to commemorate themselves? How much more admirable the Bhagvat-Geeta[10] than all the ruins of the East! Towers and temples are the luxury of princes. A simple and independent mind does not toil at the bidding of any prince. Genius is not a retainer to any emperor, nor is its material silver, or gold, or marble, except to a trifling extent. To what end, pray, is so much stone hammered? In Arcadia, when I was there, I did not see any hammering stone....I might possibly invent some excuse for [the Pyramids] and [the Pharaoh], but I have no time for it. As for the religion and love of art of the builders, it is much the same the world over, whether the building be an Egyptian temple or the United States Bank. It costs more than it comes to...Many are concerned with the monuments of the West and the East—to know who built them. For my part, I should like to know who in those days did not build them,—who were above such triflings (100).

Thoreau was never in Arcadia, except through the readings he did in Greek literature. Had he travelled there physically, perhaps his opinion would have changed. Whether he had that opportunity or not his *hubris* here demands some sort of explanation.[11] Thoreau's exaggeration was aimed at the assertion that building bigger or in imitation of certain historical styles necessarily meant that New England builders had achieved architectural sophistication. It is as an extension of his critique of the means of building that he saw around him that Thoreau attacks works he has never seen. Thoreau consents that he might find an excuse for the Pharaohs and their ambitious building projects—had he

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[9] David Farrell Krell, notes "Heidegger would have admired Henry David Thoreau's description of the They, had he known it." See *Daimon Life: Heidegger and Life-Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992): 43.

[10] A sacred Hindu book usually spelled as Bhagavad Gita.

[11] In 1847 Thoreau published an article in *Graham's Magazine* called "Thomas Carlyle and his Works," in which he wrote: "Exaggeration! was ever any virtue attributed to a man without exaggeration! was ever any vice without infinite exaggeration?. . . .By an immense exaggeration we appreciate our Greek poetry and philosophy, and Egyptian ruins; our Shakespears and Miltons; our Liberty and Christianity." Quoted in James McKintosh, *Thoreau as a Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance Towards Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974): 40. As he moves closer in this discussion to the experiences of his audience, Thoreau attempts to bring with him the idea of the expressive imagination. His comment in *Walden* is clearly meant

learned Egyptian myths instead of Greek ones; but the amount of life his fellow New Englanders spend on their homes, Thoreau seems to say, is inexcusable. This is evident in the text in the way that the layers of Thoreau's punning overlap each other. The references to the United States Bank, "cost," "silver, gold, or marble," all within a chapter on "Economy," move the major theme of this chapter forward.

One of the direct encounters with the profession of architecture in *Walden* displays Thoreau's understanding of the difficulties with which architecture had to contend. "Mr. Balcom, a promising young architect, designs [the building] on the back of his Vitruvius, with hard pencil and ruler, and the job is let out to Dobson & Sons" (101). Thoreau, ungently, mocks the young architect for his vanity: "The mainstay," of love of the art of building, Thoreau wrote a few lines earlier "is vanity..." (101). But it is the lack of pride that Thoreau mocks in the stonecutter who is unable to do better for his sons than bind them to work that, due to the state of the profession of stonecutting in New England, Thoreau considers not to employ the highest human faculties.

Why, we might ask, does he so obstinately deny human culture? In fact, his critique is better thought out than this question will allow. Thoreau argues for a greater significance and a renewal in the interest of artifacts, which orient humanity to the world it inhabits, and modes of perception of all kinds. Thoreau's comment speaks to building that has taken the imperative of an economics of perpetual growth rather than that of existential relevance. Continuing the satirical treatment of economic terms that persists throughout this chapter, Thoreau argues that the context in which the questionable relationship had developed was the economic relationship that prevailed: the "job" is "let out." Thoreau's tone shows how remote and abstract the process appeared to him—and how unhelpful in determining a mode of living individually and communally.

In the midst of his criticism the true necessities for the meaning of building emerge. Thoreau links his house to his mortality, a condition his contemporaries had overlaid with economic abstractions: "The amount of it is, if a man is alive, there is always *danger* that he may die, though the danger must be allowed to be less in proportion as he is dead-and-alive to begin with" (199). His contention is that his contemporaries are deadened to the world

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to critique his contemporaries.

through their means of building. This echoes an earlier reference in his discussion. In that discussion Thoreau critiques the ornament the villagers rely on to adorn their homes. Thoreau's critique is that their houses are about death, not in a way that might lead them to take advantage of life, but unintentionally and ironically. He reminds them:

> Much it concerns a man, forsooth, how a few sticks are daubed upon his box. It would signify somewhat, if, in any earnest sense, he slanted them and daubed it; but the spirit having departed out of the tenant, it is of a piece with constructing his own coffin,—the architecture of the grave, and 'carpenter,' is but another name for 'coffin-maker,' One man says, in his despair of indifference to life, take up a handful of earth at your feet, and paint your house that color. Is he thinking of his last and narrow house (91)?

What Thoreau thinks has gone out of the ornamentation of his contemporaries is the connection between the shelter and the life it sustains. Building must be that through which life is accommodated and the possibility of death is encountered and thus made less foreign. What they miss, Thoreau offers, is the connection of shelter to life. He finds this connection, at first, in the invasion of nature into his own house and of the ways that the seasons and patterns of nature enter into his own routine of life, but he also finds it in the act of making *Walden*. Through his reference to coffins and the grave, Thoreau points out the arbitrariness of the mode of building which does not take as its basis the meaning of mortal life.

In this direction, Richard N. Masteller and Jean Carwile Masteller argue that Thoreau parodies the architectural pattern books of Andrew Jackson Downing that were popular during the period.[12] Comparing Downing and Thoreau, who often use the same terms—"imagination," "individual," "freedom,"—the authors find that Downing's architectural agenda leads towards domestication while that of Thoreau's leads towards the wild; Downing seeks to make the maturity of the nation evident through "proper" architecture, while Thoreau authors from what he sees in nature and imagines is necessary in his own life. As the Mastellers argue, Thoreau may well have known of Downing's pattern books and incorporated a critique of them in *Walden*. In one of his

[12] See "Rural Architecture in Andrew Jackson Downing and Henry David Thoreau: Pattern Book Parody in *Walden*," *The New England Quarterly: A Historical Review of New England Life and Letters* 42.4 (December 1984): 493-510. See Appendix A for examples from this book.

books, for instance, Downing cites another author—Sir Joshua Reynolds—who recommends that the colour of a house should match the colour of the grass and soil where the house will be built. This lead to the response we have just read from *Walden*: "One man says, in his despair and indifference to life, take up a handful of the earth at your feet, and paint your house that color. Is he thinking of his last and narrow house?" The Mastellers describe Thoreau's response in *Walden* and the passage in the Journal where Thoreau originally wrote his response; summarizing Thoreau, the Mastellers write:

> If we would have an individual architecture, the appropriate color is obvious: 'Why do you take up a handful of dirt? Better paint your house your own complexion; let it turn pale or blush for you'. Thoreau's disdain in the original journal entry had been even stronger: 'What do you take up a handful of dirt for? Why don't you paint the house with your blood? with your sweat' (498)?

One's life is the only wealth that one has to "spend." It is possible to live under an illusion and not to live as if one were someday, perhaps today, to die. Thoreau shows what he has feared: "I did not wish to live what was not life; living is so dear" (135). Subsequently he did not want to build or to live in a shelter which made him feel dead already; he did not want to forget the possibilities of death, of his limitations, and of the particular place where he lived.

Thoreau, as the following quote illustrates, said that each person must take up the task of expressing his or her self: Thoreau construed his project simply as a wake up call rather than a model for others:

> ....Finally, there were the self-styled reformers, the greatest bores of all, who thought that I was forever singing,—
>
> This is the house that I built;
> This is the man that lives in the house that I built;
>
> but they did not know that the third line was,—
>
> These are the folks that worry that man
> That lives in the house that I built (199).

His expectations were demanding, but not unrealistic. Thoreau recognised that the realm of technology which he had inherited bore a certain degree of inevitability, and that life must take advantage of what it is given to "make our civilization a blessing":

> Though we are not so degenerate but that we might possibly live in a cave or a wigwam or wear skins today, it certainly is better to accept the advantages, though so dearly bought, which the invention and industry of mankind offer. In such a neighborhood as this, boards and shingles, lime and bricks, are cheaper and more easily attained than suitable caves, or whole logs, or bark in sufficient quantities, or even well-tempered clay or flat stones. I speak understandably on this subject, for I have made myself acquainted with it both theoretically and practically. With a little more wit we might use these materials so as to become richer than the richest now are, and make our civilization a blessing. The civilized man is a more experienced and wiser savage (83).

Throughout the first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau critiques his contemporaries' means of building through comparing it to that of other cultures and to what he sees evident in nature. But in the above quote we understand that his critique has less to do with the material condition in which he finds himself than it does with the lack of imaginative engagement through which "we might use these materials so as to become richer than the richest now are, and make our civilization a blessing."

Building the Shelter: From Systems to Cycles

By looking at Thoreau's building process we can begin to see how his discussion shifts from criticism of his contemporaries to a way of seeing nature: he moves from "Economy" in the first chapter to "Spring" and hence, life, at the end of the book. Thoreau's literary project made the construction of the shelter necessary—it provided him with a place to write. Building it, however, also made a way of expression possible, a way of looking at the natural world and of speaking of it.[13]

In opposition to the habits of his townsmen, Thoreau offers an example of building which he believes better satisfies his understanding of how to lead the good life. It was not to encourage followers or establish a tradition that Thoreau conveys his way of building; rather, he intended to point out that alternatives could be imagined.

He begins the written description of his project in *Walden* in the following way:

> Near the end of March, 1845, I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house, and began to cut down

[13] The first of many drafts that *Walden* went through shows that it was conceived to have a much different character from what the final version ended up to be. Robert Kuhn McGregor asserts that "even at the time Henry went to live by the ponds he did not consider nature a primary theme for his writing efforts," *A Wider View of the Universe: Henry Thoreau's Study of Nature*, 75. Living at the pond, Thoreau slowly began to take more and more notice of the natural world around him, says McGregor.

> some tall arrowy pines, still in their youth, for timber. It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course is thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise. The owner of the axe, as he released his hold of it, said that it was the apple of his eye; but I returned it sharper than I received it (83).

He invites others to participate in his project and has established a way of relating to others, an ethics: "I returned [the axe] sharper than I received it." Thoreau continues to use economic terms and means but with markedly different ends: materials are "borrowed," his course of action is "generous," he allows his neighbours an "interest" in his "enterprise." But, as should be evident through his use of words, the power Thoreau aims at is poetic rather than economic. Thoreau borrows common terms and returns them with sharper meanings than they had previously carried: the tall arrowy pines of the New England understanding are the materials out of which Thoreau hews and whittles a vision of the natural world. Indeed, perhaps it is not only the axe but Thoreau himself that returned "sharper" to the village of Concord.

This borrowing occurred not only from his fellow-men but also from the land itself, for timber. Consider what Thoreau writes elsewhere about the apple: "The apple was early so important, and generally distributed, that its name traced to its root in many languages signifies fruit in general. Μηλον, in Greek, means [not only] an apple, also the fruit of other trees, also a sheep and any cattle, and finally riches in general."[14] The "apple" of the neighbour's eye, his riches, the riches of the earth: in all these things Thoreau allows himself to fall into debt. His ethic is to improve on what he has borrowed. We have seen this already in the example of the axe. Thoreau, as we will see shortly, comes back to this with respect to the trees themselves. In doing so he moves far beyond the economic abstractions that, he says, his contemporaries (and, by extension, his readers) have used to define their own existences.

At the beginning of the book, Thoreau does in fact describe his house in terms that seem fitting to the title of the chapter, "Economy," in which it appears. The list of materials and their costs is one of Thoreau's most memorable descriptions of his house:

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[14] "Wild Apples: The History of the Apple Tree," in *The Works of Thoreau*, Henry Canby ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937): 712.

Boards,.....	$8 03½,	
Refuse shingles for roof and sides,.	4 00	
Laths,.....	1 25	
Two second-hand windows with glass,.....	2 34	
One thousand old brick,.....	4 00	
Two casks of lime,.....	2 40	That was high. More than I needed.
Hair,.....	0 31	
Mantle-tree iron,.....	0 15	
Nails,.....	3 90	
Hinges and Screws,.....	0 14	
Latch,.....	0 10	
Caulk,.....	0 01	
Transportation,.....	1 40	}I carried a good part on my back.
In all,.....	28 12½	

Thoreau's "list" seems to place a great deal of emphasis on monetary qualities.[15] It seems that Thoreau is quite proud of the minimum cost of his dwelling. Certainly this fits in with his comments on the outlandish expense and attention the Egyptians and city-dwellers paid to their constructions. He will not invest in attention what does not pay back in significance. Thoreau's most treasured possessions are free: the fields, wild orchards, the vista's through which he wanders, and descriptions of these handed down from author to author. The materials he uses are minimal in an effort to show that meaning can be made from a few simple things with which we are surrounded. The list emphasizes what Thoreau could do without.

This list and Thoreau's exhortation to simplified living show that the morality that he advocated relied on a sense of practicality. While for the likes of Benjamin Franklin and the burgeoning population of industrialists this practicality was tied to a program of monetary and material gain, Thoreau and other Transcendentalists were interested in the potential of their endeavor to create a vigorous, dedicated, and creative intellectual community. Michael Meyer summarizes the difference:

> Perhaps no single comparison of passages better measures the distance between Franklin's and Thoreau's sensibilities than the following revealing lines. In 'The Way to Wealth,' Franklin repeatedly warns against going into debt, because as Poor Richard says, 'For age and want, save while you may;/ No morning sun lasts a whole day.' In *Walden*, however, Thoreau concludes his book with these final words designed to serve as a beginning for his readers:

[15] Thoreau, *Walden*, 93.

> 'Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.' With Franklin there is a sense of desperation, of time running out, of life closing down, but with Thoreau, this constriction gives way to expansiveness and open-endedness....The economic freedom that Franklin prescribed for eighteenth-century Americans exacted too high a price from the souls of nineteenth-century romantics such as Thoreau.[16]

The knowledge that Thoreau sought was something different from what he had inherited. This is evident in the song he sang to himself while working: "I went on for some days cutting and hewing timber..., not having many communicable or scholar-like thoughts, singing to myself,—

> Men say they know many things;
> But lo! they have taken wings,—
> The arts and sciences,
> And a thousand appliances;
> The wind that blows
> Is all that any body knows (85).

By meeting his basic needs in the simplest way possible, Thoreau, "not having any scholar-like or communicable thoughts," opens himself up to a different form of understanding. Thoreau moved away from a way of thinking that places importance on the mechanical applicability of knowledge to a way of thinking that explained his engagement with the world around him.

Thoreau's little song echoes his call to clarity concerning the meaning of the knowledge of the world that was developing all around him. He contrasts this knowledge which he sees as fleeting and transitory with knowledge that is universal. On the edge of the meaning of this little rhyme is a contrast between the ways that artifacts represent and the primacy of human presence, between knowledge of a thing and "saying." We will see later how Thoreau would eventually speak positively about flight and affirm the metaphorical relation between his own thoughts and the soaring of a bird's flight; that is, between kinds of inspiration. Perhaps we can use that knowledge to read this poem. Instead of our contrivances soaring above us—*they* have taken wings—*we* should be

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[16] Michael Meyer, "Introduction," *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1983): 23.

inspired through our relation to the world, Thoreau says.[17] This little mantra-like saying, in the presence of which he tells us his house was constructed, shows the tension Thoreau experiences between the real value of the world that he was making and the value of the world he sees around him. Thoreau's resolve, as the written poem indicates, is to try to understand this paradoxical situation through the art of writing.

In his description of how his shelter was built, Thoreau continues as follows:

> So I went on for some days cutting and hewing timber, and also studs and rafters....I hewed the main timbers six inches square, most of the studs on two sides only, and the rafters and floor timbers on one side, leaving the rest of the bark on, so that they were just as straight and much stronger than sawed ones. Each stick was carefully mortised or tenoned by its stump, for I had borrowed other tools by this time (84).

The borrowing of "other tools" indicates not only that he had other physical implements but that, since the use of these tools requires knowledge of how to use them, he had gained other knowledge—he borrows tools from the collective wisdom of how to build. Thoreau considers the details of his construction techniques sufficiently important to include them in his book. The significance of this discussion is at least partly that the kind of knowledge that Thoreau is seeking, the kind of engagement he is after, depends on his physical involvement with the world—knowing through making.

An extension of this way of knowing, Thoreau's description of his construction process is couched within a discussion of how the sound of his axe attracted curious passers-by and how he ate with the smell and pitch of the trees sticking to his hands. In particular, he notes a curious relation, a kind of knowledge, to the trees which he cut down: "Before I had done I was more the friend than the foe of the pine tree, though I had cut down some of them, having become better acquainted with it" (85). He was beginning to form the understanding and sensitivity he would later develop with the world through which he would find a means of expression.

Daniel Peck has pointed out that the building of the hut enabled Thoreau's

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[17] Theodore Rozak will echo something similar concerning a television commercial for discount flights: "[T]he wealth of artistic and religious symbolism...passes through my mind, the real but subterranean meaning of flight, [is] buried now beneath a glamorous technology of jet planes...; and I grow sad to see a noble imagery debased to the level of so poor a counterfeit." *Where the Wasteland Ends: Politics and Transcendence in Post-industrial Society* (Berkeley, Celestial Arts, 1989): 355.

imaginative constructions later in the text.[18] The cosmos that opens up for Thoreau, evident as we read *Walden,* is possible because of his act of building. This suggests that a relationship with nature is made possible through building, that only through building can we expect the world to present itself to us. Phenomenologically, acknowledging one's stance—humanness—is the key to recognizing "otherness" in nature.

Thoreau tells us that he dug his cellar where a woodchuck had formerly dug his burrow. "I took particular pleasure in this breaking of ground," he tells us, "for in almost all latitudes men dig into the earth for an equable temperature" (87). The sense of life in such an activity as digging one's own cellar brings back the issue of what place human habitation has in addressing the human issues of belonging and orientation. The cellar provides for one in life—room in the earth—what the grave will provide in death. Thoreau digs to a fine sand where "potatoes would not freeze in any winter" (87), and perhaps considers at the same time that one's body will one day nourish the earth. The confrontation with mortality that pervades this paragraph continues: "Under the most splendid house in the city is still to be found the cellar where they store their roots as of old, and long after their superstructure has disappeared posterity will remark its dent in the earth. The house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow (87)."[19] The burrow marked where the woodchuck had passed and a cellar marked where people, even the most splendid, had put down their roots and, perhaps, were buried.

> At the end of the process of building, Thoreau engaged his friends to help him:
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> At length, in the beginning of May, with the help of some of my acquaintances, rather to improve so good an occasion for neighborliness than from any necessity, I set up the frame of my house. No man was ever more honored in the character of his raisers than I. They are destined, I trust, to assist at the raising of loftier structures one day (88).

What are the "loftier structures" which Thoreau expected his friends to raise? Like Thoreau, other Transcendentalists including the poet Ellory Channing and R.W.

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[18] See Peck *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in* a Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, *The Journal, and* Walden (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990).

[19] This act of digging into the earth and the nourishment one provides for it recall the discussion provided by Michael West of the scatological imagery in *Walden.* Michael West, "Scatology and Eschatology: The Heroic Dimensions of Thoreau's Wordplay," *Publications of the Modern Language Association,* 80 (1974): 1043-1064.

Emerson concerned themselves with understanding the meaning of nature for their lives as thinkers in the New World. From them, Thoreau perhaps expects new ways of thinking and relating to the world—a structure of American life and thought.

In the following passage, Thoreau considers the craft of his enterprise of building:

> I began to occupy my house on the 4th of July, as soon as it was boarded and roofed, for the boards were carefully feathered and lapped, so that it was perfectly impervious to rain; but before boarding I laid the foundation of a chimney at one end, bringing two cartloads of stones up the hill from the pond in my arms. I built the chimney after my hoeing in the fall, before a fire became necessary for warmth, doing my cooking in the mean while out of doors on the ground, early in the morning: which mode I still think is in some respects more convenient and agreeable than the usual one (88).

The precision and care in his effort to build for himself somewhere to live are reflected in his written account of it. The boards are "carefully feathered and lapped," and Thoreau is careful enough even to go so far as tell us that he brought stones from the pond, as he says, "in my arms."[20]

Much has been made of Thoreau's declaration that he moved to his shelter on Independence Day. Stanley Cavell offers that Thoreau declares independence not from the beliefs and values of society but from the way that society practices its beliefs and values.[21] In Thoreau's later description of his move to his shelter, Cavell sees a reference to the accidental nature of America's discovery and its subsequent rediscovery by every American obsessed with the idea of independence. But even in that example Thoreau's reference is contrasted by a certainty with regards to the natural world: "When I first took up my abode in the woods, that is, began to spend my nights as well as my days there, which by accident, was on Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, 1845, my house was not finished for winter" (128). What attracts attention here is the contrast of the cyclical with the linear: the cycle of days and nights begin at the pond, by accident, at an important juncture in linear history. Similarly, the coming of winter spoken about and the presence of summer compliment the cyclical aspect of this declaration, not of

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[20] The importance of the "first-hand" knowledge that Thoreau gains by constructing his own shelter is only one aspect that I wish to bring to contemporary conversation about building. The main point will be that this kind of precision and care is what should be brought to our individual conceptions of the natural world and the mode of responsible involvement we attain to within those conceptions.

independence, but of interdependence. Reading the first quote again, we are more aware of the same elements at play; Thoreau move into his house "after my hoeing," presumably, then, after *harvest*; the house, likewise, is impervious to the *autumn* rains; before a chimney is necessary for *winter* warmth; cooking in the *morning* air.

The sentence also suggests, however, that Thoreau minimizes the importance of that historical event in favour of his more immediate reality. He moves from abstractions and from what his contemporaries might consider news-worthy events to what Thoreau thinks is enduring and important: from systems to cycles. "What news!" Thoreau says, "how much more important to know what that is which was never old" (139). In this paragraph, the event which bears most significance is not liberation of the United States from British Rule and the symbolic reenactment of Thoreau's liberation from Concord. Rather, it was because his house was on that date boarded and ready to occupy that Thoreau moves in. That which was never old in this case is the human condition—humankind's relation to the natural world.

When built, the shelter enabled Thoreau to dedicate himself to study. Thoreau attempted to ease himself into the literary world and found himself impinged upon by the proximity of a world that was, paradoxically, close at hand and yet just beyond his grasp; this paradox drew out of him a literary response. Thoreau attempted to fix a place for himself in the world through writing but found that he was the one being addressed.

Thoreau's final words, then, in his description of the construction of his simple house are telling: "In those days, when my hands were much employed I read but little, but the least scraps of paper which lay on the ground, my holder, or tablecloth, afforded me as much entertainment, in fact answered the same purpose as the Iliad" (88). It is not due to a lack of intensity in his thought that a newspaper suddenly suffices as adequate reading. Rather, it was in the context of his authoring and making in which he read. His senses peaked, Thoreau could see the drama of ages unfolding, the paper providing merely a mandala for meditation as he crafts his own epic story.

The description of the construction of his shelter is important for my observations for a number of reasons. In the process of building Thoreau began to notice more acutely

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[21] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1972): 8.

the world around him, how his actions changed how he saw, and how he was seen. In particular he asserted that in the process of building he established a debt relationship to other people and to Nature. His efforts in *Walden* constituted an effort to repay those debts.

His shelter was part of the natural environment in which he lived in many ways. As suggested above, the shelter was built as the seasons dictated. At first it was only boarded and the summer wind came in through the cracks in the wall. When fall came and the wind grew cold, he gathered sand from the pond and mixed plaster to seal up the cracks. At the beginning of winter, when it became too cold to cook outside, Thoreau built a stove for himself to cook with and to heat the inside of the shelter. The primitive act of building one's own shelter was reenacted in his experiment at Walden Pond. Through it Thoreau was able to take account, in a more profound way perhaps than he had expected, of his own relation to the world around him and the construction that he had made.

His movement from economic understanding to one based on the necessities of life enabled him to see what had passed by so many of his contemporaries. It motivated him to attempt to put into form the meaning of both his experience and that of his contemporaries; this was accomplished through touching on the universals in which they were all implicated. The shelter that Thoreau constructed opened up for him, in time, the possibility of seeing, and saying, a world.

The Shelter and Nature: The Imaginative Projection

From his experience in the indigenous societies of Indonesia, David Abram writes about the role of the shaman and the shaman's relation to both the community and the natural world.[22] From his position just outside a community's limits, the shaman negotiates between the community and the more-than-human world that surrounds it. The effects of Thoreau's move to the edge of his community resembles the task of the shaman: as the shaman cures so too Thoreau, through his writing, seeks to gain a wild wisdom for his people. Speaking of the shaman, Abram writes: "His magic is precisely this heightened receptivity to the meaningful solicitations—songs, cries, gestures—of the

larger, more-than-human field" (9). Thoreau's shelter begins a process through which he realises his own role as an artist—a shaman in the modern world.[23]

We might not know anything of Thoreau's project if it were not for his writing. That he built a dwelling, we should remember, is part of his literary project. This artistic endeavour is itself an attempt to participate in the kinds of discussions through which humanity formulates modes of existence, through which it offers explanations for the mysteries it encounters. Thoreau's writing—the flow of his words and the type of analogies he uses—reveals his vision of nature.

Having finished describing the process of building the house, Thoreau is provided with an opportunity, the leisure, to reflect on the process and its meaning:

> It would be worth the while to build still more deliberately than I did, considering, for instance, what foundation a door, a window, a cellar, a garret, have in the nature of man, and perchance never raising any superstructure until we have found a better reason for it than our temporal necessities even (89).

This is an invitation for us to read Thoreau's description of his dwelling on a deeper level. The reflection on his process of building is itself a layering of meaning, a kind of literary ornamentation of his house. This wondering is an act of authorial imagination. In building and generating written images, Thoreau seeks to accomplish a generosity of meaning through an economy of means.

Thoreau gives his own definition, a written one, of what architecture should be. With respect to building, as with all his topics, Thoreau makes assertions as if opinion were truth fitted for an individual; "What of architectural beauty I now see," he says,

> I know has gradually grown from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller, who is the only builder,—out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance; and whatever additional beauty of this kind is destined to be produced will be preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life (32).

The house is seen as an extension of the indweller just as Thoreau saw himself as

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[22] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (Random House: Toronto, 1996).

[23] For an extensive discussion of the proximity of Thoreau's writing to shamanistic practices see Louise Cristina Kertesz, *A Study of Thoreau as Myth Theorist and Myth Maker* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champange, 1970): 198-250. Daniel Peck also invokes this image: "Like the shaman, Thoreau must bring [former inhabitants] back into being through dream and incantation." Writing is the spell

"part and parcel of nature."[24] The house is an outward extension of an inward mode of being just as his writing is a literary expression of a way of seeing the world.

His ideal house is nearly realised one morning when he sets his furniture outside in order to clear his one room dwelling:

> It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and the pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories... I was sometimes tempted to stretch an awning over them and take my seat there. It was worth while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs (158).

In this example we see another pairing of his ambition to create a home in this world through writing and through building. The pen and ink still on his table, Thoreau relocated his belongings out of doors. Recurrent nature, "life-everlasting," form the floor and support for his existence. Paying attention to the puns he has used earlier we note the "free" wind blowing on his belongings which makes it "worth" his while to spend the time thus admiring not the things themselves but their surroundings: a bird and the perpetually growing green grass.[25] The line between the world Thoreau writes and the world he lives is almost erased. The move from the village to Walden is extended once more—Thoreau takes his writing with him.

Thoreau later expands on his ideal house—one with which we ourselves are already familiar. The description of his ideal house, perhaps the longest sentence in the book, comprises a second list—a much expanded and much wordier version of the first list in which Thoreau gave an account of his materials:

> I sometime dream of a larger and more populous house, standing in a golden age, of enduring material, and without ginger-bread work, which shall still only consist of one room, a vast, rude, substantial, primitive hall, without ceiling or plastering, with bare rafter and purlins supporting a sort of lower heaven over

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Thoreau casts to accomplish this task. See Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work*, 148.

[24] Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in. *The Works of Thoreau*, Henry S. Canby ed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937): 659.

[25] Elsewhere, Thoreau says: "The grass flames up on the hillside like a spring fire,...as if the earth sent forth an inward heat to greet the returning sun;...lifting its spear of last year's hay with the fresh life below....So our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade to eternity" (*Walden*, 359).

> one's head,—useful to keep off rain and snow; where the king and queen posts stand out to receive your homage, when you have done reverence to the prostrate Saturn of an older dynasty on stepping over the sill; a cavernous house, wherein you must reach up a torch upon a pole to see the roof; where some may live in the fireplace, some in the recess of a window, and some on the settles, some at the end of one hall, some at another, and some aloft on rafters with the spiders, if they choose; a house in which you have got into when you have opened the outside door and the ceremony is over; where the weary traveller may wash, and eat, and converse, and sleep, without further journey; such a shelter as you would be glad to reach in a tempestuous night, containing all the essentials of a house and nothing for the house-keeping; where you can see all the treasures of the house at one view, and everything hangs upon its peg that a man should use; at once kitchen, pantry, parlor, chamber, store-house, and garret; where you can see so necessary a thing as a barrel or ladder, so convenient a thing as a cupboard, and hear the pot boil, and pay your respects to the fire that cooks your bread, and the necessary furniture and utensils are the chief ornaments; where the washing is not put out, not the fire, nor the mistress, and perhaps you are sometimes requested to move from off the trap door, when the cook would descend into the cellar, and so learn whether the ground is solid or hollow beneath you without stamping (290).

In this list Thoreau lets his imagination run; to unravel it is a work of the imagination as well. Frederick Garber has pointed out that Thoreau's ideal house is in fact the "house" of humanity.[26] When Thoreau, continuing the list in the next sentence, says "you cannot go in the front door and out the back without passing some of its inhabitants (291)" it becomes clear that the "larger and more populous house,...a vast, rude, and substantial primitive hall," is the world in which we live. Through the built project of Thoreau's dwelling, the realm of the natural world is "writ large" around him—he moves from an economic account of his dwelling to one based on a more adventurous understanding. Thoreau compares the ideal house to the nest of a bird: "A house whose inside is as open and manifest as a bird's nest...; where to be a guest is to be presented with the freedom of the house, and not to be...shut up in a particular cell, and told to make yourself at home there,—in solitary confinement" (291). Our dreams of freedom are most intense from within the walls our individual confinements, straining to be worthy guests in a house that is familiar and yet not our own. Thoreau uses this idea of a "lower heaven" to talk about the kind of freedom his building is intended to

[26] Garber, *Thoreau's Fable of Inscribing*, 157.

provide,—an "*Extra vagance!*" As he says elsewhere: "I fear chiefly lest my expression not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced" (372). This "lower heaven" is coextensive with the canopy of leaves under which he walks "even with the Builder of the universe" (378).

We may note that Thoreau's description of a "vast, rude, substantial, primitive hall" is itself an adornment of the little shelter he built beside the pond, embellishing it by releasing the potential of his words to provoke our imaginations. Thoreau's shelter is ornate, complex, comprising an indulgent list of materials; it is, in fact, all the world to us. It continues Thoreau's earlier attempt to discover "what foundation a door, a window, a cellar, a garret, have in the nature of man," what these things signify in the "tempestuous night" of our experience. The "necessary furniture and utensils are the chief ornaments" not simply because of their function—no list this long is *necessary*—but because they aid in giving "your respects to the fire that cooks your bread." The "one view" is the only view we, individually, have, our gaze across the landscape, peering into the deeper significance of the things we make and the world around us.

Thoreau's shelter becomes a tool through which he sees the natural world. Through our consideration of his discussion of the house, we see that it carries references on many levels. Such an interaction prepares us to see the world through the lense of his experience and aspirations:

> The stars are the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment! Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions. Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant? We should live in all the ages of the world in an hour; ay in all the worlds of the ages. History, Poetry, Mythology!—I know of no reading of another's experience so startling and informing as this would be (53).

We have seen how Thoreau's shelter provides the interpretative tool whereby Thoreau is able to contemplate the natural world. Standing apart from the requirements of the society around him, Thoreau creates the space of deliberation in which his literary imagination can flourish. In the space that his efforts have provided him, Thoreau listens to

the world around him for voices that others will not hear or understand. Thoreau's writing is the product of the task that he has taken upon himself. He is convinced that through his writing he will be able to make himself at home in the world.

The comparison of his house to the nest of a bird, as we shall see in the next chapter, demonstrates Thoreau's understanding that the house is to be a tool of one's desire for freedom. The discussion of the house as a bird's nest invites us to consider Thoreau's expressive work, both his writing and the construction of his dwelling, as work of the vertical, transcending, element of life—the imagination.

CHAPTER 4

> *A beginning of a philosophical phenomenology of nests would consist in our being able to elucidate the interest with which we look through an album containing reproductions of nests, or, even more positively, in our capacity to recapture the naïve wonder we used to feel when we found a nest. This wonder is lasting, and today when we discover a nest it takes us back to our childhood or, rather, to a childhood; to the childhoods we should have had. For not many of us have been endowed by life with the full measure of its cosmic implications.*[1]

"Winged Life"

Thoreau's construction of an idea of the natural world began with an architectural act: he built his shelter. From this shelter he made his observations of nature and began the process of transforming his experience into written form. It is in this form that Thoreau presented his creative understanding of the natural world. For us to speak about his vision of nature we can concentrate on Thoreau's writing in *Walden* of the birds he observed at Walden Pond. Stanley Cavell illustrates well the tensions involved: "Birds generally at Walden...seem to me to carry moments of the writer's most intimate identifications, as befits a poet, or a writer in competition with the nightingale."[2] Perhaps Thoreau did not intend to present a coherent and complete vision of the meaning of the natural world through his written account of the birds at Walden Pond. But the coherence his discussion does present prompts my own imagination. In each of these examples or instances, Thoreau's references to birds and to flight contribute to a vision that he offers; this vision provides a way of engaging with the world and suggests an ethic for participating in it.

In Thoreau's comparison of houses to birds' nests, in his consideration of their singing voices and his written one, in his encounter with specific characters within nature such as the cockerel, the loon and the owl, and in the greater aspirations his investigation pointed towards, his perception as a writer ordered, in part, his experience as a naturalist.

Birds' Nests

Thoreau compared his own shelter to the nests of the birds that he took notice of during his stay at the pond. The result is a critique of a way of building and an attempt at an original mode of expression. In the comparison of his shelter to a bird's nest, Thoreau

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[1] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969): 93.

makes an argument for imaginative engagement in our search through the realm of ideas and through the realm of nature. In the image of his own home as a nest, Thoreau revealed in a new way the delicacy and precariousness of the human condition—that we make our way between earth and sky, that the ground is our realm of experience and yet we are free to let our inspired thoughts soar.

Gaston Bachelard treats the phenomenological significance of the image of the nest in his book *The Poetics of Space*. He dicusses the pervasiveness of this image in human consciousness and the metaphor of making our home, like the nest of a bird, somewhere between earth and sky. Bachelard also cites another example, one from Thoreau's journal, of Thoreau's use of the metaphor of the nest. In it Thoreau describes a tree that a woodpecker has inhabited in terms of a family returning home from vacation and reclaiming their house. Bachelard is struck by the way that the metaphor also speaks about a happy family as a flourishing nest. Though, as Bachelard has it "in literature, the nest image is generally childish," (93) he is grateful to the poet who is able to bring us back to a simple image since it can be very powerful: "we feel grateful toward the poet who has the talent to renew it with...felicity" (99). [3]

In this section we will explore, through critical commentary, the historical context in which Thoreau's references to the nests of birds occur and Thoreau's references themselves in *Walden*. The problematic that arises concerning the boundary between man and nature will begin to take shape throughout this section.

The issue in considering Thoreau's references to the nests of birds is not that of endeavouring to find a means of building that is somehow more primitive or for us to find a way to imitate indigenous architecture. Though narrowly, even Bernard Rudofsky's book *Architecture without Architects* avoids such a proposition.[4] Our historical consciousness makes our reference to (but not our study of) indigenous architecture technically feasible

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[2] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992): 40.

[3] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 90-104. Bachelard's analysis of this metaphor is also treated in Harries' *The Ethical Function of Architecture*: "The metaphor of the nest suggests a love supported by confidence in what the future holds: to consider one's home a nest is to trust in the world without sufficient reason for that trust. And it is precisely such trust, Bachelard suggests, that is a genuine condition of genuine dwelling" (256). He adds: "Isn't it love that builds all nests" (263)?

[4] Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1964).

but existentially harmful. Thoreau's relevance comes through his writing about a shelter, as Joseph Rykwert writes about the primitive hut, "beyond the reach of the historian or archaeologist," in a renewal that has always been sought for "in the rituals of seasonal change and initiation."[5] A human condition is common to mythological and indigenous cultures, Thoreau, and modern society; the historical consciousness of modern society, however, must be taken into account.

The distance between man and world that Thoreau had to overcome was within the bounds of the pastoral writing tradition though, as Leo Marx points out, to make sense of the American experience in the 19th century, it needed to redefine itself. In his seminal work *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America,* Marx describes the challenging condition of America in the period which Thoreau writes.[6] To paraphrase Marx's argument, two forces are in conflict at this period in American history: firstly, the vision of America as agrarian landscape according to models put forward by people such as Jefferson (in *Notes on Virginia, 1785*) and, even later, Emerson (in "The American Scholar" address, 1844) and, secondly, the vision of Americans civilizing the wilderness through industrial technology. Marx speaks about the cultural artifacts of this period in two different categories: the sentimental and the complex. The sentimental is indicated in the American taste for the rustic; it is evident in contemporary culture, says Marx, in the preference for products associated with a rustic setting.[7] Sentimental pastoralism, Marx says, uncritically portrays a life in better balance with nature. Complex pastoralism, such as is presented in *Walden*, according to Marx, speaks about the pastoral ideal in terms mediated by a realization of the changes brought through industrialization. In Thoreau's particular case, this meant taking the pastoral ideal out of the realm of linear history and relocating it in literature: the pastoral ideal is no longer a mode of action but a form for creative definition: "[Thoreau] removes [the pastoral] from history, where it is manifestly unrealizable, and relocates it in literature, which is to say, in his own consciousness, in his craft, in *Walden*" (265). Marx backs his argument by

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[5] Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972): 192.

[6] See Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1964).

[7] A convincing contemporary example is that of advertising for Marlboro cigarettes.

pointing out the ambiguity of Thoreau's treatment of his agrarian endeavors: the small bean crop Thoreau experimented with was a monetary and hence, agrarian, failure but a success in Thoreau's more sustained literary endeavor—to write a book about the experience. At the crossroads of these two forces, I conclude from Marx's discussion, complex pastoralism produced the cultural artifacts through which Americans could attempt to understand how their experiences could be made predictable, even as those experiences exceeded their immediate grasp. In approaching Thoreau's reference to the nest of birds we must simultaneously keep in mind his 19th century agrarian context and the beginning of the age of the industiral machine in America. It is against this background—with open but perhaps unbelieving eyes that Thoreau makes reference to the nests of birds.

From Marx we understand that Thoreau sees in nature a model that he knows must be taken up by human culture for a relationship to be established—that the story of the separation from nature pervades every culture and that, in his culture, the reconcilliation had industrial technology to compete with. Similarly, Jane Bennett suggests that Thoreau attempts to formulate this relationship but that, for him, there remains an element outside of the vision that he creates:

> Thoreau is not unaware of the artificiality of his Nature. But this is not to say that he considered it simply to be a fiction....Thoreau could not understand Nature as simply an artifact because he is confident of the existence of a pure Nature, that ambiguous and recalcitrant source for his semiotic projects, that fund of imagery not reducible to the imagination it enables.[8]

Bennett argues that Thoreau crafts an understanding of Nature and "inflects" what appears in his observations towards the ends he aims for in his art. In this sense we see Thoreau's difficult balance between the world he intends to speak and the world that addresses itself to him. Thoreau's references to the nests of birds show that, while he sees nests as implicated in his life and the lives of his audience, the realm in which nests occur remains essentially other. Authorship is the tool that traverses this boundary but also, as a tool, places Thoreau at one remove from the realm of nature.

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[8] Jane Bennett, *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* (Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Publications, 1994): 60.

What is this boundary, then, that separates the use of birds as a trope for literary expression from the use of birds as a model for one's own existence? The distinction is quite clear today when even empathy with the animal world is highly suspect. In contemporary terms, we might ask the extent to which our definitions of nature interpret what we perceive—how do our categories, in other words, guide our perception?[9] To acknowledge that we still ask this question sensitises us to the issues as we address them in Thoreau.

But what, then, about Thoreau's time and his understanding? How did Thoreau's understanding in *Walden* differ from that of his contemporaries? Joseph Rykwert cites a work called *Home Without Hands, Being a Description of the Habitations of Animals, Classed According to their Principles of Construction,* published in 1876 in London.[10] In this book, Reverend J.G. Wood discusses what he sees as the architecture that animals make. Rykwert claims that such books as Wood's were popular in the late nineteenth century. As the examples he quotes are European, our own concern remains at a slight remove.[11] The question we must ask is that of where, for Thoreau, the boundary should be placed between birds' nests and his own, and therefore human, dwelling.

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[9] The argument for animal rights, for example, reflects our tendency to speak of existence in rationalist terms. For a position which argues the importance of maintaining the traditional philosophical categories see John Passmore, *Man's Responsibility for Nature, Ecological Problems and Western Traditions* (London: Gerald Duckworh & Co., Ltd., 1974). Such positions have been challenged from several directions and particularly from ontological insights in phenomenology. See David Abrams, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (Toronto: Random House, 1996). Also, although animals do not have mortality as Alphonso Lingis speaks about it and thus not have individuality, Lingis's argument in *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) might profitably be extended in this direction. As well, his book *The Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998) contrasts Kantian ethics with an ethics based on the ethical directives we receive from the world around us—the face of the other, for instance, even as transmitted by mass media. See especially pages 210-213.

[10] Cited in Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise*, 19.

[11] In his influential work *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought From Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley: California UP, 1967), Clarence Glacken writes about debates between New and Old world thinkers (between Thomas Jefferson and Count Buffon, for instance) of the value of nature in the New World, what methods of cultivating it were most appropriate, whether it was better or less suited to human inhabitation than Europe. These debates reveal the differences in the natural surroundings that were perceived between these two realms; they warn against too direct an application of European theories at the time to our understanding of the contemporaneous American conceptions of nature. James McIntosh, on the other hand, points out the (more literary) European heritage of Wordsworth and Goethe in the development of Thoreau's understanding of nature. See *Thoreau as a Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance toward Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974). Helpful in determining the terms in the American conversation is Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3d ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982).

In *Walden*, we can follow Thoreau's way of thinking to see how this balance is effected or pursued in his account. In one particular passage Thoreau laments the division of labour among the villagers. Performed for the sake of efficiency and economy, such division of labour deprives each person from experiencing the fulfilling variety that meaningful work always offers: "Shall we forever resign the pleasures of construction to the carpenter" (89)? Thoreau supposes that, just as another sews for him or cooks for him, he might also get another to think for him. But he is in no regard eager to lay that task entirely on someone else: "No doubt another may also think for me; but it is not therefore desirable that he should do so to the exclusion of my thinking for myself" (89). Not only other men but nature as well can define for Thoreau how he will live his life. This passage, when applied to the natural world and to Thoreau's literary presentation about his experiences with the animals and the seasons, means the following: just as others can provide him with ideas and valuable work, so too his observations of the animals and trees provides the fodder for his model of nature—in a larger sense nature may provide the model for my life, he says, but it is not therefore desirable that it should do so to the exclusion of my ability to define that model myself.

Through the following examples from *Walden*, we can begin to examine in more detail the kind of "inflected" model the nests of birds are for Thoreau in his conception of how to build and how to live. His call to consider origins is a critique of the way human culture around him which, though that culture had taken up a model of the natural world, had forfeited the enduring qualities of the natural world for the fleeting ones.

Thoreau evaluates the means of acquiring food, clothing and shelter offered in the pragmatic, materialist approach and finds that it lacks beauty and promise. In the attention he pays to the housing he sees around him he notes that from wherever the concept of shelter developed—perhaps "some enterprising mortal crept into a hollow in a rock"—we have "advanced to roofs of palm leaves, of bark and boughs, of linen woven and stretched, of grass and straw, of boards and shingles, of stones and tiles...clean paint and paper, Rumford fireplace, back plastering, Venetian blinds, copper pump, spring lock, a commodious cellar, and many other things" (71). What is the result of all of this? he asks. In answering, Thoreau appeals again to natural phenomena and in this instance particularly

the phenomena of birds as the basis or standard from which to judge:

> At last, we know not what it is to live in the open air, and our lives are domestic in more senses than we think. From the hearth to the field is a great distance. It would be well perhaps if we were to spend more of our days and nights without any obstruction between us and the celestial bodies, if the poet did not speak so much from under a roof, or the saint dwell there so long. Birds do not sing in caves, nor do doves cherish their innocence in dovecots (71).

The quote illustrates the tensions between the horizontal and the vertical dimensions. Though he argues for the values of the field, the horizontal, the value he is pointing to within that horizontal is the openness of the field to the sky and the vertical. The hearth of course is the symbol of home, of warmth and stability. The field is a middle ground between the wild and the domestic, "half-wild" as Thoreau says of his own bean field. The poet produces meanings that move between the regions of our understanding and the mysteries that surround us: between, for instance, our days and nights—our experiences—and the celestial bodies that order them; between the poet herself and the earth(l)y realm in which her words have significance; between the saint and the heavenly realm to which he attains. The orientation of the hearth is vertical, along the axis of thought—men and women walk upright, look up, see the stars, and wonder; thought is the mind on fire. The field is the horizon of meaning, the realm in which we act and carve out significance. The pairing of these two realms is part of the reason that birds are important in Thoreau's searching for a means of expression. It suggests how this expression can retain meaning in the modern world: the verticality of birds' capacities are constant symbols of our thoughts, their soaring reminds us of the carving we do to remember who we are and where we have been. In *Thoreau's Fable of Inscribing*, Frederick Garber points out the various inscribings that Thoreau does to mark out a means of being at home in the world—showing that Thoreau "knows that home-making in the world may well be the central business of living, and that living and writing, in fact, the whole business of inscribing, may be not only cooperative/corroborative acts but perhaps even the same act, when viewed from the proper perspective."[12] Under "inscribing" Garber includes diverse acts of autography—digging cellars, marking logs, plowing. We might add the traces, perhaps in

[12] Garber, *Thoreau's Fable of Inscribing*, 5.

his memory, that Thoreau leaves as his eyes follow the flight of the bird. In both the example of the field and the reference to birds, then, nature is present for Thoreau in the body and the mind of man as an undulating line between the realms of the horizontal and the vertical.

Similar to this example, Thoreau considers the amount of immediacy in experience and life that one must give up in order to attain the advantages of housing which presumes inevitable, infinite, progress. The loss of this immediacy, says Thoreau, means that the acquisition turns out not to be a wise one. And more often than not, such acquisition is not even an attainable goal: "I think that I speak within bounds when I say that, though the birds of the air have their nests, and the foxes their holes, and the savages their wigwams, in modern civilised society not more than one half the families own a shelter" (73). The model in nature serves as a critique of many aspects of their building tradition: neither the homeless nor the rich whose homes fail to rise above pretension can be said to inhabit a protected stay against the contingencies of their existences.

Searching for some way in which his own dwelling can have a greater significance, Thoreau finds that the essential quality of his shelter is not to be found in the sheer expense of his house or its imposing grandeur. As argued in the previous chapter, the reason for Thoreau's celebration of his shelter is how it releases him to experience the world and make sense of that experience. Often he writes in ways that invert one's understanding of the relationships involved in order to challenge the conventions that he feels are binding him. Thoreau writes, for instance: "The Harivansa says, 'An abode without birds is like a meat without seasoning.' Such was not my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but by having caged myself near them" (129). The image is doubly challenging since Thoreau offers that he has caged himself near their nests, their homes. Implicitly he acknowledges that his own condition and the condition that humanity places on the world around him is different from the relation that the birds themselves have with their world. But the cage he talks about is merely the boundary from which his surroundings begin to unfold and as such moderates the degree to which his shelter is constricting. His shelter becomes, rather, a means of freedom since, in his decision to build, Thoreau frees himself to write.

Thoreau intends to craft for himself something which, unlike the houses on his contemporaries, better retains his "vital heat."[13] "It would be worth while to build more deliberately than I did" (88). Thoreau says and then finds the model he is looking for: "Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature" (141). Let us, metaphorically, build as the birds build, he says:

> There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands...the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when so engaged (88)?

The understanding of nature in place here and the one to which Thoreau turns in his reference to birds is an understanding of nature as something both poetic and deliberate. He is speaking about both birds and men building deliberately. Thoreau's hope is that, on the part of people, the result of this deliberate—or, as the word suggests, thoughtful—activity results in a poetic artifact or product. Thoreau might have gone even further to say that not only should people build with their hands but they should build with their hearts, as birds use their breasts to push against the insides of their constructions and thus smooth out a home for themselves.[14] We would readily admit that birds sing beautifully but would find it hard to say that birds have a poetic faculty, strictly speaking. In this instance, we should note, the realm of birds is defined in contrast to the realm of humanity: Thoreau defines the

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[13] Elspeth Riley writes: "Thoreau's exploration of heat does not just advocate a movement "back to basics," as we might suspect from the Emersonian nature of his project, but examines what might constitute basics. His answer addresses the physical basis of necessity, then turns that basis into a reading problem....[T]he literal meaning of Thoreau's "natural facts" is a means to allegorical ends. Through analogy, we can deduce that the fire that warms...is the vital heat that enables the individual to survive. Allegory shifts Thoreau's focus from natural to moral philosophy. At a first level of abstraction, the fire is a metaphor for the irreducaible physical heat required for survival; at one remove from the literal level, it is a metaphor for the action of spirit within us, action that is necessary to keep us alive spiritually....'Vital heat,' then, serves equally well to imply Thoreau's rhetorical principle, a combustable language that ignites progressively expaning levels of meaning." Elspeth Riley, *Song of the Earth: Pastoral's Search for the Sensory World* (Ph.D. Diss, University of Californa at Irvine, 1997): 205.

[14] Bachelard quotes this image from Jules Michelet's *L'oiseau*, 4th ed., 1858. The qualities of the felt-like material which results from the marriage of moss and down, says Bachelard in praise of Michelet's image, is memorable in itself. Thoreau would have agreed with Bachelard's reading of this image on the human level: "the home is modeled by fine touches, which make a surface originally bristling and composite into one that is soft and smooth." The nest," says Bachelard, "is a swelling fruit, pushing outward against its limits," (*The Poetics of Space*, 102, 101). Thoreau expresses this sentiment in this way: "The finest qualities of our nature, like blooms on fruits, can be preserved only by the most delicate handling" (*Walden*, 48).

realm of nature more liberally than we might expect (as all metaphors do) because he challenges us to engage our own poetic faculties. In the same manner, perhaps an image might help explain: the theme of "winged life" in Walden occurs within the question of Thoreau's own existence and his means to expression; the quill, reminiscent of the tool through which Thoreau's expression takes place, couples as a reference to the life he hopes to attain as well as a reference to the realm of nature around him in which he hopes to place himself.

Through his authorship, Thoreau communicates that the model which nature offers can only be taken up metaphorically. The issue for Thoreau was not to construct human habitation that formally resembled the nests of birds. Neither was it to reproduce human shelters with the technical efficiency and instinctive mechanics through which birds achieve their nests. Rather, the role of building, for Thoreau, was to express the imagination; his point is not that we should imitate nature, per se, but that, as he took up nature, we must find poetic conversations which guide our expression. If others built differently but according to their own expression, then they built in the same spirit as Thoreau: "[Others] perchance build more magnificently and spend more lavishly than the richest, without ever impoverishing themselves (58)"—without impoverishing their imaginative capacities, we might add.

But how then did Thoreau's description of his building differ from the pattern book understanding that Andrew Jackson Downing proposed which likewise had to be suited to the individual tastes and conditions of the owner or inhabitant? What benefit did Thoreau see in requiring unskilled people to construct their own means of survival; what possibility does it offer for the development of a high form of human creativity which accepts the tradition that it is handed down? Must all Americans start over, modelling their own individual lives on the idea of a linear progression from material and poetic *naïveté* to sophistication in these areas? Can there be no inheritance of skill? We have seen that this "construction" is read on a larger scale, the possibility of which is one of the virtues of Thoreau's writing about his shelter—a possibility one would imagine was much more difficult with Downing's "Anglo-Italian Villa" or a "Cottage Villa in the Rural Gothic

Style."[15] Thoreau looked to the seasons and the metaphor of birds' nests rather than to pattern books and got as far as writing in his search for a means of dwelling.

Thoreau's writing points to many issues beyond that of the image of the bird's nest. But let us make a few final distinctions concerning this example: one critical difference between the realm of birds and humanity is that the bird makes its own nest instinctively and does not need instruction. Though some people appear to have instinctive skill and to a degree probably do, the question of human value and exchange is far more ambiguous and problematic than it is for the birds. To give Thoreau his due, he does pose the question hypothetically: "Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands...the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when so engaged?" And at times Thoreau shows that he is trying to overcome the dialectic of assertion and counter-assertion that characterises so much of his writing; through the poetic images in his prose he shows that he is trying to offer conceptions that are poetic, life-changing, and enduring. In the example above, he appears to be caught between these two and is therefore often read either as an architectural theorist or as a poet on the verge of—but not yet having faith in—his own expression. These indeed are the tensions which characterise Thoreau's conversation; these tensions themselves point to a level of reflection beyond the instinctive lives of birds to and point to a philosophical consideration of how to make oneself at home in the world.

Thoreau sees the alternative to this drive for a means of communicating as a threatening one: to lead lives that are not made beautiful through poetic insight, to lack music. He speaks about this threat in terms that we are by now familiar with: "We do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built, and cheer no traveller with their chattering and unmusical notes" (89). Thoreau does not let the traditions of society define for him what his life might be but neither does he follow blindly a pattern he may observe in nature. His experiences must be crafted to fit into the work of art that he, as an artist, is constructing. Also, the distinction that Thoreau is willing to draw between kinds of birds shows that, for his metaphor of building nests, the boundary between humanity and the realm of birds is more accurately placed between modes of

[15] Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*: 291, 296.

engagement with the world (the poetic versus the merely pragmatic) than between physiological categories.

In contrast to the style of ornamentation common to the village, Thoreau conveys an understanding of his house as an entity with greater existential weight. Of ornamentation Thoreau writes: "A great proportion of architectural ornaments are literally hollow, and a September gale would strip them off, like borrowed plumes, without any injury to the substantials" (90). The plumes or feathers of birds are what, we well know, enable them to fly. The architectural ornaments of his contemporaries, by contrast, are to Thoreau like borrowed plumes that themselves are driven by the winds of fashion, business, and a meaningless publicness. They do not touch the substantials of life, he says. The feathers belonging to the bird endow it with the gift of flight; the magic of that phenomenon is something to which no one is immune—the aesthetic pleasure of the ornamentation which was being offered, Thoreau laments, is sadly lacking by comparison.

Thoreau might have taken note that, like Icarus, his contemporaries were trying to fly, that the intention for meaningful ornamentation was genuine but misguided. Thoreau does open the conversation a little, however, by reference to music; contrary to the "borrowed plumes," he adorns his shelter with literary ornamentation. Describing his house in the morning light Thoreau says:

> To my imagination it retained throughout the day more or less of this auroral character, reminding me of a certain house on a mountain which I had visited the year before. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains, bearing the broken strains, or celestial parts only, of terrestrial music. The morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation in uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it. Olympus is but the outside of the earth every where (129).

The ornamentation of Thoreau's shelter is not like the imitated flight of his neighbours but is instead the wind itself—garments of the gods, as Thoreau's sees it, the terrestrial parts of celestial music, the poem of creation. It is with the same medium on which the birds stretch and soar that Thoreau clothes his own shelter and, on account of this effort, is inspired. The quality through which Thoreau's cabin is opened up to the possibility of being touched by the gods was its simplicity—its airy lightness—or its lack of

pretension. It is unplastered, not overprotective, receptive and, as Thoreau will later say about his own life, "undefined in front" (373). By forgetting the fashion of the day, Thoreau makes himself available to the pattern of ages—Walden is Eden and Olympus, Thoreau, like Adam naming the animals or like Zeus distributing gifts, is empowered to create.

Thoreau's examples from nature are used to suggest a comparison. His building also speaks. The direct correspondence through which he might consider his own house like the nest of a bird is missing; otherwise he would not need to make use so often of the challenging comparison. Though Thoreau studies to understand the realm of myth and an ancient way of understanding, nature can no longer be for him the foundation for innocent myth. What replaces this possibility is his crafted description of the connection between these realms; through this connection, Thoreau is able to speak to those around him about the world they shared.

Giving Voice to the Air

In *Walden,* Thoreau's references to the sounds birds show that the vision he tried to create needed ritual repetition, that it needed to be tended to, re-imagined, sung. Like music or an epic, this vision existed while it was "played" or "spoken." As writing, it is available to the creative reader: the words can influence our breathing as we form the words in our minds; they can elicit us to respond, breathing according to the rhythm of the words we use to answer—writer and reader either becoming attuned to each other or wrestling and becoming exhausted.[16] The songs of birds convey to Thoreau a greater sensitivity towards light, towards the variability of time, and towards an idea of the significance of these in his daily affairs: the project in *Walden* allows Thoreau to catch his breath.

The confrontation between the lives and goals of his contemporaries and the life he endeavours to create for himself is perhaps best shown in considering the sounds of birds. In one instance, Thoreau contrasts the realm of birds to that of machinery and, in doing so, describes an aspect of his cultural and technological surroundings. This comparison is part of an investigation of what nature means in relation to the reality of the changing world

[16] See Bachelard, "Silent Speech," in *Air and Dreams* (Dallas: Dallas Institute for the Humanities and Culture, 1988): 239-246.

around him. He begins with a more typical reference to birds and offers the image of them "giving voice to the air" (much as he himself might be said to be doing in his writing and crafting of an idea of nature). But the chapter from which the quote is taken deals to a great extent with the sound of the train that runs past Walden Pond; Thoreau's comparison of the train to the natural rhythm of the partridge seems surprising:

> As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivity of wild pigeons, flying by twos and threes athwart my view, or perching restless on the white-pine boughs behind my house, gives a voice to the air, a fishhawk dimples the glassy surface of the pond and brings up a fish...; the sedge is bending under the weight of the reed-birds flitting hither and thither and for the last half hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge (159).

It seems as though the sounds of nature have become the terms against which Thoreau's dealings with technology and society are measured. Is this consistent with the view and understanding of nature that is offered in Thoreau's other references to the natural world and specifically to birds?

In each of Thoreau's references he presents a poetic vision of the songs of birds: they give voice to the air. Similarly, as an artist, he takes his experiences and authenticates them by sending them back into the world according to his own vision and interpretation, voicing his artistic vision. This vision is, in origin, not unlike the technological realm Thoreau makes reference to which also defines the world. Thoreau's vision, however, unlike the train, uses the world around him but does not exhaust it. It is this startling contrast which perhaps suggests a reading of the "rattle" of the railroad cars as one coincident with that of a snake—an opening of the eyes after which a mythic redemption must be sought.

More directly, however, when Thoreau appropriates the train's sound and speaks of it in terms of the natural habits of the partridge it suggests that this relationship of appropriation works in both directions. Just as he defines nature, so too nature responds with its own requirements for the continuation and fulfillment of life. Thoreau brings something to nature—his education, his agenda, his artistic struggle for expression—and, like us all, receives from it in the form of a framework and imperatives for existence and for

meaning. The metaphor is open to influence from both sides.

I have already quoted Leo Marx's understanding of this scene. He adds: "Few passages in *Walden* are more transparently contrived or artful; it is as if the subject had compelled Thoreau to admit a debt to Art as great, if not greater, than his debt to Nature."[17] Marx takes Thoreau's recourse to a very contrived language when dealing with the conflict between these two realms as a sign of Thoreau's doubt (though Emerson had not doubted it) that answers to the quest for meaning could be extracted directly from the natural world. My only qualification of Marx's interpretation is that, while the confrontation with technology as it appears in the phenomenon of the train leads Thoreau into some of the most artful discussions in the book, the metaphor, as I have indicated, does in fact read both ways. Thoreau shows nature adapting itself to technology just as Marx sees Thoreau to be manipulating the realm of nature to fit the convention of pastoral writing. Thoreau ends his long consideration with an image in a few contrived rhymes:

> What's the railroad to me?
> I never go to see
> Where it ends.
> It fills a few hollows,
> and makes banks for the swallows,
> It sets the sand a-blowing,
> And the blackberries a-growing, (168)

Thoreau tells us that after the train had gone by he heard the whip-poor-wills "sitting on a stump by my door, or upon the ridge pole of the house" sing (169). After comparing the train to the rising of the sun and to the celestial order of the planets, he tells us that the birds sang "almost with as much regularity of a clock, within five minutes of a particular time, referred to the setting of the sun, every evening" (169). As he mentioned earlier, from the Harisanva, his abode was near to the birds and he "had a rare opportunity to become acquainted with their habits....They sang at intervals throughout the night, and were again as musical as ever just before and about dawn" (169). The birds give voice to the air and flavour the element we breath with their songs, Thoreau states; they give

[17] Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, 253.

structure to the day, indicate the time for sleep and for waking, and enrich the landscape in which our lives take place. Nature is a thickened reality thanks to the regularity of the songs of the whip-poor-wills. And thanks, we might add, to the writing of one who was willing to breathe in their songs. The name whip-poor-will is itself indicative. While onomatopoetic, what we try to imitate the sound with are words, already meaningful in human dialogue.

The Pond and woods that provided the back-drop for Thoreau's reflection had been logged—some of it for railroad ties. From the time before his stay there and continuing after it much more resembled a fallen Eden than the Paradise Thoreau imagines for us. Again with reference to the birds, Thoreau lamented the destruction he witnessed of the place that had contributed so much to his vision of the natural world: "My Muse may be excused if she is silent henceforth. How can you expect the birds to sing when their groves are cut down" (239)? Just as the shelter had provided the artifact through which Thoreau began to see the world in a different way—the tool through which a work of art could be created—the birds of Walden Pond and the context in which they lived provided Thoreau with a means of imagining a world his contemporaries had almost forgotten.[18]

The birds were also indicators of spring. In Thoreau's vision of nature this phenomenon, the organising effect of the seasons, provided a solidity and coherence to the human experience of existence: "The first sparrow of spring! The year beginning with younger hope than ever! The faint silvery warblings heard over the partially bare and moist fields from the blue-bird, the song-sparrow, and the red-wing, as if the last flakes of winter tinkled as they fell" (358). The birds in this instance end the hardship of the "unspeakable cold," writes Thoreau: "I hear a song-sparrow singing from the bushes on the shore,—*olit, olit, olit,—chip, chip, chip, che char,—chewiss, wiss, wiss.* He too is helping to crack [the ice]" (359). The tale about spring that Thoreau creates takes on the form of his own renewal; it becomes a reminder of regeneration, the need for repetition of the creative act. His vision of nature was similarly a mark of his own literary craftsmanship:

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[18] Ivan Illich calls attention to the loss of such a elemental knowledge and the effect it has on our conception of how we relate to the world: "H_2O and water have become opposites: H_2O is a social creation of modern times, a resource that is scarce and that calls for technical management....The city child had no opportunity to come in touch with living water," *H_2O and the Waters of Forgetfulness: Reflections on the*

> I heard a robin in the distance, the first that I had heard in many a thousand years, methought, whose note I shall not forget for many a thousand more,—the same sweet and powerful song as of yore. O the evening robin, at the end of a New England summer day! If I could ever find the twig he sits upon! I mean *he*; I mean *the twig*. This at least is not the *Turdus migratorius* (360).

The bird Thoreau listened to was not the same one that the ornithologists perceived. The song of the robin was more celestial than the ornithologist's categories would allow. Thoreau wonders whether it would be possible to situate himself in the same way that the evening robin had been situated and whether his own song, his writing, could be as eloquent as the song of the bird. These sentiments echo an earlier inquiry of Thoreau's in which he wondered whether or not a person, in constructing his or her own house, would have the poetic quality drawn out of him or her. If I could be like the robin, exclaims Thoreau, or if I could find a place to write as inspiring as the twig is to that bird, my artistic vision would be as beautiful to the world as the song of a bird was to my ears. That this is a wish or an ideal shows that Thoreau understands how it cannot be so and that his conception of nature is a work of art, more mortal than the instinctive song of a bird.

Planting his crop of beans the first year gave Thoreau his own way of thinking about the usefulness of birds. People who rode by in their wagons shouted advice to Thoreau to put something in the furrow along with the seed to nourish it: "chip dirt, or any little waste stuff, or it may be ashes or plaster" (203). Thoreau, however, tried to be more attentive to the possibilities than this advice would allow. He crafts a conception of nature as something other than a technical problem; his attention instead was with the brown-thrasher that sat on the branch of a nearby tree and sang a song which Thoreau interpreted as a ruse on the part of the bird to steal the seed. "You may wonder," Thoreau concludes, feeling his bean seeds safe from the hunger of the brown-thrasher, "what his rigmarole, his amateur Paganini performances on one string or twenty, have to do with your planting, and yet prefer it to leached ashes or plaster. It was a cheap sort of top dressing in which I had entire faith" (203). Rather than bury the beans with manure, which would have translated into more beans for sale at the market at some future time, Thoreau planted the beans together with the song of the brown-thrasher. He thus immediately harvested something he found

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Historicity of 'Stuff' (Dallas: Dallas Institute for the Humanities and Culture, 1985): 76.

even more nourishing and satisfying: his own poetic understanding of the natural world. Such reflections, we remember, are exaggerated in order to provoke his neighbours to thought. But they are also genuine in that, by creating an imagined world in which seeds are nourished by the songs of birds, an understanding of the natural world different from that of his contemporaries could be conceived.

Thoreau offers his own creative definition of nature and its potential. His wondering is genuine, though, a thought experiment in which he suggests—without knowing himself what the truth of it might be—an alternative approach to the materialist pragmatism of Benjamin Franklin. Through his writing he made use of his observations in nature to suggest lives that were as beautiful and therefore as purposeful as the songs of birds. The song of a robin is a rhythmic stillness in our lives. The things we make, our writings, our buildings, have this measure to compare with. The song, in order to meaningful, must be sung. Its existence requires our breath—a form of intimacy with our own existence.

Thoreau's understanding of the world around him and his attempt to speak the truths he finds there are treated in three images of birds especially: Chanticleer, the rooster; the laughing cry of the loon, and the enigmatic owl. In each of these we consider the worth of the imagination to Thoreau's references to nature; that the individual vision he constructs allows the reader to participate. The potential for the poetic image to engage us in seeing the richness of the world around us and the abundance of meaning is what these images bring to the question of environmental ethics and our desire to reconnect, as moderns, to the world around us.

Chanticleer's Call: "Awake!"

Like many mythological references, Thoreau's references to birds speaks to a dual condition of humanity. The cockerel, for instance, is a winged but flightless bird; for Socrates, it made an appropriate sacrifice to the god of healing in the moments before his death: "Crito, we ought to offer a cock to Asclepius. See to it and don't forget."[19] The blood of this flightless bird flows into the river he crosses to enter the Elysian Fields of

[19] Plato, "Phaedo," translated by Hugh Tredennick, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns eds. (New York, Bollingen Foundation, 1961): 98.

eternal contemplation. Thoreau's references to this aspect thus speaks of the borders between domesticity and wilderness as well as that between night and day.

But how does one construct, or imagine such a vision, especially in the modern world, when the Elysian Fields are replaced, in Thoreau's day, by the domesticated fields of *animal laborans*, Hannah Arendt's term for man separated from his potential, through his work, to create meaning in the world?[20] What about today, as we still seek to tame the memories of the Killing Fields or harvest within the confines of our politically contested earth? For Thoreau, as Stansberry writes,

> imagery of the wilderness is the product of the interaction of his imagination with the wild things about him....Hence, Thoreau emphasises the interaction of the human mind with the natural events about him, even while continuing to celebrate the concept of wilderness as an ideal. The problem for him as a literary artist [or any "author"] then becomes how to communicate that interaction to the reader.[21]

In her explanation, Stansberry relies on the emotion that images evoke. As a means of communication more dynamic than "statement," she sees the poetic image as a means of creating an understanding of the world. Bachelard relies on the unconscious and the bounty of the dream image—absolutely clear, but not reducible to rationality. The hermeneutic wager is that as we become educated in our imaginative encounter with the topic at hand we see our own prejudices through the text of another author—there results a "fusion of horizons," a recognition of the constancy of the questions we address, though in different terms, across the earth.[22] Not that we might always agree, but that the possibility exists for understanding each other—the stranger beyond our horizon who we might one day encounter, the past buried underneath us, waiting to be brought into the light of the living present.[23]

With the following brief description of his project, Thoreau introduces what he saw as part of his task in writing the book: "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as Chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my

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[20] See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1958): 135.
[21] Gloria J Stansberry, *Let Wild Birds Sing: A Study of the Bird Imagery in the Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Ph.D. Diss., Kent State University, 1973): 211.
[22] See Paul Ricouer, "Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology," in *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, John B. Thompson ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981): 75.
[23] See Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, 204-214.

neighbours up" (45).[24] The freedom to which his neighbours needed to be awakened was one from slavery to economic abstraction. He sought to awaken them from the dreamless sleep of their daily labours to a life of leisurely discovery of the world around them and to receive the world awakening around them. A wedge had been created between the possibilities for their lives and the lives that many of them chose to lead. Thoreau first noticed this possibility and spoke about it in terms of what reading could offer them. The original call was to a simplified life as a means to devote oneself to the higher part of oneself. For Thoreau, this higher part was the imagination, and it was stimulated through reading literature and through maintaining the highest level of engagement in one's everyday activities.

The call to attention from the realm of nature was a theme to which Thoreau returned often. Chanticleer, "standing on his roost, if only to wake his neighbours up," began the new day and assured Thoreau that the dialogue with the natural world is one of the pervasive certainties in human experience (45). The regularity of Chanticleer's lusty boast was the first of Thoreau's references to birds and the first vision of what it was he saw in nature as a pattern after which to model his own existence. The reference to Chanticleer on the first page of the book begins a long association that Thoreau makes between his task of inscribing and an existence that is awake to imaginative possibilities and to the border condition he occupied.

In the image of the rooster, Thoreau found a dual condition of domesticity and wildness. We occupy this border condition, Thoreau suggested, and our lives can lead in either direction—towards the domestic and desperate or towards the wild and free. Thoreau's discussion of this bird illustrates that the vision of nature he created was one in which it was necessary to anticipate newness and awakening or, like Orpheus, to call forward a new day.

Thoreau argued for the value of wakefulness in this passage but at the same time dissociated his idea of what it means to be awake from the domesticated version he observed in the villagers. He begins the paragraph with a musing on the value of keeping a

[24] Chanticleer is a character from *The Canterbury Tales* (published 1526) *by* Geoffrey Chaucer's (~1340-1400). See note 25 below.

rooster about his shelter: "I thought that it might be worth the while to keep a cockerel for his music merely, as a singing bird" (172). Certainly the rooster's song is strange choice of music unless beauty is equated with absolute wakefulness. Concerning the sound of the rooster's call he says that it "is certainly the most remarkable of any bird's, and if they could be naturalised without being domesticated, it would soon become the most famous sound in our woods" (172). Later, he adds: "I kept neither dog, cat, cow, pig, nor hens, so that you would have said that there was a deficiency of domestic sounds" (173). These domestic sounds include the ones which typically define the lives of the domesticated villagers: "the hissing of the urn, children crying." What Thoreau has instead are:

> only squirrels on the roof and under the floor, a whippoorwill on the ridge pole, a blue-jay screaming beneath my window, a hare or woodchuck under the house, a screech-owl or a cat-owl behind it, a flock of wild geese or a laughing loon on the pond and a fox to bark at night. Not even a lark or an oriole, those mild plantation birds, ever visited my clearing. No cockerels or crow nor hens to cackle in the yard (173).

What Thoreau has, he tells us, is "unfenced Nature." He did not need to keep a rooster— "I am not sure that I ever heard the sound of cock-crowing from my clearing;" and "its shrill sound never roused me from my slumbers." Stanley Cavell suggests a reading of this sentiment:

> How can this observer and experimenter and accounter be unsure whether he ever heard the sound of a rooster from his clearing? Perhaps because the sound is so familiar and frequent to his ear, and at once so faint and so unmistakable, and he is not sure it is a sound heard, i.e., that is comes from outside. But then you may find yourself conjecturing whether one is quite sure one hears, or knows, the sound of one's own voice; and at this point one enters into the theme of 'unconscious truthfulness'...of those 'strong and valiant natures, who will mind their own affairs...not knowing how they live'....Or perhaps the hallucinatory, or mythical, sound—which therefore again is not strictly heard—is the *clarity* of Chanticleer; and then one conjectures whether the 'clearing,' from which he is not sure he heard it, is a place in the woods or is instead an absorbing activity, as of the sky or water, abstracting him from distractions. At this point one enters a new region in which the activities he ascribes to himself are to be understood, e.g. losing, trailing, finding, mining, minding, building, sitting, standing, walking, settling, leaving.[25]

[25] Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 38.

Thoreau inscribes a place: trails, a shelter, a path of memory.[26] The ambiguity of inside and outside world, of the boundary between dream and reality, is explored in this passage. Thoreau is caught up in some absorbing activity—walking, building, writing—which constitutes a clearing in his consciousness. He hears the crowing of the cock, but that sound cannot be dissociated from the activities which provide it with context—his perception is his world. The sound of the cock crowing resonates with an imperative to awareness.

And yet Thoreau must also seek self-critical activity:

> With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense....I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes (180).

As these are the issues, no wonder this boundary matters to him: the rooster, championed at the beginning as the model after which Thoreau would address his contemporaries, is here used to satirise their domesticated lives: "No wonder that man added this bird to his tame stock,—to say nothing of the eggs and drumsticks" (172). Perhaps parodying the American "rags to riches" story, Thoreau celebrates, with mock heroic triumph, the power of the domestic rooster to drown out "the feebler notes of other birds" and to motivate one to "rise earlier and earlier every successive day of his life, till he became unspeakably healthy, wealthy, and wise" (172). Thoreau's reference to Chanticleer also places him within the domain of American legend: the backwoodsman, the gamecock of the wilderness, stood at the centre of American popular legend as the very image of the untamed. Thoreau sought to fashion himself using both this image and the image of the quick witted Yankee.[27] Not wealth but awareness is what Thoreau insisted on.

Given this wild wisdom, nature is the tool with which Thoreau "conspires":

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[26] See Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work*, 148.

[27] Constance Rourke, *American Humour: A Study of the National Character (New York: Doubleday Anchor*, 1953).

> How much more beautiful than our lives, how much more transparent than our characters, are [White Pond and Walden]....How much fairer than the pool before the farmer's door, in which his ducks swim! Hither the clean wild ducks come. Nature has no human inhabitant who appreciates her. The birds with their plumage and their notes are in harmony with the flowers, but what youth or maiden conspires with the wild luxuriant beauty of Nature (247)?

Unlike the wild ducks which are healthy and beautiful in the image of nature that Thoreau constructs, and unlike Chanticleer whose wild song wakes the domesticated, the chickens at John Field's house, where Thoreau had taken shelter from the rain, have lost all taste of wilderness and beauty. At John Field's house the chickens, "which had also taken shelter here from the rain, stalked about the room like members of the family, too humanized methought to roast well," says Thoreau (251). In this house, the relationship had become too direct and no room was left for metaphor.

The image of the ever optimistic rooster, crowing at every dawn, is one that provided Herman Melville with fodder for a parody of Transcendentalist optimism in his short story "Cock-a-Doodle-Doo! or The Crowing of Noble Cock Beneventano" of 1853. Melville's use of this image shows that the associations Thoreau made were common among literary people at that time. Both knew, for instance, of Chaucer's use of this image in *The Canterbury Tales*. Thoreau appropriates that image in a positive way, as Stansberry writes: "In this instance the brag of Thoreau's rooster is not that of the haughty chicken of Chaucer's tale; rather his brag suggests the declarations made by Anglo-Saxon heroes of their powers of vitality and their capacity to triumph over dark forces."[28] Thoreau's appropriation of the positive side of this image to "brag as lustily as Chanticleer in the morning" raises Melville's critique: "In the 1850's Melville was made gloomy by news of many disasters and political upheavals. So it is possible that Melville is satirizing overly optimistic proponents of transcendentalism by depicting a foolishly noisy barnyard fowl."[29] Thoreau's *Walden* predates Melville's story by a year but the similarities are uncanny. The vision of nature that Thoreau created was contested by Melville whose story—in which the rooster, and the family that places absolute faith in

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[28] Stansberry, *Let Wind Birds Sing*, 173.

[29] Robert Gale, "Cock-a-Doodle-Doo! or The Crowing of the Noble Cock Beneventano." *A Herman Melville Encyclopedia* (Westport CT, Greenwood Press, 1995): 85.

its call, suddenly die—points out some of the limitations or inherent dangers of the individual mythology.

The Loon

Thoreau did effect a kind of self-critique in his understanding of nature. He is touched by another kind of inspiration: the laughter of the loon. The "otherness" of the world around him is dramatised in *Walden* in a game of tag that he played with a loon at Walden. While Thoreau rowed in the direction of the loon's taunting call, the bird disappeared under the water. Sometimes it reappeared on the other side of him and the subsequent resounding call sounded to Thoreau much like a laugh. Unlike the hunters who came to silence the sound of the loon, Thoreau allowed it to resound and finds himself gently mocked.

In the example above Thoreau shows that, though his book is about the natural world, about his experience of living at Walden woods, it is as much about the challenge of authorship. His observations of nature, then, were tainted by his requirement that these observations be crafted into a piece of writing. They were influenced as much by his literary ambitions as they were by what we might think of as his scientific precision. Thoreau did not loose his place as a subject in his observations of nature and his book must be taken not as a scientific treatise, but as an individual's search for expression.

Thoreau found in the call of the loon a sound more wild than any other in the woods. It was a haunting and mysterious call, as resolute as the howls dogs make, something beyond the playful diving game of hide and seek which the loon participates in with Thoreau. The loon stands as an example of how Thoreau saw in nature a wildness suited to his educated eye and his literary aesthetic. Twice Thoreau calls the call of the loon "unearthly" (283). The loon called "as if calling on the god of the loons to aid him," says Thoreau (283). He was impressed with the immediate rise of the wind and filling of the air with mist that he thought it was "as if it were the prayer of the loon answered, and his god was angry with me" (283).

Charles R. Anderson has pointed out the resonance of Thoreau's crafted account of the loon with a mythological one:

> In the centuries before *Walden* [the loon] was the center of a whole cluster of myths. To the Algonguin Indians...the loon was the messenger of their culture-hero Kuloscap, 'The Master'; it was he who gave them their human-sounding cry so they could pray to him when they needed help....In [other Native] loon mythology, [a modern commentator adds] they are sometimes thought to escort the dead to the spirit world, conceived as lying beneath the water.[30]

This depth was important enough for Thoreau to play with the image; he celebrated the loon, also known as the great northern diver, for its knowledge of the "not unreasonable, though...unusual" depth of Walden Pond (335). Another commentator adds: "The loon is depicted as a teasing but friendly adversary, but Thoreau also describes its typical sound as "demonic laughter," thereby suggesting a darker side to the animal's significance. Because the loon is able to dive to the deepest part of the pond, where humans cannot venture, it represents nature's dark, unknowable secrets, which may or may not be benign."[31]

The loon's unpredictability, its otherness, is what permits us to understand this scene as a dance. "Without difference, without otherness, there can be no dance," says Daniel Peck about this scene; the encounter with this unpredictable neighbour enabled Thoreau to perceive the wildness in himself. The dance was an inscription on the surface of the pond set to the rhythm of an animal's breath, summoning up an musical accompaniment of wind and thunder; in Thoreau's imagination, the pond was a drum, beaten from the inside by the movements of a bird, awakening the spirits of rain. This creature occupies the depths out of which mythical spirits emerge and which is necessary for metaphorical flight.[32]

Gaston Bachelard points out that upward is the normal direction of the imagination: as I sink, I get heavier, the world presses more forcefully upon me, my lungs collapse. Upward is the direction we imagine, downward—the fall, separation, our fear of being unprotected—is the direction we know.[33] But the depths we reach influence the heights we attain; our willingness to stand over the abyss and overcome our vertigo enables us to rule

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[30] Charles R. Anderson, *The Magic Circle of Walden* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968): 196.
[31] Richard J. Scheider, "Walden," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, (101).
[32] Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work*, 122.
[33] Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 92. Following references in this paragraph are from Bachelard's chapter in the same book on Nietzsche's "Ascesional Psyche": 120-160.

the sky. Thoreau encountered the terrifying potential and fundamentally inhospitable nature of the wild at Mt. Ktaadn, on a week-long walking trip he took during the years he lived at Walden Pond.[34] Momentarily, on Mt. Ktaadn, Thoreau did see the kind of abyss that, for instance, philosopher Frederich Nietzsche imagined—the heights from which Nietzsche's character Zarathustra spoke.[35] The experience reveals an adventure narrative far from the pastoral of *Walden*; perceiving an overwhelming otherness on Mt. Ktaadn, Thoreau writes:

> It was a vast, Titanic nature, such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends....Vast, Titanic, inhuman nature Nature has got him at a disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly Why came ye here before your time. This ground is not prepared for you.[36]

For Zarathustra, the herd of men was the ground unprepared for his message of the joyful dance through existence—the cold, silent, mountain air was where he was at home.[37] The inversion of these conditions speak to the differences between the worlds they experienced. Reading Thoreau, we enable ourselves to imagine conditions in which our alienation was not so radical, when the laughing of a loon and not the air raid siren was enough to remind us of a world just outside our grasp, where the dove was a symbol and not an opportunity.

But Thoreau maintained a trust that the authorial act, the work of art, carries the potential to reveal meaning in the world. Daniel Peck writes: "[I]t is in the nature of *Walden*, as a pastoral, largely to diminish [the threat of industrial and technological

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[34] Thoreau published "Ktaadn and the Maine Woods," in *The Union Magazine*, in November 1848. It was edited and published with other essays as *The Maine Woods* after his death by his friend, the poet William Ellery Channing, in 1864.

[35] This reference to the work of Frederick Nietzsche does not seek to explain a great deal of the work of that philosopher. Rather, by contrasting the use of this image, I attempt to illustrate the added difficulty we encounter in our search for inscribing ourselves on the earth, now littered with images. See *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978). Also, John Sallis deals with some of these issues in his commentary on Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of *Geist* in Heidegger, called *On Spirit*. See "Flight of Spirit," "Mimesis and the End of Art," and "The Place of Wonder" in *Double Truth* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993). These are tangents for future study.

[36] Thoreau, "Ktaadn," *The Works of Thoreau*, Henry Canby, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company): 520.

[37] Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 139.

forces], or, rather, to overcome [them] through the power of rhetoric." (132). As Richard Kearney writes, our alienation and our profound separation from the world around us in not unconquerable as long as there is the possibility to imagine how the world could be different.[38]

The Owl

Thoreau makes use of the owls in his construction of a vision of nature; they too provided him with an understanding, an echo, of nature at his ideal house and of the nest as a model for building. "They gave me" Thoreau says, "a new sense of the variety and capacity of that nature which is our common dwelling" (170). In one particular passage, Thoreau recounts the sounds which the owls make and compares them to themes familiar within literature. The effort Thoreau made to bring attention to his own craft is conspicuous:

> When the other birds are still the screech owls take up the strain, like mourning women their ancient u-lu-lu. Their dismal scream is truly Ben Jonsonian. Wise midnight hags! It is not honest and blunt tu-whit tu-who of the poets, but, without jesting, a most solemn graveyard ditty, the mutual consolations of suicide lover remembering the pangs and the delights of supernal love in the infernal grove....Yet I love to hear their wailing...; as if it were the dark and tearful side of music, the regrets and sighs that would fain be sung....*Oh-o-o-o-o that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!* sighs one on this side of the pond, and circles with the restlessness of despair to some new perch on the grey oaks. Then—that I had never been *bo-r-r-r-n*! echoes another on the farther side with tremendous sincerity, and—*bo-r-r-r-n!* comes faintly from far in the Lincoln woods (170).

Of course, Thoreau, on this side of the pond, sighed words into the owls' mouths, and let their communications be read in a mysterious light. This is the difficult boundary which Thoreau's writing takes us to: nature is an other "in a strain made...melodious by distance" (171) says Thoreau; of the serenading of the hooting owls, he adds "I find myself beginning with the letters gl when I try to imitate it" (170). His own authorship is fully evident; he spells out the loneliness of the owl, taking comfort in the echoes resounding throughout nature. His writing, we must add, could only resonate because he was "attuned" to the world around him—attempting different strategies, attending the silence before the echo resounds.

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[38] Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1988): 392.

Unlike the songs of birds which give voice to the air, the owls "do the idiotic and maniacal hooting for men" (171). "It is a sound," Thoreau says, speaking of the owl's cries, "admirably suited to swamps and twilight woods which no day illustrates, suggesting a vast and undeveloped nature which men have not recognized" (171). In this instance Thoreau defines nature through personification. By thinking of it in human terms, the natural world became something resistant to exploitation and the drive to package for sale in industry.

Nature is in this instance not only the bright cheerfulness of the birds and the wakening call of Chanticleer; it is the necessary complement to these in Thoreau's effort to craft his own conception of the natural world:

> All day the sun has shone on the surface of some savage swamp, where the single spruce stands hung with usnea lichens, and small hawks circulate above, and the chickadee lisps amid the evergreens, and the partridge and rabbit skulk beneath; but now a more dismal and fitting day dawns, and a different race of creatures awakes to express the meaning of Nature there (171).

Nature is as dark and brooding as it is clear and bright, Thoreau seems to say. An echo reflects back to us our calls and invitations, it is the reverse side of something, its double. In it we hear our own voices, reflected off the woods or the walls of a city. An echo taunts us, calling us forward, a mirage of sound. Seeking friendship, we may instead find ourselves lost:

> One very dark night I directed...on their way two young men who had been fishing in the pond. The lived about a mile off through the woods, and were quite used to the route. A day or two after one of them told me that they wandered about the greater part of the night, close by their own premises, and did not get home till toward morning....It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time....By night, of course, the perplexity is infinitely greater....not till we are completely lost,—for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut to be lost,—do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature (217).

In this more mysterious landscape, our senses are sometimes unable to deal with unfamiliarity. Where we are at home, others are not; discussing the former inhabitants and visitors to his house, Thoreau included a discussion of barrel owl that he encounters:

> He could hear me when I moved and cronched the snow with my feet, but could plainly not see me....I too felt a slumberous influence after watching him half an hour, as he sat thus with his eyes half open, like a cat, winged brother of the cat.

> There was a narrow slit left between their lids, by which he preserved a peninsular relation to me; thus, with half-shut eyes, looking out from the land of dreams, and endeavoring to realize me, vague object or mote that interrupted his visions. At length, on some louder noise or my closer approach, he would grow uneasy and sluggishly turn about on his perch, as if impatient at having his dreams disturbed; and when he launched himself off and flapped through the pines, spreading his wings to an unexpected breadth, I could not hear the slightest sound from them (313).

He and owl exchange sensitivities to sight and sound here; Thoreau at first alert and observing but then it is as if the spell had been reversed and Thoreau could plainly see but not hear the owl. Thoreau personified the owl and accrued to him the capacity for dreams, impatience, and a neighbourhood. More powerfully even, Thoreau saw in the owl what he would wish for in each of his neighbours—a dawning of consciousness and day. It is through such neighbouring with the birds that Thoreau felt he could model his home after theirs. The dreams of owls are real, he challenges us to think, the dreams of the villagers are illusory—nature cannot be reduced to quantitative description alone. Nature is for him the simple reality of a dawning day, the echo of the owl's call still resonating in his own consciousness.

It is primarily a regard of wonderment that Thoreau conveys when he relates the kinds of birds that he finds near his shelter. His retelling of what seemed to be an exchange between a migrating Canada goose and cat-owl Thoreau offers us one of "the most thrilling discords that he ever heard" (319). Thoreau writes:

> I was startled by the loud honking of a goose, and, stepping to the door, heard the sound of their wings like a tempest in the woods as they flew low over my house. They passed over the pond toward Fair Haven, seemingly deterred from settling by my light, their commodore honking all the while with a regular beat. Suddenly an unmistakable cat-owl from very near me, with most harsh and tremendous voice I ever heard from any inhabitant of the woods, responded at regular intervals to the goose, as if determined to expose and disgrace this intruder from Hudson's Bay by exhibiting a greater compass and volume of voice in a native, and *boo-hoo* him out of Concord Horizon (319).

"And yet," offers Thoreau, " if you had a discriminating ear, there were in it the elements of a concord such as these plains never saw nor heard" (319). Knowing Thoreau's own ear for the double meaning of words it is likely that he means to point out a contrast

between the concord of these elements of nature and what he saw as a lack of such melodiousness in the village of Concord. Thus it is a concord such as the villagers of Concord—the ones on these plains—never saw nor heard. Further to this distinction, he comments on an underlying resonance between things that seem at first to be discordant.

The voice of the cat-owl seemed to Thoreau the voice of a native, more suited to the area; and yet, between the two, there existed in his mind a sympathetic understanding if not a consonance of expression. Might we also hypothesise a similarlity between Thoreau's endeavour to find expression within the woods and the literary ambition to relate to the human community he *seems* to have isolated himself from? The echo he listens for reminds him of the sounds of his neighbours—while it seems to be a rejection, it is a consonance such as always require distance.[39]

Higher Laws

In his book on the phenomenon of flight and its significance in the human imagination, Gaston Bachelard warns against a too hasty identification of the freedom this image suggests: "Images of liberation present a problem if their different stages have not each been experienced. The same difficulty arises with truths imparted by...*a liberating aerial motion* to which someone has given his adherence too quickly."[40] The images encountered so far in Thoreau's *Walden* have dealt with their nests, their cries, their habits but only occasionally with the explicit metaphor of their flight. Indeed, thus far birds have built, sung, crowed, swam, and hooted but rarely have we dealt with the specific image of the flight of birds and its meaning in Thoreau's *Walden*. This image allows us to further consider the role of the imagination in building.

Dealing in "The Bean-field"[41] with the period of his stay at the pond in which he hoed beans, Thoreau suggests that we should plant such seeds amongst men as unmixed and heroic joy, as justice and truth—seeds, as it were, of virtue. However, he continues,

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[39] See Frank Fanuzzi, "Thoreau's Urban Imagination," in *American Literature* 68.2 (1996): 321-346.

[40] Bachelard, *Air and Dreams*, 8.

[41] Incidentally, followers of the philosopher Pythagoras were forbidden to eat beans. In their world, the relation between spirit and wind was treated religiously. The connection is not lost on Thoreau who writes that he planted beans "[n]ot that I wanted beans to eat, for I am by nature a Pythagorean, so far as beans are concerned" (207). The rest of sentence illustrates his interest, then, in raising beans: " some must work in fields if only or the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day" (207).

though we are times "Anteus like" and draw our strength from out of the ground, humans are closer to the flightless bird than to something rooted in the earth: "something more than erect, like swallows alighted and walking on the ground:—

> 'And as he spake, his wings would now and then
> Spread, as he meant to fly, then close again,'

so that we should suspect that we might be conversing with an angel" (210).[42] Previously Thoreau had quoted Plato's description of a man as a "biped without feathers" (194). In this example, flight takes place in the mind, the exhalation "as he spake" providing the means of transcendence. It is not as if he had failed to fly and then closed his wings. Rather, the flight had taken place, "conversing with an angel."

This aspect of his understanding of nature connects his own creative vision with the morality and understanding of reality which characterized his epoch. His own imaginative contribution is rooted in a context but, through his own life and effort, has correspondence with a higher realm. "How, then, can our harvest fail?" Thoreau says, completing his thoughts on the sympathies between his concerns and those of the birds, "Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds? It matters comparatively little whether the fields fill the farmer's barns" (212). What matters is his creative vision of nature and how it can speak to those around him.

As Thoreau hoes his beans the birds circled overhead. In particular, Thoreau is drawn to the "kindredship" in the world around him. Speaking about the nighthawks, Thoreau observes them

> falling down from time to time with a swoop and a sound as if the heavens were rent, torn at last to very rags and tatters,...graceful and slender like ripples caught up from the pond, as leaves are raised by the wind to float in the heavens....The hawk is ariel brother to the wave which he sails over and surveys, those his perfect air-inflated wings answering to the elemental unfledged pinions of the sea. Or sometimes I watched a pair of hen-hawks circling high in the sky, alternately soaring and descending, approaching and leaving one another, as if they were the [e]mbodiment of my own thoughts (204).

This illustrates one of the most important similes that Thoreau makes with the birds:

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[42] Thoreau quotes from Charles Quarles (1592-1644), *The Shepard's Oracles, Ecologue V.*

he sees in their potential for flight something of the creative potential in human beings. In fact, the heavens, *as if*, "torn at last to very rags and tatters" are if fact not that at all, or only momentarily so. Rather, the "soaring and leaving" effectually sews together the earth and sky, words acting as the thread he used to bind the various layers of nature together.

In the young of the brood that walked past his house Thoreau sees a transcendent meaning, something beyond the presentation of the young bird as a potential bearer of eggs or potential meat:

> The remarkable adult yet innocent expression of their open and serene eyes is very memorable. All intelligence seems reflected in them. They suggest not merely the purity of infancy, but a wisdom clarified by experience. Such an eye was not born when the bird was, but is coeval with the sky it reflects. The woods do not yield such another gem (274).

Thoreau is trying to redefine what the natural world is. The unwary or unfamiliar traveller, he says, is often not aware of the complexity in the woods and in nature: such a traveller would frequently shoot the mother and leave these others to "gradually mingle with the decaying leaves which they so much resemble" (276). This knowledge requires a kind of attentiveness: "You only need sit long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns" (275). This redefinition of nature—against how it was perceived and for a more acute perception—can be achieved, says Thoreau, through observing what is there; in *Walden*, this task was accomplished through the crafting of his house and the writing it enabled.

This transcendent meaning is revealed through seeing in a more general sense rather than the limiting stance of investigation. The world around him is allowed to present itself for what it is—many layered, complex, and mysterious. Transcendence, we know, means that something overarches individual things and rises above them. It is for this reason that Thoreau pays so much attention to the lives of the birds at his pond—they offer as appropriate a symbol as he could ask for of the way this world makes reference to a higher world. The birds offer a symbol of the freedom Thoreau finds to initiate a new cultural dialogue in response to the world he finds around him.

Through his writing Thoreau weaves together a conception of nature; as material for this endeavour he alludes to and appropriates images at hand, Christian, Greek, and Native

American. In Thoreau's vision, the natural world maintains some qualities of the everlasting and universal:

> Not an intermittent spring! Perhaps on that spring morning when Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden Walden Pond was already in existence, and even then breaking up in a gentle spring rain accompanied with mists and a southerly wind, and covered with myriads of ducks and geese, which had not heard of the fall, when still such pure lakes sufficed them (226).

Not only is Thoreau's conception of Walden Pond as everlasting an idealisation, but so is his vision of what the pond was like in the past. Not only did it exist since the beginning of time as described in Christian mythology but it contained more ducks and geese, the wind was always southerly, and, noting Thoreau's return to the word "spring" in this quote, it seemed to be perpetually the beginning of the era of fecundity—one's creative powers at a height, ready to name the animals (and fill the world with people!). The ducks and geese were "myriad," the mist and spring rain promised life-giving nourishment, and the pond was as untouched by sinfulness as the freshness of spring. That it is a reinterpretation is seen in the peculiar theology which allows Thoreau to associate the banishment of Adam and Eve from the garden with an idealised image of the Pond. More enduring than the fact of Adam and Eve's sin, Thoreau says, are the phenomena of water, seasons, and birds.

In Thoreau's definition of nature, the earth and the sky are often seen as reflection of each other. Thoreau extends this analogy so that the fish are often portrayed as equivalent to the birds. In the following paragraph on the mirror-like quality of the pond, Thoreau couples his observations on how the fish affect it with observations on how the birds affect it:

> As you look over the pond westward you are obliged to employ both your hands to defend your eyes against the reflected as well as the true sun, for they are equally bright; and if, between the two, you survey its surface critically, it is literally as smooth as glass, except where..., perchance, a duck plumes itself, or, as I have said, a swallow skims so low as to touch it. It may be that in the distance a fish describes an arc of three or four feet in the air (234).

Thus the birds dive into the realm of the fish and the fish swim momentarily through the air. That Thoreau's nature was something in which all parts resonated is reinforced by the way

he brings together birds and fish. It is echoed in Thoreau's own desire to follow the swallows' mistake and walk on the opposite side of glassy surface. Nature is a series of layers, interwoven by existence.

A few paragraphs later, Thoreau speaks in much the same way about his own experience watching the world from a boat on the Pond:

> In such transparent and seemingly bottomless water, reflecting the clouds, I seemed to be floating through the air as a balloon, and [the perch's] swimming impressed me as a kind of flight or hovering, as if they were a compact flock of birds passing just beneath my level on the right or left, their fins, like sails, set all around them (237).

Again, the Nature Thoreau is describing is his own particular creation, one made possible by his drawing near to his subject. He begins to see the world around as it presents itself and in terms of his own imaginative way of understanding. Thoreau finds a correspondence of fish and birds, of pond and cloud, of earth and sky.

In the chapter in which Thoreau describes the construction of his hearth, he likens the smoke from his home to the flight of birds through a poem of his own:

> Light-winged Smoke, Icarian bird,
> Melting thy pinions in thy upward flight,
> Lark without song, messenger of dawn,
> Circling above the hamlets as thy nest;
>
> Go thou my incense upward from this hearth,
> And ask the gods to pardon this clear flame (299).

Thoreau attributes to his chimney a special relationship to the world as it connects to the earth, "standing on the ground and rising through the house to the heavens..." (289). This rising up of the smoke from his house, his likening it to the flight of a bird, and the rising of the chimney itself into the heaven again show Thoreau is preoccupation with nature and his role as an interpreter of a cosmic song; the chimney inscribes his own presence in the sky. Again, the image is of multiple layers being sown together—perhaps for the purpose of clothing the gods.

"We need the tonic of wildness," says Thoreau, "—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the

whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest" (366). The wildness Thoreau speaks about is the realm of the imagination. It is the birth-place of his own understanding of nature and the vision he offers to his readers. In his writing, Thoreau clings as tightly to the importance of the imagination as he does to the concept of wildness when dealing with the natural world: "At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable" (366). And what do we make of the monsters that the imagination sometimes produces? Thoreau's answer is stern and significant:

> There was a dead horse in the hollow by the path to my house, which compelled me sometimes to go out of my way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave me of the strong appetite and the inviolable health of Nature was my compensation for this. I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp,—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood!...The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poison after all, nor are any wounds fatal. Compassion is very untenable ground. It must be expeditious. Its pleadings will not bear to be stereotyped (366).

No relationship to nature can be assumed, says Thoreau; it must be built up, spoken about, loved, wondered at, sympathised with, experimented upon. The answers are myriad—a recognition that our mortality is sufficient. It is the antidote that provides immunity, he tells us, and the straining of the muscle that builds it; real compassion is specific and not universal. Likewise, nature is specific to an imagined vision. There are bound to be conflicts but these conflicts are the announcement that our answers are momentary, that they need to be renewed like the seasons and like our kinship with each other. The returning geese and ducks that Thoreau sees, the birds that "fly with song and glancing plumage," are in similar movement "to correct this slight oscillation of the poles and preserve the equilibrium of Nature" (361). Thoreau's vision of nature is a means of correcting the oscillations of his experience and an attempt to preserve the equilibrium of his own existence. Like the "light and graceful hawk" that Thoreau admires for its singular flight, "alternately soaring like a ripple and tumbling a rod or two over and over, showing

the underside of its wings," the vision that Thoreau offers is not isolating but a playful offering. Referring to the hawk, Thoreau says "It was not lonely, but made all the earth lonely beneath it" (365).

The vision of the natural world Thoreau created through writing brought him closer to nature; in doing so he responded to the way that the natural world already addressed itself to him. On this venture of creating a view of nature, Thoreau says, it is not "as if there were safety in stupidity alone," or elsewhere, "A man sits as many risks as he runs" (372). We need not fear, if our wonderment be genuine, misrepresentation of the natural world, "The universe is wider than our views of it:"

> Who that has heard a strain of music feared then lest he should speak extravagantly any more forever? In view of the future or possible, we should live quite laxly and undefined in front, our outlines dim and misty on that side; as our shadows reveal an insensible perspiration toward the sun. The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly translated; its literal monument alone remains. The words which express our faith and piety are not definite; yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior natures (373).

Nature has "more lives to live," as Thoreau did when he moved from the ponds. His invitation, a call to imaginative contemplation of nature, is for us to articulate a "beautiful and winged life" (381).

This discussion of the images of birds in Thoreau's *Walden* challenges us to formulate an idea of how a conceptions or ideas of nature can be imagined in the post-industrial world.

CONCLUSION

I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance.[1]

A Framework for the Love of Nature

Thoreau never intended for his view of nature to be sufficient for everyone: in the concluding chapter of Walden, he expands of the possibilities he had outlined in "Spring," the chapter immediately before: "The first sparrow of spring! The year beginning with younger hope than ever!" he wrote energetically. So too in the "Conclusion": I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours (342). Through his writing, however, we are invited to partake of his view and to allow it to influence or challenge our own understandings.

In Thoreau we observed a view of nature fundamentally resistant to objectification and, instead, open to multiply interpretations and resonating, even, with our own experience of the mystery of the world around us. The rooster reminded us of borders between night and day, of the ambiguity between our perception and reality, between life and death. The loon was a symbol for the element of mystery, the ungraspable, its otherness is the source of movement, the dance. We saw the owl as consciousness, the clarity that leaves us spellbound—in a word, silent wisdom.

The distance that history provides enabled us to see Thoreau's vision of nature, one very specific to his context, in which the birds around him provided a means of participating in a literary discussion and of relating to his own surroundings. Though our reality is urban, Thoreau can reach us through the capacity of the poetic image to exceed itself, to renew itself with every returning thought. This fundamental capacity of human knowledge is necessary if we are to find a way to understand how the mortal human world relates to nature.

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[1] Dillard, Annie, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," *Three by Annie Dillard.* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1990): 39.

In what follows I suggest a parallel conversation to the investigation into Thoreau. I do not mean to suggest that this investigation into history is inadequate by itself. The conversation about the gift might be seen as a thought experiment or a slight tilting of the balance through which the next step might be made. I do take it as a challenge to think through, as a modern, this idea of a view or vision of nature. This is a task that would not have been possible without the confidence in the truth and validity of the poetic understanding that has been gained through this investigation into Thoreau.

The Gift

Implicit in the work of Thoreau is the idea that the work of art holds lasting importance to orient us in our technological age. My understanding is that architects have the special opportunity now to offer responses to the environmental crisis through offering frameworks for creative realization of the relationship between humanity and the non-human world. The poetic definition of nature I feel is necessary is provoked by the passing of poetic certainties—always preserving the character of the unknown—which once informed architectural creation into the uncertainties of the technological project.[2]

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[2] Here, perhaps, would be the time, but it is not the place for comment on a few works by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) which have been informative in considering what nature might mean today. For instance, Heidegger's essay "The Work of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead,'" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977) points to the loss of the highest values and to the process of questioning—seeking even to the point of asking the absurd—as the task of philosophy. The idea of nature as something which forms a highest value is subject to the process of questioning through which we are once again, through the cry of the madman (in consideration of whom Heidegger ends his essay), able to experience the dread of the natural world—the nature that might be thought. Heidegger challenges us to question what the boundaries of our thought are. This questioning has the result that we are led even to question reason. "Thinking begins only when we have come to know that reason, glorified for centuries, is the most stiff-necked adversary of thought" (112). Considering the issue of nature, these words are an invitation to ask not only what reveals itself to reason concerning our actions in nature, but also to ask what informs reason and provokes thought.

Another essay of Heidegger's that informs a way of thinking about nature is "The Question Concerning Technology." Heidegger portrays technology as a danger and yet simultaneously as the potential for bringing humanity into a truer essence of itself than has been experienced since the Greeks. The essence of technology is in questioning, in wonder, Heidegger says. In order to preserve the character of man in which both ordering and wonder are possible, the essence of technology has to be preserved and we have to face the idea that the threat of constant and total ordering must motivates us to begin asking the questions again. We have become obsessed with the process of answering and lost sight of what it is to ask questions

What might this mean for an understanding of Heidegger as someone relevant for our thinking about nature? Heidegger points out a way that technology motivates us to ask questions; it is thus is both a danger and the potential for our thinking. In the same way, is it possible to say that the evidence we see of the destructive elements of the ordering inherent in technological thinking lead us to consider once again, to question, what the world around us *is* and what our potential relationship to it might be? The connection

Art creates a world and, as Hans-Georg Gadamer says, sets truths into play.[3] But it also enables us to move about adeptly within the truths already given and the world in which we find ourselves—art does not define reality without influence from others' sources. Architects are not free to define nature according to their whim but are invited to offer definitions of nature which house truths already existing whether those truths be life-giving and celebratory or threatening and monstrous.

Exclusively using the term "environment" to describe the mystery that plays host to our wandering is something we should be suspicious of if the world is to be something other than a resource for consumer industry. It is through that part of the human experience, rather, in which is found the tendency for the nurturing of growth, for observing the process of self-realization, and of providing a concern for the natural world finds its place as a motivation for human action. It is also through our own human experience that we can begin to appreciate nature as a gift and to love, as a child loves his or her mother and father, the affirmation of life that such a gift proclaims.

The prospects, however, are not easy; my topic is a difficult one. The meaning of nature is strongly contested and it is necessary to reflect individually, as architects in a post-industrial consumer society, on the importance of our own stances with regards to this question. Our encouragement comes from the evidence that people can be involved in addressing the environmental crisis in significant ways other than simply meeting the standards set by positivistic science. Not everyone understands the principles behind global warming, deforestation, or pollution that are held as the reality of the environmental crisis and the terms which inform environmental ethics. It is therefore necessary, as architects, to rephrase the questions in terms that enable us to dwell in this world. As Karsten Harries has pointed out in *The Ethical Function Architecture*, however, two foci must be kept in balance: firstly, that of the individual taking a stance and creating art as the highest expression of humanity's aspirations and, secondly, that of

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to my own concerns is explored in many works including Bruce Foltz, *Inhabiting the Earth: Heidegger, Environmental Ethics, and the Metaphysics of Nature.* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International Inc., 1995): ch. 8.

the community whom the architect addresses.[4] Speaking into the post-industrial world we must recognise the legitimacy of numerous conceptions of the world around us.

Common among us is the possibility of seeing nature and linking it to the joy and responsibility of receiving a gift. Nature is a gift as mysterious and promising as the gift of life. We are not asked whether we wish to be born, or where, or when, but we find ourselves suddenly awake to the possibilities that our individual lives set in front of us. If we are open to understanding it in such a fashion, life can appear as a gift, as something that we must respect; so too with nature.

Nature can be thought as a gift in the same way that one thinks of a particular talent or ability, one that will determine for you the meaning of your entire existence and provide for you the possibility of realising your humanity. Does this require thinking of nature as a deity or as the gift of some divine Being? No more than it does to call life a gift and to recognise that, however we may understand the processes through which life came about in the universe, we speak of the meaningfulness of our existence as something special and significant like a gift.

Glenn Murcutt is an Australian architect whose work speaks about openness to the gifts of nature and to thinking of nature in terms other than the ones defined by science conceived of as an unquestioned map of reality. Though Murcutt strives to follow the code of the Aboriginal Australians to "tread lightly on the earth"[5] and to respect the natural surroundings, he moves beyond what many architects do in translating this sentiment into the cultural milieu of consumer society. Typically, architects who respond to this sentiment turn only to an ethical standpoint defined by primarily by a model of the perfectibility of human knowledge. Murcutt's work acknowledges the way that building changes nature. At the same time, however, it allows the realm beyond our grasp, the unpredictable, to participate in the definition of the relationship between the natural and

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[3] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the beautiful and Other Essays*, Trans. Nickolas Walker, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986).

[4] Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1997): 364.

[5] Glenn Murcutt quoted in Françoise Fromonot, *Glenn Murcutt: Buildings and Projects*. (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1995): 49. Murcutt's work also appears in Brenda Vale's *Green Architecture: Design for an Energy-Conscious Future*, (Canada: Little, Brown & Company, 1991).

the built world. It thus opens the natural world up to the possibility of existing in different ways.

Some of the most notable features in Murcutt's designs are his expressive drainpipes (See Appendix B). The drainpipes open up to the sky. In doing so they answer the necessity of collecting rain in the dry Australian terrain. No less importantly, however, they offer a special way of thinking about how the building relates to the place in which the building is situated. The shape of the drainpipes afford the opportunity to name the relationship between the drainpipe and the natural world and to think of that relationship according to one's own imagination: the drainpipe is a chalice, as if the house were offering a toast to the sky in celebration of the liquor it collects; it is a pair of forearms pressed together and hands outspread, reaching up in prayer to the sky, supplicating it for rain; finally, it is a tree, mediating between earth and sky, abstracted to suit the conditions in which we find ourselves. The drainpipe opens up the possibility for us to think of its function in different ways.[6] But it also offers a way to think about nature: nature bestows liquor; it makes us aware of our dependence for nourishment, it challenges us to consider its future, to ask, "Where do we go from here?"

For ethics, it is clear that we must begin to ask ourselves what visions of the natural world we are to rely on in our architectural works and whether these conceptions allow for our participation as finite human beings. Do they open up the concept of nature and allow us to see many sides of our relationship to it? Do they allow us to acknowledge that the world, though often within our reach, is ultimately beyond our grasp? Significantly, Murcutt's designs remind us of another possibility—that the rains might not come. The building serves as a reminder of the fragility of our existence. More than the possibility of annihilation of the planet within a few centuries or decades or even years, we are confronted through Murcutt's design of what a few days without water might mean for us.

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[6] That the gutters and downpipes on Murcutt's houses must also accommodate the downpours which fall on the area in which he builds contributes too rather than detracts from their poetic power. Architectural critic Philip Drew writes: "The wide box gutters...have the same incomplete quality as the dry creek beds of the inland. They too await the coming deluge.... Receptors of the sky's delicate tears, creek bad and metal gutter together reflect the uncertainty and extremes of rainfall on this continent." *Leaves of Iron*, (Sydney, The Law Book Company Ltd., 1985): 71.

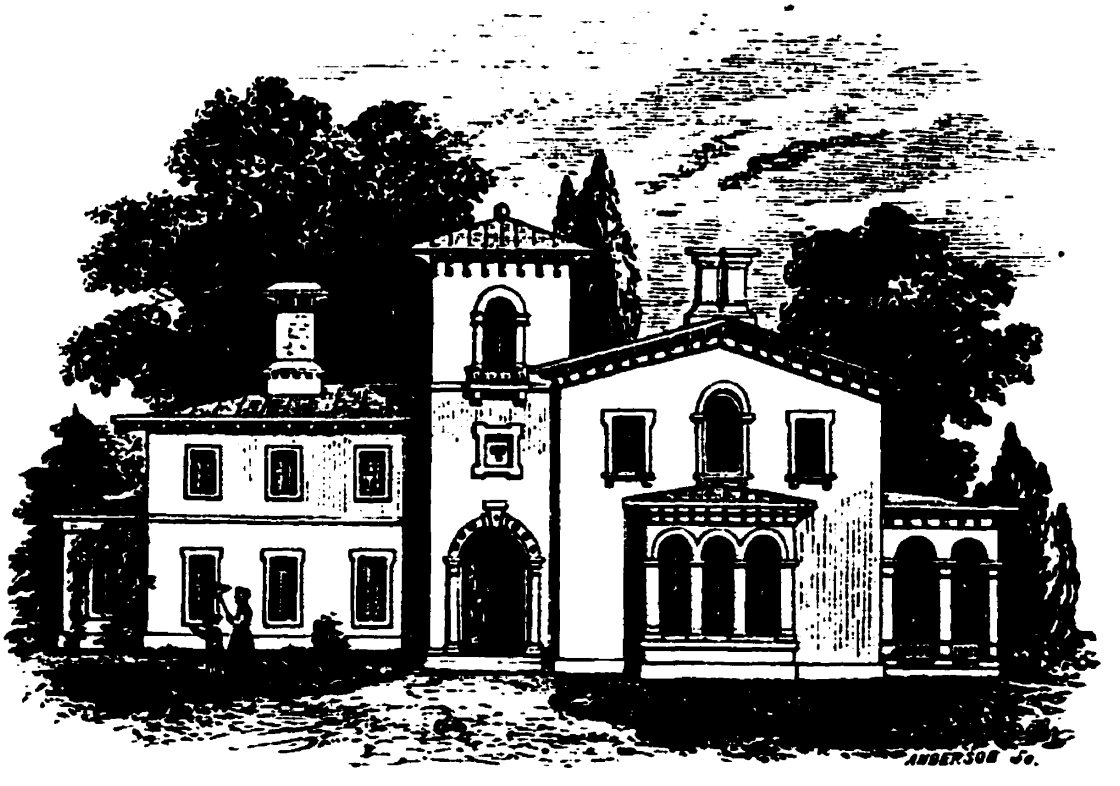
In his buildings Murcutt tries to have the forms he uses and the logic of the building itself address not only the issues of what it means for humans to exist with concern for natural things but also what it means for humans to have concern for their own experience. Thus for Murcutt, it makes a difference how the building collects the water from the roof. In his buildings he makes certain that the drainpipes bring attention to themselves and so points to the importance of water for a building in Australia's climate. Subsequently, it has the effect of asserting the importance of the life that the building contains. Murcutt's use of a modern style celebrates the development of sophisticated methods of production, the pride of modern technology. However, his use of this style to convey an understanding of the building's relation to the natural condition in which he builds shows that he is using these technological developments for a means that is not limited by a technological reduction of the world around us.

In her book "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek," Annie Dillard summarizes her chapter "Seeing" with the assertion that the secret of seeing is the pearl of great price: "The literature of illumination reveals this above all: although it comes to those who wait for it, [illumination] is always, even to the most practiced and adept, a gift and a total surprise" (39). The gift of seeing is the light of creative definition and of looking at things in new ways. Such experiences of illumination come to us like gifts and they change who we are; describing such an experience, Dillard writes: "It was less like seeing than being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance....I'm still spending the power" (39). We acknowledge our many experiences and life itself as gifts. Nature too is a gift to which we can open ourselves up. Our breath stolen, it is a mutual kind of inspiration.

All our gifts bear the mark of our mortality. The "power" we spend, as Dillard writes about it, does not last forever and pennies do not suffice to sustain us. But we know all this without being told; we feel it in the emptiness of our possessions, the difficulty of defining our relationships, our straining to complete necessary tasks. Taking up the richness of the visions we are given, however, suggests a means of finding a role for architecture in relating us to nature.

APPENDIX A: Andrew Jackson Downing

"A Laborer's Cottage." Andrew Jackson Downing. *The Architecture of Country Houses*. 1850 (New York. De Capo Press. 1968): 72.

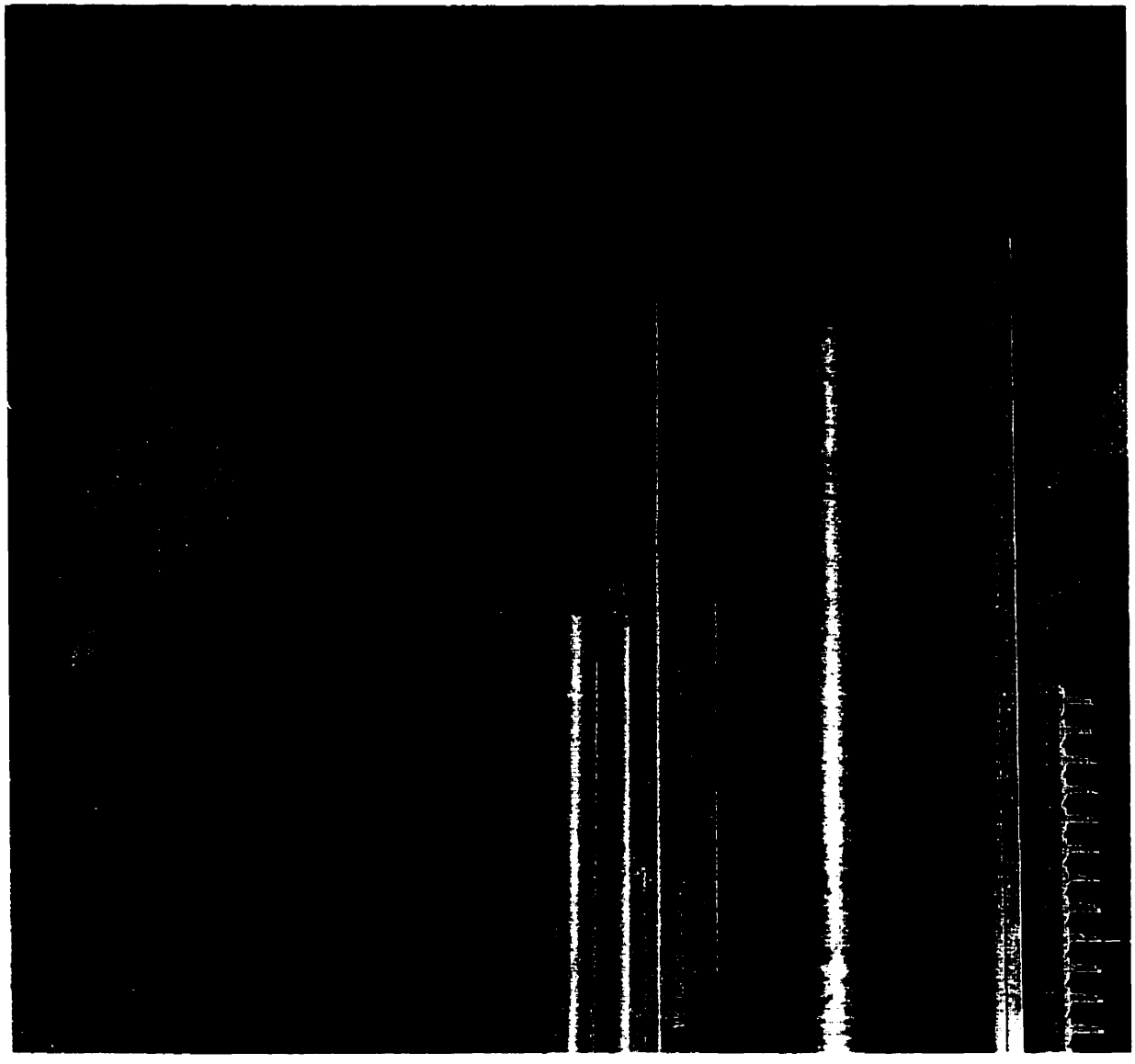


"Villa in the Italian Style." Downing. *The Architecture of Country Houses*. 284.

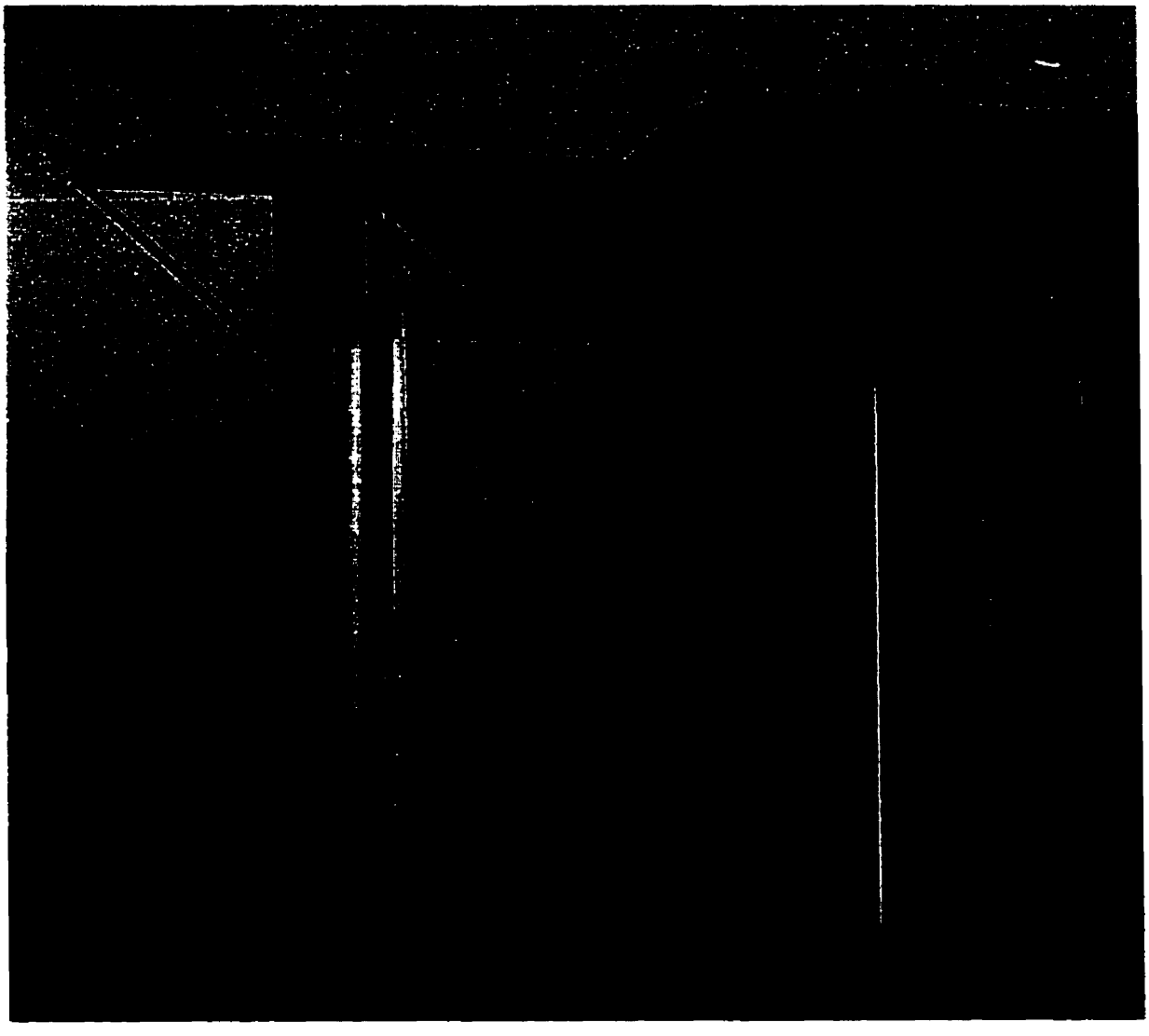
"Rural Gothic Villa." Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 323.

"Villa in the Fointed Style." Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 338.

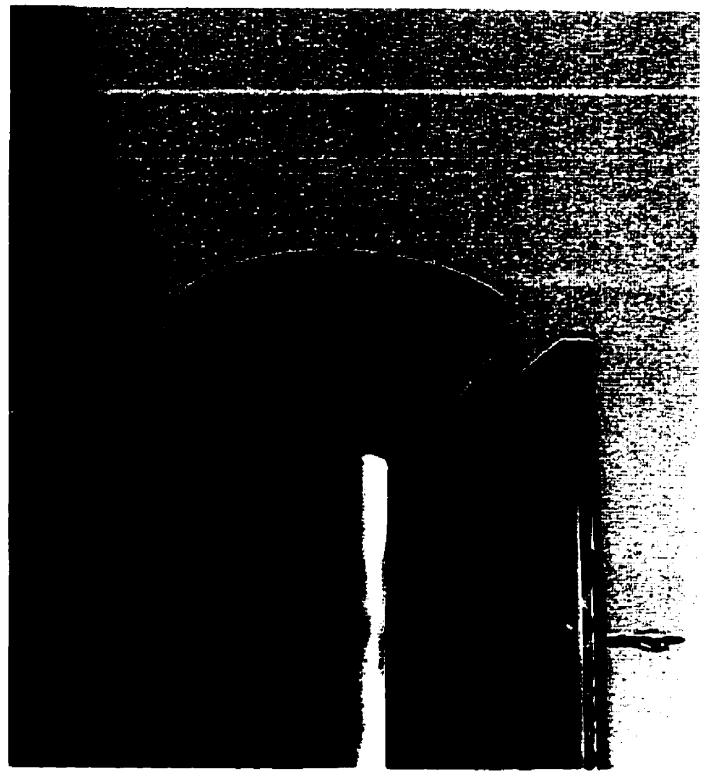
APPENDIX B: Glenn Murcutt



Francoise Fromonot, *Glenn Murcutt: Buildings and Projects*, (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1995): Cover.



Fromonot, *Glenn Murcutt: Buildings and Projects, 100.*



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