

“From Silenced Nature to Worldness in American Literature”

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As Christopher Manes writes, ‘[n]ature is silent in our culture [...] in the sense that the status of being a speaking subject is jealously guarded as an exclusively human prerogative’ (Manes, 1996). According to this view, nature is less silent than silenced, the difference lying in a refusal to have a relationship with the natural world because of the lack of adequate language to describe our relationship with it. This problem originated with the promotion of human faculties, which led us to believe that our language, in Manes’s words, ‘ha[s] no analogues in the natural world’. In this paper, I will discuss American authors such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Edward Abbey who accounted in their memoirs or essays on experiences in nature for a multi-sensorial experience of nature, which betrays an attempt to find a form of language that would relate humans to natural elements. Indeed, although nature does not speak, I will argue that human beings were provided with their sensory perception that allows them to appreciate worldness and to develop a harmonious relationship with the rest of the world. I will also stress that our alienation from the natural world is as much a cultural problem as it is a consequence of Western consumer capitalism and supermodernity, as suggested, for example, in Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* (1985) or in Jon Krakauer’s non-fiction book on Christopher McCandless *Into the Wild* (1996). Adopting an ecocritical approach, I will examine the ways in which we tend to perceive worldness as silent and how literary texts may revive worldness as essential concept in the study of the relationship between literature and our physical environment.

“Western culture has not treated the senses equally”, stresses my mentor and thesis supervisor Professor Michel Delville, because for a long time, the ‘lower’ senses of smell,

taste and—to a lesser extent—touch were regulated to the lowest position in the hierarchy, excluded from the realm of aesthetic judgement” while, in fact, they “enrich and complexify human perception” and allow us to reach a better understanding of our physical environment.

For instance, although there is no dearth of writings on Thoreau’s philosophy of nature, still, very little attention has so far been paid to his relationship to the senses as vehicles of understanding. In his famous memoir *Walden* (1854), all his senses are active as he experiences the natural landscape of Walden Pond, in such a way that he somehow fuses with it. He appreciates the taste of “sand cherries”, “beans”, wild “huckleberries and even mentions that “wild holly berries make the beholder forget his home with their beauty, and he is dazzled and tempted by nameless other wild forbidden fruits, too fair for mortal taste”. Besides the sense of taste, Thoreau dedicates a whole chapter to the Sounds of nature in which he demonstrates acute hearing as he is, for example, enthralled by the “distant lowing of a cow in the horizon beyond the woods” that “sounded sweet and melodious” to such an extent that he almost thought they were “the voices of certain minstrels”. The transcendentalist also describes being frequently touched by the wind, by its breezes and claims that the “lake” is “the earth’s eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature”. Thoreau is therefore a “hard-headed empiricist”, as Leo Marx calls him in his book *The Machine in the Garden* because, although he is also a transcendentalist, he “assumes that natural facts properly perceived—by all the senses—must yield truth”. In other words, his multi-sensorial perception does not convey a sense of superiority in the natural landscape but of equality and by perceiving the truth that lies in every single natural element, in “the reality that surrounds us” as he says, he seems to grow spiritually and to fully realise his self.

Besides Thoreau, his transcendentalist and conservationist successor John Muir also displays a similar experience of the natural world. Indeed, Muir describes in his first

published book *The Mountains of California* (1894) his sensations of smelling the ‘sweet-scented hayfields’, tasting the ‘delicious’ ‘sugar pine’, hearing species of trees that ‘give[] forth the finest music to the wind’ or of seeing ‘fresh beauty [that] opens one’s eyes wherever it is really seen’. In addition, even the machine, which Thoreau occasionally welcomes in the landscape in *Walden*, does not disturb nature’s expression of beauty and his appreciation of it. For instance, he explains that he hears the singing of the ouzels “on the lower reaches of the river where mills are built”, even “through the machinery, and all the noisy confusions of dogs, cattle, and work-men”. The natural world in Muir’s text is as powerful as man’s attempt to transform it since preserves its stillness while dealing with the noisy and overwhelming expansion of industrialism. In fact, the rising of industrialism was not intrinsically nature’s enemies. As Thoreau thought, the new market economy, meaning capitalism, was corrupting our mind and, along with the belief that reason or human language make us superior to other species, our understanding of our physical environment and of ourselves. He believed that money or fame could alter negatively our perspective on truth, on nature, and ultimately cause greed, domination and destruction instead of harmony.

Concerned by the same issues, the conservationist and essayist Aldo Leopold intended in his nature essays, which are collected in his work *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), to refocus human perception by revaluing the lower senses. For example, in his reflexion on hunting, Leopold acknowledges that he is his dog’s student, and not the reverse, because the dog’s sense of smell is more acute. Indeed, the dog is depicted as ‘a professor of logic’ who can ‘draw[] deductions’ with his ‘educated nose’. Through the examination of empirical ‘data’, the dog ‘deduce[s] a conclusion’, his skills at ‘smelling’ allow him to understand, to see things the hunter’s ‘unaided eye’ cannot see. Although Leopold is a scientist, he admits that those who best comprehend the natural world are those who remained connected with it. In other words, the hunter is an outsider in the natural environment that the dog masters. In

his essay called ‘Song of the Gavilan’, Leopold emphasises that though some sounds may be ‘audible to every ear’ in nature, ‘there is other music in these hills, by no means audible to all’ because, ‘to hear even a few notes of it’, ‘you must live here for a long time, and you must know the speech of hills and rivers’. In this passage, the author acknowledges that nature has a ‘speech’, a language, which is impossible to understand for those who have lived separately from the natural world. Furthermore, Leopold criticises new technologies and mechanization as they have alienated man from the true meaning of outdoor activities such as hunting but, most importantly, from wildness. Like Thoreau, he does not reject science or progress but rather regrets man’s yearning for excessive inventions or man’s focus on acquiring a comfortable life. “The modern dogma is comfort at all cost,” claims Leopold. Like Thoreau, Leopold is not interested in the accumulation of meaningless luxuries, he has the “philosophical eye”, perceives nature’s “wildness”, which he describes as “the fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals”, the priceless value of natural elements. He believes that multi-sensorial perception allows us to understand nature, its wildness and its language, and to build a respectful and sustainable relationship with the natural world. Leopold at some point even quotes Thoreau and mentions that “in wildness is the preservation of the world”, which the “high priests of progress could never grasp”. In fact, he depicts the modern man as a “trophy-hunter”, supercivilized and over-equipped with “gadgets”, whose perception has been fragmented. In Leopold’s words, he is “the motorized ant who swarms the continent without learning to see his own back yard”, in other words, he wants to see all without really seeing.

Perhaps as a more radical thinker, the neo-Thoreauvian conservationist and essayist Edward Abbey shares in his memoir *Desert Solitaire* (1968) that scientific—but also cultural—descriptions damage human perception. Experiencing the Colorado Plateau region of the desert, Abbey writes that he wants to see things as they are, devoid of any scientific or

cultural referential. Like Thoreau, he believes that there is truth in simple natural facts such as “the face of the wind” or “the feel of its music”. According to him, nature ‘speaks’ when humans remain silent. One can only understand nature’s language and beauty when he is alone in the wilderness, when there is no human intrusion—or, rather, invasion—, as he can hear the sounds of birds, of the wind, of nature. Although he seems to focus on the sense of hearing, comparing many natural sounds to music, he also adopts a multi-sensorial approach to nature since he, for example, frequently smells odours of trees (cedarwood or junipers). However, his sight seems to be obstructed by human inventions such as the flashing light or the light of the generator that prevent him from seeing the world as it really is. Indeed, Abbey views man-centeredness and his worship of culture and technology as obstructing human perception of natural facts. Besides technologies or mechanization, he stresses the importance of nature’s separateness from humanity, which Leopold also partially does, meaning not as a physical space existing separately from humanity but as a landscape representing significantly different values, as having wildness, which should not be glorified with human terms but understood and appreciated with our senses as it really is. “The itch for naming things is almost as bad as the itch for possessing things”, he says, “let them and leave them alone—they’ll survive for a few more thousand years, more or less, without any glorification from us.” Abbey, like Leopold, criticises the human tendency to dominate or appropriate natural elements while their wildness can only be preserved when it is possessed by humans.

Nevertheless, in our postmodern or, as environmentalist and essayist Bill McKibben calls it in his essay *The End of Nature* (1989), our “postnatural world”, a world in which nature has ended ‘both as a discrete biophysical entity and as a meaningful concept’, this idea of the separateness of nature is unconceivable. Nature has ended as a meaningful concept because we live in an artificial world where every single natural landscape has been somehow altered by man’s hands, by his expansion, his production or his pollution. Moreover, our

perception of natural landscapes significantly changed since we do not view the “reality that surrounds us”, as Thoreau did, but rather a cultural representation of it, a simulation. In his dystopian novel *White Noise* (1985), DeLillo uses characters, and more specifically his protagonist Jack Gladney, to illustrate a different conception of the sublime, the postmodern sublime. For example, Jack’s colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, explains that once you have seen the signs about the “most photographed barn in America”, it becomes impossible to see the barn’ because you become “part of a collective perception” and “only see what the others see”. Every photograph reinforces the aura’, he says, ‘an accumulation of nameless energies’ of which Jack and himself are part, and he ‘seemed immensely pleased by this’. As James Collins mentions, the image of the barn could be perceived as a ‘simulation’ that is ‘created through photographic reproduction’, which causes ‘an aura in which ‘authenticity’ is no longer of any interest to the tourist’.¹ This ‘aura’ could be identified as a sublime experience that excludes ‘reality’, the ‘authentic’ landscape, as it is the ‘reproduction’ that arouses Murray’s pleasing reaction. Indeed, as Dana Phillips suggests, in Postmodernism, ‘representation has supplanted presence’ and, as a result, ‘the postmodern’ has altered ‘our relationship to the landscapes we inhabit’.² In fact, there is a collective, cultural appreciation of landscape that is not ‘natural’ but artificial, factice, as the barn is beheld through ‘cultural mediation’, through the means of cameras.³ On the other hand, sounds—or rather, noises,—are significant in DeLillo’s novel as they convey a comforting feeling to the listener. For example, Jack associates the sounds he hears, “the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating”, in the mall with a sensation of happiness, with “the human buzz of some vivid an happy transaction”. Thoreau’s process of self-realisation in sublime nature is therefore replaced by the purchase and consumption of commercial products in the postmodern

¹ James Collins, ‘Reconfigurations of the American Sublime in the Fiction of Joan Didion, Don DeLillo and Paul Auster’, (McMaster University, Ph.D, 2012), p. 132.

² Dana Philips, ‘Is Nature Necessary?’, Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 206-207.

³ Collins, ‘Reconfigurations of the American Sublime’, p. 133.

landscape, to such an extent that his conception of transcendentalism has become what could be described as consumerist transcendentalism.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, annoyed by our postmodern society and by the postmodern process of self-realisation, Christopher McCandless decided to venture into the remaining wilderness of Alaska, in which he unfortunately died of food poisoning in 1992. Jon Krakauer (1954 -) tried to reconstruct McCandless's journey in his non-fiction book *Into the Wild* (1996) and included many explicit quotations from and comparisons with Thoreau but also with Muir. For example, McCandless wanted to improve spiritually and even perhaps, 'unlike Muir and Thoreau' as Krakauer stresses, 'went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul'.⁴ On the other hand, McCandless learnt what 'Muir and Thoreau already knew', which is that 'an extended stay in the wilderness inevitably directs one's attention outward as much as inward, and it is impossible to leave off the land without developing both a subtle understanding of, and a strong emotional bond with that land and all it holds'. Consequently, McCandless's intention was to reconnect with the natural world, to get out of a self-limiting society defined by the constant search of luxurious comfort. Interestingly, Carine McCandless, Christopher's sister, mentions in her recently published memoir *The Wild Truth* (2014) that Chris used to describe his parents as 'fake people' who 'brainwash themselves into this false sense of security and satisfaction by falling back on their treasured money and worthless luxury expenditures to shield themselves from reality'. In this extract, Chris McCandless refers to reality as unveiled by the American economic system, by capitalism and consumerism. In other words, he believes that our alienation from the "real world" was caused by a deficient economic system that also determines our social relationships and our relationship to our physical environment.

⁴ Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, p. 183.

To conclude this talk, in my master thesis entitled “Transcendentalism and Sublime (Post)Nature in American Literature: From Self-Discovery to Self-Destruction”, one of the ecocritical conclusions I developed was focused on some American authors’ multi-sensorial approach to nature, used as a means of reconnecting with the natural world. In our postmodern world where culture and simulations dominate the realm of representation, we tend to alienate ourselves from worldness and to live in a virtual or alternative reality, to such an extent that we forget the true necessity of the natural world. For example, the very recent mobile application called ‘*Pokémon GO*’ urges people to roam streets and ‘natural’ parks in search of unreal creatures to ‘capture’, but they actually pay less attention to the reality that surrounds them than to their mobile screen. Moreover, capitalism and consumerism also alter our perception of worldness, since we tend to consider everything as a commodity to be consumed, without considering intrinsic values of natural facts, their wildness. As Alison Byerly explains, even national parks could be regarded as transformations of the ‘sublime landscape into a series of picturesque scenes’ since this form of ‘aestheticization of landscape permits the viewer to define and control the scene’ and therefore to regard it as a mere ‘object of artistic consumption’.⁵ As a result, the texts previously discussed revive worldness as an essential concept because they illustrate a natural world as fundamental to human self-realisation or, more largely, to our existence. It is only when the natural world, its language, is comprehended, when there is harmony, that the whole concept makes sense. In my dissertation I used Thoreau’s poem “Men say they know many things” as a connecting metaphor. Quote:

⁵ Alison Byerly, ‘The Use of Landscape: The Picturesque Aesthetic and the National Park System’, Cheryl Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 53.

*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.*

This poem emphasises that no matter what man will invent next, what will be the next artistic or scientific production, “the wind that blows”, which could be understood, more largely, as the natural world, is all that any body should know and remember as the necessary and vital force characterising our worldness.

To quote from this conference presentation:

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