A Solitary Chanticleer in Walden

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A Solitary Chanticleer in *Walden*

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Thorean's *Walden*[1] remains the outstanding example of American nature writing, a book which offers a vivid exposition of a simple life that continues to exert a powerful appeal on readers. Yet thoreau's work is more than merely a report of an experiment in plain living in a forest. The significance of Thoreau's life near the pond can be fully understood only when it is placed within its social context. Let us start by considering the historical and cultural forces at work in mid-nineteenth-century America when the book was written and first read.

To begin with, it was a period of enormous and very rapid expansion. The United States took possession of Texus, California and the whole Southwest as a result of its victory over Mexico in 1847. Industrial and technological development in this era helped to tie the expanding country together. At the same time, however, the rapid pace of industrical development exacerbated the conflict between the North and South. Note here that the turbulent social conditions caused by such far-reaching changes seriously affected human lifestyles. Thoreau often displays an astute understanding of the effect that such changes had on individuals. Notice that Thoreau compares life of his day to the "chopping sea" (91), and he fears that man has no chance to be anything but a machine or, a "sound sleeper" (92). Insisting that "simplicity" is the only way to survive, Thoreau chose primitive life in the woods, instead of remaining in an ever more prosperous society.

In this paper, we will focus on the significance of Thoreau's struggle to

look for a more authentic life.

I

To investigate the character of Thoreau's experiment, let us begin by analyzing his unique situation. Where was Thoreau's famous hut located? According to his own description in *Walden*, it was set "by the shore of a small pond, about a mile and a half south of the village of Concord and somewhat higher than it, in the midst of an extensive wood between that town and Lincoln, and about two miles south of that our only field known to fame, Concord Battle Ground" (86).

Interestingly, his description of the location is rather broadly-focused. It starts from the point where he is, and gradually spreads to take in a much wider area. There comes suddenly, however, a sense of dwindling or narrowing as the following passages show:

> [B]ut *I was so low* in the woods that the opposite shore, half a mile off, like the rest, *covered with woods*, was my most *distant* horizon. (86)

> Indeed, by *standing on tiptoe I could catch a glimpse* of some of the peaks of the still bluer and more *distant* mountain ranges in the north-west, . . . But in other directions, even from this point, *I could not see over or beyond the woods* which surrounded me. . . . (87)
> (Hereafter, emphases added.)

These short passages underscore a very important point: Thoreau had his feet on the ground, and his perspective in the forest seemed to be, at this point, somewhat restricted. In the early stages of his settlement, Thoreau's glimpse of the pond is like an image not of the real thing itself

but of the thing which reminds him of a remote elsewhere. If nature wears the colors of the spirit of the seer,[2] it may reflect his state of mind as a stranger in the woods. Thoreau says in "Walking": "We would fain take that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world, which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world; and sometimes, no doubt, we find it difficult to choose our direction, because it does not yet exist distinctly in our idea."[3] As this comment signifies, Thoreau feels somewhat lost when he first steps into his "interior and ideal new world."

Moreover, Thoreau metaphorically describes his hut built in the woods as "a cage" (86), "my snug harbor in the woods" (169), and "this more substantial shelter about me"(85). These metaphors all indicate that Thoreau feels a need for somewhere to hide or protection from something outside. It also implies Thoreau's uneasy state of mind. Likewise, in "Where I lived," Thoreau describes his dwelling as:

> Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the *universe* and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as *far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers*. . . . I discovered that my house actually had its site in *such a withdrawn*, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the *universe*. . . . (87-88)

Thoreau's vision becomes so all-encompassing as to be called cosmic; he emphasizes the importance of the everlasting world which he compares to the changing society which he has left behind. However, if we notice the fact that Thoreau's habitat was only a few miles away from the village where he often goes,[4] his grandiose locution rather makes us aware that there is a gap between the real situation and *his* ideal world. Despite his hyperbolic trope about the place where he lives, Thoreau has a unique but

unstable sense of place and distance which reveals that he has a vulnerable inner self.[5]

II

Having observed how he thinks of the place, and having noticed that uneasy, seclusive sense interwoven into his text, we are now ready to consider the following passage written by Leo Marx:[6]

> The hut beside the pond stands at the center of a symbolic landscape in which the village of Concord appears on one side and a vast reach of unmodified nature on the other. As if no organized society existed to the west, the mysterious, untrammeled, primal world seems to begin at the village limits.

We can agree with Marx on the point that the hut itself is positioned on a frontier. This ambivalent concept of the hut, which Marx suggests, is a valid assumption. However, it may be nearer the truth to say that the habitation is a transcendental symbol through which we can get a glimpse of the profundity of Thoreau's vision. Let us investigate it in more detail.

As we have examined, the life in the woods secluding Thoreau from the public has its grimmer side as well. In the opening chapter, Thoreau declares that he will tell exactly what he observed happening in nature. Accordingly, his descriptions of an internecine ant-war, a dead horse pecked by crows and the like show us the existence of the rapacious natural world in which he finds himself.

For example, Thoreau's trip to seashore described in *Cape Cod* also allowed him further insight into raw, inhuman power of a nature observed without sentimentality. He describes the ocean as "a wilderness

reaching around the globe, wilder than a Bengal jungle".[7] Nature is sometimes so threatening that rather than protecting it can even invade the hut: "unfenced Nature reaching up to *your* very sills. A young forest growing up under *your* windows, and wild sumachs and blackberry vines breaking through into *your* cellar; . . . their roots reaching quite under the house" (128). It is noteworthy that Thoreau sometimes changes his position with readers, using the second person possessive case instead of "my". On one hand, as Thoreau deliberately invites us to picture ourselves within the scene, we are unwittingly caught up in the confrontation with cutthroat nature in his text. On the other hand, he seems to stand apart from us. We will analyze the reason in the following section.

III

There is a more important phase which should not be ignored in nature —solitude. Emerson opens his well-known essay "Nature" by saying; "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society."[8] To carry out the transcendental experiment, Thoreau turns his back on Concord, declaring that he cherishes his solitary life. However, being alone does not necessarily mean to "go into solitude." Therefore, Thoreau intentionally chose the simple, almost stoic way of life. As a result of the choice, he must become accustomed to his isolation. Thoreau describes the situation like this:

> I kept neither dog, cat, cow, pig, nor hens, so that you would have said there was a deficiency of domestic sounds; neither the churn, nor the spinning wheel, nor even the singing of the kettle, nor the hissing of the urn, nor children crying, to comfort one. (127)

The repetition of negative terms thus circumscribes his new domain.

Thoreau figuratively cuts "most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life," because he believes such things are "not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind" (14). But when Thoreau feels even too far away from human habitation to hear roosters crow, he becomes definitely lonely.

While he clears all ordinary things from his yard, he, nevertheless, wants to have a cockerel nearby for a singing bird. As Lawrence Buell suggests, Thoreau's desire "to place himself at a distance within new world nature gives way to what looks like a desire to domesticate the landscape with replacing the cockerel."[9] Nevertheless, he cannot afford to keep it. Why? One possible reason might be found in Thoreau's dejected confession, which comes after admiration for the bird; "but its shrill sound never roused me from my slumbers" (127). Stanley Cavell acutely points out that: "Perhaps because the sound is so familiar and frequent to his ear, and at once so faint and so unmistakable, that he is not sure it is a sound heard, i.e., that it comes from *outside*." (emphasis added.)[10]

As Thoreau says, outside things do not change; *we* should change. Now it is time to remember Thoreau's renowned declaration in "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For"; "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 neighbors up" (84). We have examined that a real bird (rooster) can not fill Thoreau's microcosm with its entity. Rather, Thoreau himself must be a chanticleer to wake up neighbors who are "torpid" in his vicinity. The chanticleer can be a symbol of spiritual beginning preparing the ground for the union of man and nature.

Ⅳ

In the concluding pages of *Walden*, Thoreau tells us what he has

learned by his experiment in nature:

> He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him . . . . In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex, and solitude not solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness." (216)

In *Walden*, Thoreau sometimes discloses to us that he is not always resolute, or self-confident. Despite the popular image of Thoreau as an easy communicant with nature, he was a vulnerable seeker of the truth in Walden "the boundary," where one can travel to the interior and ideal world. "〔L〕ike a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments (324)," he tries to articulate (or, brag as lustily as chanticleer) his own conception gained through his struggle by way of the simple life. It is the new relationship between man and nature which does not reside in ordinary natural lands or in societies or in anything "outside," but in individual consciousness.

Notes

1 Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau* : *Walden*, ed. Lindon Shanley (Princeton : Princeton UP, 1971) Hereafter the page numbers of this book are cited parenthetically in the text.

2 This is a well-known concept of the American Transcendentalism. See Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature." *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Richard Poirier (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 7.

3 Henry David Thoreau, "Walking." *The Selected Works of Thoreau*, ed. Walter Harding (Boston : Houghton, 1975) 667.

4 Richard Bridgman, *Dark Thoreau*, (Lincoln : U of Nebraska P, 1982) 78.

5 Richard Bridgman concludes that Thoreau was "a vulnerable man" in conclusion of his *Dark Thoreau*. (Lincoln : U of Nebraska P, 1982) 284-287.

6 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden : Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York : Oxford UP, 1964) 245.

7 Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau : Cape Cod*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton : Princeton UP, 1971) 148.

8 Emerson, 5.

9 Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination : Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge : Harvard UP, 1995) 71.

10 Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago : U of Chicago P, 1972) 38.