



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Spirit in the Pond:

Thoreau's Vision of Nature

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Egill Arnaldur Ásgeirsson

Mái 2011

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Enskuskor

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Ágrip

Í þessari ritgerð er fjallað um bandaríska rithöfundinn Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) með sérstakri áherslu á náttúrusýn hans. Ritgerðin skiptist í þrjá meginkafla. Í þeim fyrsta er bakgrunnur Thoreau kannaður. Fyrst er fjallað um Transcendentalistana, menntahreyfingu sem lét til sín taka um miðja 19.öld í Bandaríkjunum. Sérstaklega er fjallað um Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) og einstaka vináttu hans og Henry David Thoreau. Emerson var gríðarlega áberandi í bandarísku menningarlífi og hafði mikil áhrif á fjölda rithöfunda. Hann gerði Concord að miðstöð Transcendentalistahreyfingarinnar. Henry David Thoreau hóf feril sín sem lærisveinn Emerson og reyndi fyrir sér sem ljóðskáld og rithöfundur. Árið 1845 byggði hann sér kofa við Walden tjörn og bjó þar í tvö ár. Meðan á dvölinni við Walden stóð kviknaði gríðarlegur áhugi Thoreau á náttúrunni, áhugi sem var listrænn, vísindalegur og trúarlegur. Þegar bókin um Walden kom út árið 1854 var á ferðinni meistaraverk sem þykir með merkari verkum bandarískrar bókmenntasögu. Sérstaklega er hún fræg fyrir einstakar náttúrulegflýsingar. Sýn Thoreau hafði fjarlægst mjög þá bókmenntalegu sýn sem einkenndi hann við komuna til Walden. Hann varð fyrir miklum áhrifum af fornum austrænum trúartextum, sérstaklega úr hindúasið. Hann leit svo að náttúran væri lifandi heild og að það byggji andlegt afl í náttúrunni. Thoreau skrifaði á ljóðrænan máta um vísindaleg efni tengd náttúrunni. Hann þróaði með sér mjög öfluga athyglisgáfu og reyni að ráða ráðgátur náttúrunnar þar sem hann áleit að einstök fyrirbrigði endurspegluðu dýpri lögmál. Í þriðja kafla ritgerðarinnar er fjallað um þá stefnu innan bókmenntagreiningar sem á ensku heitir Ecocriticism. Greint er frá upphafi stefnunnar, núverandi stöðu og framtíðarhorfum. Einnig eru birt viðhorf sem gagnrýna stefnuna eins og hún hefur þróast. Sérstakur gaumur er gefinn viðhorfum innan „umhverfisrýni“ sem líkjast viðhorfum Thoreau um hina andlegu náttúru.

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1. Introduction

It is amazing how little energy we spend thinking about nature and even less, trying to understand and formulate the discourse about the topic. Unfortunately ecological problems abound all around us including pollution and global warming. These problems make claims on our attention and furthermore it can be argued that it is not only our moral duty to analyse the situation but we should take some action in favour of nature. We owe it to ourselves and future generations. Actually most people would agree with this and some kind of a shallow environmentalism is regarded as politically correct. Therefore the widespread indifference and corresponding silencing of an urgent dialogue on everything concerning the natural environment is both strange and highly unfortunate. It is always easy to criticise the public discourse and there are endless topics of utmost importance that do not get their deserved attention. But how are ecological or environmental issues dealt with in academic circles? Perhaps academics in the field of the humanities are not the best equipped people in the world to initiate and lead the discussion about and in favour of nature. Nature does not fit into any neat classification such as the academic division of fields. The ideological and conceptual arsenal of the academics is often very removed from nature so they have invested an enormous amount of energy in highly abstract knowledge. Obviously there is considerable indoor activity behind a higher university title and then the nature of the work realised at the centre of culture and education further distances the academic from the wilderness. Therefore, it is a joyful experience to discover the existence of an ever-growing group of literary critics of whom has been said, mockingly of course, that they “would rather be hiking” (Cohen 24).

The American writer Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) is fascinating in so many ways that it is difficult to find another writer from the period who compares to him. He only published two books during his lifetime and they were by no means successful on the commercial level. He had prepared a few manuscripts for publication and then his now famous journals were published posthumously. His fame has been constantly growing and he is remarkably influential in the field and history of political theory, he is crucial in nature literature and serves as an example for many people on

their journey towards personal growth. He spent most of his life in his hometown Concord, Massachusetts and there are two events in his life that have risen to mythological heights. He lived a little over two years in a cabin he built himself by Walden Pond and wrote a book about his life in the woods that has become a classic. During his stay at Walden he went to prison for one night because he did not want to pay a tax to an unjust government. He wrote an essay about that experience that has become both famous and influential, commonly known as “On Civil Disobedience.” Thoreau’s *Walden* has shaped the way Americans think about nature and he is “one of the few American writers to have become canonized as both a popular hero and a hero of high culture” (Buell, *Environmental* 24).

This essay examines Thoreau’s *Walden* in the context of his life and his contemporaries, especially the so called Transcendentalists. The enigmatic Ralph Waldo Emerson requires special attention. The emphasis will be on Thoreau’s writing about nature and I will use some concepts and insights from an ecocritical point of view. I will mainly search inspiration in the works of Lawrence Buell and Robert Kuhn McGregor. Henry David Thoreau’s writings on nature are regarded as canonical in the ecocritical “movement” in literary criticism, thus the discussion will be shifted from his ideas towards modernity and involve the main ideas of ecocriticism. The beginnings, present standing and future possibilities of ecocriticism will be looked at and for the sake of argument some critical comments are added. Henry David Thoreau’s ideas regarding spirituality in nature developed with time and have found resonance in some modern theories within ecology and ecocriticism.

2. Background

2.1 The Transcendentalists

In order to fully understand Henry David Thoreau's writings the cultural situation in the United States at the beginning of the 19th century must first be reviewed. After his graduation from Harvard in 1837, Thoreau, as an aspiring man of letters, entered a very curious and highly interesting cultural atmosphere that would mark his life and writing career. This atmosphere was caused by the movement of the so called Transcendentalists. It is a term used to describe a group of writers, philosophers and social reformers that were highly influential in American society. Lawrence Buell estimates that the Transcendentalists nucleus consisted of some fifty to seventy-five men and women and all the central figures were born during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. The term itself was actually used by "conservative detractors as a synonym for 'German nonsense'" and reluctantly accepted by the Transcendentalists themselves with time (Buell, *Future* 12). It was an "elite" movement from ancient New England stock. Most of the men attended Harvard College and many had ministerial training as Unitarians, but "the Unitarians rejected the orthodox Calvinist doctrine that humankind is born deprived, contending that human nature is inherently improvable" (Buell, *American* xix). The Transcendentalists took the insurgence of the Unitarians against Calvinism a step further and claimed that "individual conscience and inner light" should reign over religious institutions (Buell, *American* xix). The beginnings of Transcendentalism can therefore be traced to a rebellious position against dogmatic religion.

There are many definitions of Transcendentalism and perhaps it is the use of intuition as a method for gaining valid knowledge that is its main characteristic and this position is obviously not compatible with the traditional scientific worldview. It is necessary to look further into the Transcendentalist philosophy: Apart from the "supremacy of insight over logic and experience for the revelation of the deepest truths" one definition also stresses their "belief in the essential unity of all creation and the innate goodness of man" ("Transcendentalism"). They were idealists and their roots can be traced in various directions, for instance to "German Transcendentalism (especially as it was refracted by Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle), Platonism and

Neoplatonism,” and “the writings of such mystics as Emanuel Swedenborg and Jakob Böhme” (“Transcendentalism”).

The Transcendentalists’ rebelliousness was not limited to religious matters as they advocated social equality, and the strong presence of women in the movement was atypical for the times (Buell, *American* xi-xii). Buell stresses two characteristics of their position. They wanted a “new start” and took no established truth for granted. Also they felt that American thought was “provincial” and should look towards France and Germany instead of Britain. Furthermore they found inspiration in Asian wisdom and read the classics of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Islam (*American* xiii). In Buell’s words the Transcendentalists were “both intensely now-centered and zealously cosmopolitan” (*American* xii). It is the oriental side of Transcendentalism that gives some of their writings a touch of eternity and profound wisdom and in the case of Emerson and Thoreau, it adds a genuinely appealing dimension to their text for readers interested in issues of the “meaning of life” character. Aphorisms and elevated language are their trademarks and often they are both polished and original.

This kind of “eternal wisdom” vocabulary has entered some fields of western discourse recently through an endless flow of so called self-improvement books. The Transcendentalists were fond of capitalization: Nature, Truth, Reason etc. Modern discourse in the self-improvement field emphasises concepts like reincarnation, karma, visualisation, intuition and personal relationship with God, with or without capitalisation, and the discourse is strikingly similar. This kind of literature has often been labelled as “New Age” and originates in great part from the USA. Needless to say academia is far from impressed, but the broad public seems more receptive. Multiculturalism and globalization seem to provide fertile ground for individualism and self-improvement.

2.2 Some major figures

In retrospect the most famous Transcendentalists were Emerson, Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. This was by no means obvious at the time and there are many others worth mentioning. Buell finds the following most significant among the founders: Amos Bronson Alcott, George Ripley, Orestes Brownson, Elisabeth Peabody and Frederic Henry Hedge. Ripley, Hedge and Brownson were Unitarian ministers and Hedge turned

back from Transcendentalism to moderate conservatism and kept his ministry. Ripley and Brownson left the church like Emerson. Later Brownson became a Catholic and very critical of his former friends (Buell, *American* xvi). Brownson was a radical and an outspoken critic of social injustice and influenced Thoreau when they worked together in 1835 (Richardson 27). Thus Thoreau's first meeting with Transcendentalism was through social radicalism.

Reformation and activism often went hand in hand inside the Transcendentalist movement. George Ripley and his wife Sophia founded the experimental commune Brook Farm. The experiment lasted from 1841-47 and is quite notorious in American history. In the 1840s members of the so-called Association movement founded over forty utopian socialist communities. Ripley expressed his wish to "combine thinker and worker." Emerson was tempted to go but as his position centered on personal reform of the individual, he did not. Thoreau did not want to come and live in a boarding house, but expressed sympathies for the communal reform policies. Thoreau then moved into Emerson's home, a good arrangement for both men and he stayed there for two years (Richardson 100-103). Alcott and Peabody were educational reformers and Alcott also started his own experimental farm: Fruitland, so named because of the strict diet. The experiment was a disaster. Alcott lived in Concord with his big family and Emerson often had to help him financially. It was not until the daughter Louisa May Alcott gained fame as a writer that the family's financial situation improved (Buell, *American* xvi).

Buell discusses many influential "second generation" Transcendentalists but only three will be mentioned here. Theodore Parker was active in the field of theological radicalism and he also was a fierce abolitionist but the debate over slavery forced many Transcendentalists towards social activism. Emerson and Thoreau are both examples of this development. There were many poets among the younger Transcendentalists like Jonas Very and William Ellery Channing, the latter being an intimate friend of Thoreau and his biographer after his death. According to Buell, the Transcendentalists were mainly interested in philosophy and criticism of art and were at their best in essay writing on such topics rather than purely "creative" expression (*American* xviii).

Robert D. Richardson, the author of an extensive biography of Henry David Thoreau, has expressed an interesting evaluation of the Transcendentalists. He finds it “ironic” that they were thought “to have their heads in the clouds, impractical and otherworldly” (73) when indeed they “found that the ethical consequences of transcendental idealism impelled them into social, political and intellectual reform” (74). Richardson thinks that the American Transcendentalists did not develop German Idealism significantly but the ethical implications of their contribution was important and is still mostly unrecognized (73). The intellectual diversity of the Transcendental movement was a constant source of inspiration to Thoreau, and they were reformers. The spirit of reformation is reflected in his life in the woods as he was showing by example the possibility of a simpler and better life.

2.3 Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was a key figure in the cultural history of America in the 19th century. He was an essayist, poet and lecturer. In his role as an intellectual leader of the Transcendental movement he would gather around him other writers in Concord, Massachusetts. Emerson went to Harvard, worked as a schoolmaster for a few years and then he went to Harvard Divinity School. He became a Unitarian minister in 1829. He married his first wife Ellen Louisa Tucker in 1827. She died two years later and it was the inheritance he received from her estate that laid the foundation for Emerson’s relative wealth, that often became useful when he needed to help less fortunate writers. Emerson was to become a magnet for a colony of writers and reformers and some of them needed money and housing. Emerson’s financial support was, at times crucial for Thoreau, Hawthorn and Alcott. After his wife’s death he lost faith in the religion of the church and resigned from his ministry in 1832. He travelled to Europe and met amongst other Wordsworth, Coleridge and Carlyle. He would maintain his connection with Carlyle till his death in 1881. Emerson moved to Concord in 1834 and lived there for the rest of his life. He started writing essays and giving lectures. In 1835 he married his second wife Lydia Jackson. In the essay “Nature” (1836) he formulated the foundations of Transcendentalism and deeply influenced his friend to be, Henry David Thoreau. Other important essays by Emerson are “Self-Reliance”, “The Over Soul” and “The American Scholar” (Goodman n.p.). “The

American Scholar” has often been called “the nations true declaration of literary independence” (Ruland and Bradbury 105).

In “Nature” Emerson starts by asking: “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (1). The essay went relatively unnoticed in the beginning and to Philip Gura the author’s “charisma derived from a challenge to conventional wisdom rather than for his particular wisdom himself” (96). Emerson expresses himself in poetic language and says when describing a walk in the snow: “I am glad to the brink of fear” (3). Another famous quote in “Nature” describes the ecstasy of the natural experience :

Standing on the bare ground, – – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space – – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (3)

Emerson did not regard nature as permeated by spirituality and Thoreau would later distance himself from him regarding the role of spirit in nature. The essay “Nature” grew in fame and influence as did its author and is now considered central in Transcendental literature. Henry David Thoreau read it in 1836 and it changed his life forever. Another curious fact about “Nature” which also relates to another theme of this essay is a remark from Buell when discussing the beginnings of ecocriticism in America: “Some Americanists might argue that the origin should be set much earlier, at least as far back as Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ‘Nature’ (1836), the first canonical work of US literature to unfold a theory of nature with reference to poetics” (*Future* 13). Ralph Waldo Emerson’s interest in nature was not based on scientific observation but he must be regarded as a pioneer in the field of aesthetic valuation of nature and he managed to draw the theme to the centre of attention thus influencing the field of nature writing.

2.4 Henry David Thoreau

Ralph Waldo Emerson earned the name, The Sage of Concord but Henry David Thoreau was the only Transcendentalist born in the town and he dedicated his life to the study of its history and nature. His famous: “I have travelled a good deal in Concord” (*Walden* 2) is true on many levels. He proved that the crucial factor in travelling is the

intensity not the distance. Some chronology is necessary on the life of this controversial son of Concord. His neighbours often disapproved of his opinions and lifestyle during his lifetime. He was born in 1817 and died in 1862. He went to Harvard University 1833-1837, where he studied rhetoric, classics, philosophy, mathematics and science. He avoided the traditional fields of work for a man of his education. In 1835 he taught in Canton, Massachusetts between terms. After graduation in 1837 he began keeping journals and he taught shortly in Concord public school. He had to leave his job as he refused to inflict corporeal punishment on his students (Myerson xv-xvi). Then he opened a private school with his brother John. Among his students was Louisa May Alcott, daughter of the famous Transcendentalist and educational reformer Bronson Alcott, discussed above. She is first and foremost known for her book *Little Women*, but one of her books *Moods* gives the first fictional description of Thoreau (Cheever 4).

The Thoreau brothers John and Henry David made a trip together in 1839 on the Concord and Merrimack rivers that later became the subject of Thoreau's first book. In 1841 he moved in with Ralph Waldo Emerson and his family. This was a year of terrible tragedies: first John Thoreau died from lockjaw after cutting himself while shaving. He died a slow and painful death in Henry's arms. Then Waldo Emerson's five year old son died of scarlet fever. Both men suffered heavily because of these premature deaths. In 1843 Thoreau went to New York to tutor William Emerson's children. The main purpose of the trip was to try to establish himself as a writer and he had little success. However, he met Howard Greely the editor of *The New York Tribune* who became his friend and a sort of literary agent (Myerson xv-xvi).

Back in Concord, Thoreau accidentally set fire to Concord Woods while hiking with a friend. It took him six years before he could write about this in his journal and his already dubious reputation among his neighbours suffered a serious blow. On July 4th 1845 he moved into a cabin he had built for himself on Emerson's woodlot by Walden Pond. He lived there for over two years. During that time he went one night to jail for not paying taxes (Myerson xv-xvi).

Walden was not published until 1854. In 1849 the book Thoreau wrote to commemorate his brother John, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, was published. He had to pay the cost himself and of the 1000 copies printed, only about 200 were sold. The debt of 300\$ was a financial burden on him and seriously damaged

his friendship with Emerson who had encouraged the adventure. Emerson had praised the book before publication, but criticised it afterwards, thus hurting Thoreau's feelings who found the criticism "poisonous" (McGregor 89-90). These two books were the only ones to be published in Thoreau's lifetime. In the years following his stay at Walden he made a few trips that later resulted in books that were published posthumously: *The Main Woods* (1864), *Cape Cod* (1865) and *A Yankee in Canada* (1866). Henry David Thoreau died in Concord 1862. After his death both biographies and collections from his journals were published and finally the journals were published in totality in 1894 in an eleven volume edition and in 1906 a twenty volume edition (Myerson xv-xvi).

2.5 Emerson and Thoreau: A complicated friendship

Literary friendships are notorious for their complexities but the singular friendship of Emerson and Thoreau is absurdly well documented, open to controversial interpretations and unusually complicated even as such relationships go. Emerson gave a speech at Thoreau's graduation, that later was to become "The American Scholar," urging the "youth of America to free themselves from dependency on European cultural models and to devote themselves to the life of the mind through nature, books and action" (Sattelmayer 27). When Thoreau and Emerson became friends after Thoreau's graduation from Harvard (1837), Thoreau had already read "Nature" and worked with Orestes Brownson in 1835. What certainly must have stimulated him beyond all means was that his small hometown Concord had been turned into the capital of Transcendentalism. Not only did the Emersons live there, but also had Brown Alcott and Nathaniel Hawthorn moved there with their families. Then there was a constant flow of visiting Transcendentalists to Concord and they held meetings at each other's homes (McGregor 36).

Robert Sattelmayer has written about the problematic friendship of Emerson and Thoreau and according to his view it was doomed from the beginning. Nevertheless it was both "important and productive" for both men. They both had problems with intimacy, were quite inflexible (particularly Thoreau) but the worst hindrance was that according to Transcendentalist ideals "true friendship operated on so high a plane that no discussion of it – especially of any problems that might exist with it – could take place" (26). When the ideals are set so high that they are impossible to meet both parties

will suffer, but in this case Thoreau was bound to suffer more for various reasons. At the beginning of their friendship Thoreau venerated Emerson to great extents and there are even stories about him imitating Emerson (34). There was a constant disequilibrium that marked the relationship. Emerson was 14 years senior and “became by the end of his career a national celebrity, the country’s first public intellectual” (Buell, *American* xiv). Their relationship was that of a mentor and a disciple, but the level of closeness was uncommonly high as Emerson often hired Thoreau to work for him as a handyman, and on two occasions Thoreau lived in the Emersons’ house. In 1841-1843 he worked as a handyman and assistant to Emerson in his editing of the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*. Before going to Walden Thoreau lived with Emerson’s brother William in New York as a tutor for his children but the main reason was to try to launch a literary career in the city. After staying on Emerson’s land during the Walden experience, he moved into the house again during Emerson’s prolonged lecture tour to Europe. There was a great fondness between Henry David Thoreau and Lidian Emerson. The exact nature of their feelings has caused much speculation, and highly emotional letters from him to her have been conserved. Difficulties in his friendship with Emerson would therefore result in a double loss. In Emerson’s case he had quite many literary friends and lived a conventional social life as a family man (Sattelmayer 26).

Even though both men started off as ideal friends and then later on they drifted apart complaining to their journals about each other. Complicated as their friendship often was, however they “assisted each other in literary work and at other times their disagreements forced each other to a sharper articulation of his own position” (Sattelmayer 26). Emerson helped Thoreau to initiate his career and Robert Kuhn McGregor, who is very critical of Emerson for his role in Thoreau’s life, admits: “Were it not for Emerson, the twentieth century might never have known Henry David Thoreau” (34).

Emerson’s artistic influence on Thoreau was of paramount importance: nurturing and inspirational, but also to some critics of a negative character and certainly Emerson did not approve of Thoreau’s writings and lifestyle as time passed. After Thoreau’s death Emerson played a crucial role in shaping Thoreau’s literary reputation and this time he plays his part in a bizarre way. He wrote a very controversial eulogy, presenting

a strange description of Thoreau. Sattelmayer points out that even though one “senses admiration and even love” there “is also a persistent thread of disapproval” (36). The eulogy became canonical and “presents Thoreau’s life as one of renunciation and withdrawal” (37). Emerson does not see Thoreau as a writer and says he “had no ambition” (38). Sattelmayer’s conclusion is that Emerson’s “generous support” helped Thoreau to become a writer but the eulogy was absolutely “damaging” for his reputation (38).

3. Walden

3.1 Going to the woods

1845 turned out to be crucial in Thoreau's life as he then built himself a hut by Walden Pond, on a land Emerson had just bought as a woodlot. It is a beautiful place, only a mile and a quarter from the centre of Concord. At the time of Thoreau's stay there were fewer trees than around the pond than now as the deforestation of New England was at its highest. Thoreau had idealised the place since he was a young boy and now the old idea of building a hut became possible. His friend Ellery Channing wrote and urged him to build himself a hut "and there begin the grand process of devouring yourself" (qtd. in Richardson 149). The personal and psychological reasons for going to Walden are the most interesting: It is fascinating to go and live alone with the intention of enriching your inner life. Richardson mentions three "public contexts" regarding the experiment: Horace Greeley led a group of people that wanted to distribute federal land to small farmers. Thoreau supported small sustainable farmers. Another context would be to build an experimental farm like Brook Farm based on one man's absolute self reliance. The third context is the most political. In the turmoil over the Mexican war of 1845 and the abolition cause, Fredrick Douglass' story *My Bondage and My Freedom* served as an inspiration for Thoreau: Walden was his personal liberation (Richardson 148-151). He stayed there for two years and later wrote the famous book about his experience.

Actually Thoreau needed a place to write and he wrote *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* when he lived at Walden. That book is therefore in a way a better document than *Walden* of his worldview and philosophy at the time of his residence in the woods. As mentioned above *A Week* is based on a journey Thoreau undertook with his brother John, and it is dedicated to his memory though he is never mentioned in the book.

The interpretation of the book *Walden* is neither as simple nor established as might be expected of a book published over 150 years ago. There are many reasons for this curious fact. In *Walden* Thoreau uses the first personal "I" to such an extent that it is mesmerizing and the results are of extreme intimacy: the reader feels he is listening to the confidant of a friend. The first drafts of *Walden* were actually lectures Thoreau gave in the Concord Lyceum, so Thoreau had tried the first versions on an

audience and the final text retains some smoothness of spoken language. In the second paragraph of the book he explains how the curiosity of his townsmen had brought him to tell about his life and he explains why he uses the “I” saying that he is “confined to this theme by the narrowness of his experience” and adds “I require of every writer first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life” (*Walden* 1-2). It can be maintained that *Walden* is anything but narrow and not at all sincere in the meaning that the “I” of the book is a creation of Thoreau and as the book was completed nine years and seven drafts after the actual experience: “and the story definitely grew and changed in content and emphasis in every telling” (McGregor 60). Further complications result from Emerson’s promotion of his theory in the eulogy of Thoreau as a solitary hermit that, though rejected by scholars nowadays, is very much alive among the general public (McGregor 60).

Everything concerning Thoreau’s life after he started keeping his journals is well documented, his correspondence is conserved and his writer-friends also kept their colossal diaries. Nevertheless scholars speculate why he went to the pond and even why he left as he himself is enigmatic about it. He says himself: “I went to the woods because I wanted to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (*Walden* 88). Actually he needed a place to live and a refuge to write in peace. This relatively short period by the pond was the only time in this famous “hermit’s” life that he lived alone and he had duties to perform in his other homes: either taking care of Emerson’s children or working in the pencil-making business of his own family.

3.2 Philosophy of life in Walden

Thoreau attacks the work ethics of his times and recommends a life of leisure, filled with the pleasure of direct experience of nature. His book *Walden* consists of eighteen chapters and the first one, “Economy” is by far the longest, almost eighty pages. It is Thoreau’s manifesto both polemic and belligerent and even though the message is deadly serious he can be quite funny. Many of the aphorisms in “Economy” are well known and often quoted, such as: “The mass of men lead a life of quiet desperation” (*Walden* 7). He attacks this situation by demonstrating with his example how the rhythm of life can be changed. As he particularly addresses poor students (*Walden* 2)

his advice is to simplify life: to live without luxuries and stop being a “slavedriver of oneself” (*Walden* 6). In a hilariously exact account of his costs of building the hut the final amount is \$28 12 ½ when the annual rent for a student’s room at Cambridge is \$30 (*Walden* 47-48). So it is a practical solution to build a hut for oneself if the student desires to study in peace. Thoreau needed to simplify his life out of necessity, after building the hut he had no money to live on, though he grew beans in an attempt to create an income. Schneider discusses Thoreau’s philosophy of work but his goal was always to work less thus earning the only capital that matters: time for self-culture. Thoreau makes a very short list of the necessities in life: clothing, shelter, food and fuel, emphasising simplicity in every case, even vegetarianism up to a point. By saving time or “amount of life” which constitute the true cost of things, he diverts the theories of Jean-Baptiste Say and Adam Smith from materialistic towards spiritual ends. In the case of the former saving time instead of money and invest it in spiritual self-culture. Smith argued for freedom of the individual and Thoreau advises to use that freedom for spiritual advancement (Schneider, 99-100).

The chapter where the Transcendentalism shines brightest is “Higher Laws”. It starts in a most bizarre way. Thoreau is on his way home with a string of fish and his pole when: “I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and I felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for the wildness which he represented” (*Walden* 202). What a remarkable beginning of a chapter that will turn into a rather a strict sermon on spirituality. After this bloody beginning Thoreau slowly begins to build his case. First of all he admits his dualistic nature: spiritual and primitive. He says “I reverence them both” (*Walden* 202). He then describes the pleasure of hunting and fishing and recommends it to boys as a form of education. He thinks that hunters and fishermen are often closer to nature than philosophers or poets. Then he says “I have found repeatedly, of late years that I cannot fish without falling a little in self-respect” (*Walden* 205). From that statement he condemns overeating and the consumption of all animal food, wine, coffee and tea. His advice to the wise man is to drink water (*Walden* 206-208). Thoreau furthermore recommends chastity and calls it “the flowering of man” adding that “Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open” (*Walden* 211). Jeffrey Cramer, the renowned Thoreauvian, quotes in an annotation in context of these

ideas in his *Walden* edition, an essay by Thoreau where he remarks: “If it is the result of pure love, there can be nothing sensual in marriage” (*Walden* 212). In the same annotation Thoreau admits in a letter to a friend that he may be “betraying my peculiar defects” regarding this topic (*Walden* 212). There has much been written about Thoreau’s sexuality and I am not going to enter that discussion here, but these views on chastity and the original suggestion of “lofty” marriages shows well his seriousness and firm commitment to mysticism and spirituality according to the Hindu tradition. Needless to say is this chapter too “transcendental” for many readers and otherworldly and monkish as these ideas may seem it must be emphasised that Thoreau is quite humoristic and down to earth throughout the book.

3.3 Hindu writings

Thoreau was a Harvard man and following the trend of the times he quoted the classics extensively in his writings. Furthermore, he draws on the Oriental tradition, but his studies of Hinduism revolutionised his spiritual life. The one book most often cited in *Walden* is the “Bhagavad Gita” the classical poem of Hinduism where Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna about the philosophy of action and enlightenment. Professor Robert Kuhn McGregor has researched the extent of Thoreau’s oriental studies which he intensified after the disappointment following the publication of *A Week*. Thoreau had access to Hindu literature in Emerson’s library and through his special lifelong permission to use Harvard’s library. He studied the “Bhagavad Gita” during his stay at Walden and he translated from *Mahabharatha* one of its stories: “The Transmigration of the Seven Brahmans.” He further read the Vedas and Upanishads. According to Kuhn McGregor, Thoreau’s studies were, on the surface, in the field of morality and aiming at a “more perfect intellectual life” moving to an intensive study of the stories of creation, further leading him “to develop a view of nature unique in the Western society of his time” (96-100).

The world view of the day was that only “God and humanity possessed a spirit” and the Judeo-Christian tradition and the new natural sciences “promoted the objectification of the world” (McGregor 100). Emerson then claimed that the “world of God and spirit extended to plants and animals” but “he denied the value of the

objective, sensate world.” Thoreau’s vision is that the “spiritual and natural world were inseparable and present all around him” and “it was there to be understood” (McGregor 100). His interpretations of these age old beliefs in modern context led him to “challenge the notion that nature existed only for the use of humankind” and from now on he would investigate “each part of nature he encountered with reference to the principles that held all the parts together” (McGregor, 100).

Another scholar, Robert D. Richardson in his biography of Thoreau, *Henry Thoreau: A life of the Mind*, discusses the fundamental influence the Hindu book *The Law of Menu* had on Thoreau, whose response was of a “strongly religious nature to a great revelation” (107). According to him, Thoreau “found himself agreeing with the concept of god in Menu, which considers ‘all nature both visible and invisible as existing in the divine spirit’ and with the concept of man as participating in the divine” (109). Thoreau’s studies in Hinduism shaped his holistic view of nature and curiously, the influences of these age old beliefs and texts give his writing a quality of timelessness and universality that appeals to many modern readers.

The ideas of nature permeated by spirit are of course existent all over the world. One modern and well known exponent of a theory of consciousness being the basis of creation is Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who has translated and interpreted the *Bhagavad Gita*. The famous Chapter II, verse 45 states:

The Vedas’ concern is with the three
gunas. Be without the three gunas,
O Arjuna, freed from duality, ever
firm in purity, independent of possession,
possessed of the self. (90)

The interpretation of this verse is crucial for Maharishi’s teaching of meditation, the well-known Transcendental Meditation system. Here Krishna teaches Arjuna the technique of “instantaneous realization” (90). By meditating in a certain way people can transcend the thought process and enter a field that permeates creation, which in this book is called Being. The experience transforms the individual as he has enlivened natural law in his soul and all creation (350). It is interesting to compare the parallels

between such a radical interpretation of these age old texts to the ideology of the Transcendentalists. Literary criticism and social theory have been extremely occupied with the fate of marginalized groups of people: maybe theories concerning growth of consciousness can be classified as marginalized from the intellectual debate? If people can directly experience the basic field of consciousness and nature as identical then it is indeed a revolutionary idea and certainly outside the frame of accepted opinion. Unfortunately, Thoreau did not have access to a teacher who could teach him how to meditate and realise directly the Vedas in his soul, but that fact makes his accomplishment even more admirable, as he had to reach his conclusions on his own and against the established ideology of the times. It is the religious and mystical side of Thoreau that colours his nature writing so vividly, even when he is being most objective in his descriptions.

3.4 Writing about nature

Interesting as Thoreau's opinions on politics, economy or mysticism may be, it is his writing about nature that constitutes his fame today. Through his books, essays and extensive journals, scholars are able to follow his development as a nature writer. They have also compared the various drafts of *Walden* to each other and then to the journals. Lawrence Buell wrote a landmark book about ecocriticism that was published in 1995, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture*. He remarks: "Appearances of self-contradiction notwithstanding, the development of Thoreau's thinking about nature seems pretty clearly to move along a path from homocentrism toward biocentrism" (138). Buell uses here the word homocentrism for what is generally known as anthropocentrism.

Walden's fame rests on the book's many aspects: it is about politics, self-improvement and it contains some of the most interesting examples of nature writing written in English. When Thoreau went to the woods he was not at all a specialist in natural sciences of any kind. His approach to nature was of a literary kind and he was highly influenced by Emerson and his "Nature". It is during his stay at Walden and the following years while he is writing and rewriting the book that he becomes the great nature lover, self-educated natural scientist and nature writer. There are many theories regarding the change in Thoreau's vision of nature and why he moved from his literary

and abstract view towards his absolute absorption in nature. McGregor has studied this development and he links the shift in Thoreau's consciousness to the Ktaadn incident that happened in 1846 during Thoreau's first trip into the wilderness of Maine. He had been living over a year at Walden and took systematic notes on the trip as his eyes had opened up at Walden for nature observation (69). He climbed Mount Ktaadn and this contact with harsh wilderness had an enormous impact on him. Later he would describe his experience in an essay and a famous and often cited passage that has caused much speculation ends like this:

Think of our life in nature, – daily to be shown matter, to come into contact with it, – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! The *common sense!* *Contact!* *Contact!* *Who* are we? *where* are we? (qtd. in McGregor 82).

McGregor interprets this passage and the whole Ktaadn experience as the realisation of a man discovering that nine years spent regarding nature as a symbol had been “a sad mistake” (82). According to McGregor nature became central in Thoreau's thinking after this trip (83).

In *Walden* Thoreau condenses his two years' experience into the description of one year in the woods. The book is organised around the seasonal changes: it starts in summer and culminates with the chapter “Spring,” when nature awakens after winter, the process becoming a metaphor for spiritual rebirth. The pond itself serves constantly as a metaphor for the human soul. From the literary point of view the greatest strength of the book stems from the enormous power of the pond as a symbol for the spiritual part of nature. Furthermore its metaphorical usage to show “correspondence” with the soul of man comes most naturally, whatever the reader might think of such correspondence exercises. It is difficult to think of any other natural phenomenon that could serve as well the purpose of reflecting the cyclic changes in nature and the “living” aspect of what is sometimes called dead nature. The strongest presence in the book is not the consciousness of the “I” or Thoreau, genial as it is most of the time, but that of the pond. Buell comments on the personification of the pond and finds

his evocation of a nonhuman entity as a major presence, superior to any human being in the text, the narrator included, is an extraordinary event in the

premodern American literary canon, matched only by Melville's white whale.
(*Environmental* 209)

In the chapter called "The Ponds" there is a description of Walden and the other ponds in the neighbourhood. These descriptions are full of naturalistic details of the ponds themselves and the animals, birds and fish that live there, often labelled with their Latin names. Even though Thoreau is often dealing on the surface with matters of scientific nature, his style is nowhere in the book as poetic and polished as it is in this chapter. Some descriptions are of an idyllic character. Thoreau is on a boat fishing:

It was very queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmogonical themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook. (*Walden* 170)

There are many descriptions of the colour of the water of the pond: "Walden is blue at one time and green at another, even from the same point of view. Lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes of the color of both." He carries on describing the color of the pond adding: "Such is the color of its iris" (*Walden* 171). Still another example of Thoreau's personification of the pond can be seen in the following quote:

A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature. The fluviate trees next the shore are the slender eyelashes which fringe it, and the wooded hills and cliffs around are its overhanging brows. (*Walden* 180)

Even though Buell does not reach as extensive conclusions about Thoreau's vision of nature's spirituality as Kuhn McGregor does from his Hinduism, he analyses extensively nature's personhood in *Walden* in relation to Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy" or "the ascription of human feelings to nature" (*Environmental* 183). He maintains while discussing Catherine Albanese's theories that "although Thoreau moved further towards 'spiritual paganism' than Emerson, 'he never fully got there,' at least not by the time *Walden* was written" (209). Buell regards the "pathetic fallacy" important as a source for giving environmental care a voice (218).

3.5 Other writings and further studies

Emerson asked Thoreau when they met in 1837 if he kept a journal. Thoreau immediately started to write a journal and kept at it for twenty-five years reaching two million words in the end. His sister Sophia came in charge of the journals at his death in 1861 and she did not want to see them published. Before her death in 1876 only excerpts prepared by Emerson and Ellery Channing were published. Then various selections appeared until 1906 when the journals were published in their totality (with minor exceptions). Since then they have been published four times and over twenty selections from them (Cramer xix-xxiii).

The journals functioned as a source for Thoreau when writing his books or essays and now they are read by scholars of diverse fields. Here is a typical sample to demonstrate how he thought about the role of nature. This is from October 29, 1857:

If, as a poet or naturalist, you wish to explore a given neighborhood, go and live in it, *i.e.* get your living in it. Fish in its streams, hunt in its forests, gather fuel from its waters, its woods, cultivate the ground, and pluck the wild fruits, etc., etc. (*I to myself* 344)

This conviction that nature should be the central topic in his writings came slowly to Thoreau. The Transcendentalists published a magazine called *The Dial* and the only thing Thoreau wrote during the first ten years of his writing career related to natural writing was a review essay for the magazine called “The Natural History of Massachusetts.” His themes during these years were typically Transcendental. He wrote about virtues, English poetry and historical figures (McGregor 54). It was Thoreau’s ambition to become the American scholar and poet that Emerson advocated. He avoided the subject of nature during this period (McGregor 50). In the first draft of *Walden* he does not mention the woods for the first seventy pages (McGregor 75).

The transformation that Thoreau went through during the Walden years and possibly after the Ktaadan incident discussed above regarding his appreciation of nature is best reflected in his journals, especially from the years 1851-1861. In the journals he polished his skills as a writer and a naturalist. His goal was to record nature’s action on a “daily basis” and it was “an all-consuming way of life” (McGregor 121). He went for a long walk every day and wrote about it in his constantly growing journal. Thus he

combined a “faithful record of natural phenomena and a presentation framed in prose poetry – science and art” (McGregor 177).

Henry David Thoreau’s unique position within the world of natural writing is of special interest to the ecocritic. An important aspect of his position is reflected in the fact that he was “the first major Anglo-American creative writer to begin to think systematically of native culture as providing models of environmental perception” (Buell, *Environmental* 211). He plunged into a “systematic scholarly research,” invested enormous energy in his Indian studies, writing extracts from many books and found the annual Canadian *Jesuit Relations* from the seventeenth century particularly useful. He also gathered personally much information when he met Indians and according to Richardson his observations contain “few generalizations” and “few comparisons with the white man” (Richardson 223). Even though Thoreau’s studies of the native American’s world did not result in a great book about the theme, these investigations form an integral part of Thoreau’s intellectual life and reinforce his vision of life in affective closeness with animistic nature.

Thoreau did not regard himself as a scientist but his extensive reading of scientific literature and his constant observation of nature made it possible for him to enter the scientific debate as his ideas expressed in “The Succession of Forest Trees” received considerable interest. The essay was “a plea for conservation” and he “criticized the farmers’ abuse and mismanagement of their woodlots” (McGregor 191). He was at odds with his neighbours and he realized how the materialist society exploited nature and this was mainly obvious in the incessant deforestation of the times. Thoreau proposed that the banks of Concord River would be public land and also the preservation of a forest in every township of 500 – 1000 acres (Buell, *Environmental* 212-213). Regarding these views Thoreau is surprisingly ahead of his times and in tune with modern ecological thinking and environmentalism.

4. Ecocriticism

4.1 Why?

The story of literary criticism shows that theories come and go, influence each other and either survive or die. Peter Barry in his book *Beginning Theory* writes a chapter on ecocriticism, claiming that his book is the first one of its kind to do so (Barry 239). Therefore ecocriticism can be classified as to be knocking on the door of academic respectability. When new theories come forth they have to fight for survival in the atmosphere of harsh academic Darwinism that rules university life. The initial phase of a theory is characterised by a missionary zeal and in the case of ecocriticism, nothing less than the message: Listen to us and we can certainly revolutionise literary criticism and simultaneously develop the necessary theoretical framework for analysing human interaction with the environment.

If ecocriticism is to be understood it is necessary to go to the roots and the best question to start with is: why should there be a specific literary theory based on environmental issues? Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm edited a book in 1996 that was called *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. It contains over twenty articles mostly written around 1990 that have earned their place in the book because of their historical merit. Professor Glen Love describes the first steps of ecocriticism in his article “Revaluing Nature.” He starts by quoting Toynbee’s saying that if mankind does not “take prompt and vigorous” action the earth will become uninhabitable as a victim of “short sighted human greed” (225). Love then numbers the “doomsday potentialities” such as global warming, acid rain, toxic poisoning of the oceans and more. He then asks why English – “our field” – does not react to the imminent catastrophe (226). He points out that the words race, class and gender are heard everywhere at professional meetings but “the English Profession has failed to respond in any significant way to the issue of the environment” (226). It is difficult to ignore Love’s arguments and he has localised the one burning problem facing humanity and the possible disastrous consequences of our recklessness regarding the environment. We are “environmentally conscious and ecologically aware” we just fail to show it in our professional life and according to Love we care about these issues, just not enough (227). For him, “literary criticism and theory remain peculiarly unaffected” by the

problems at the forefront of public concern and are “engaged implicitly or explicitly in the body of works to which we have given our professional lives” (229). Love tells the story of a New York publisher dismissing a Norman Maclean’s book by saying: “These stories have trees in them.” According to Love this is a sign of anthropomorphic thinking and part of the “ironical misunderstanding that society is complex while nature is simple” and “that nature is dull and uninteresting while society is sophisticated and interesting” (230). Revaluing nature can “provide us with our best hope of recovering the lost role of literary criticism” (238).

Love wrote his article in 1990 and since then the impact of ecological ideology has grown and its influence on the shaping our minds is increasing. Children are taught the basic values of environmental protection and it is politically correct to be conscious and sensitive regarding ecological problems: students should therefore be relatively well equipped with pre-existing knowledge when introduced to ecocriticism. Perhaps the world is waiting for a disastrous event of unsurpassable proportions that would make environmentalism a priority on the world’s agenda, including of course literary criticism. When these lines are written nobody knows how the nuclear crisis following the recent earthquake in Japan will develop but so far the world has witnessed a true apocalyptic situation.

4.2 First Steps

When it comes to defining ecocriticism Cheryl Glotfelty’s definition is often chosen: “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty XVIII). This provocatively simple definition is both powerful and important because in a nutshell this is the core of ecocriticism: we need to shift our attention and consequently reevaluate our concepts regarding literature and worldview. Buell describes how, when he was a young student of literature, “setting” was considered one of the four building blocks of literature the others being “plot”, “character” and “theme” but the term was “vaguely defined” and not considered important. The actuality of the burning environmental issues has since changed this situation (*Future* 3-5).

Ecocriticism does not have a fixed set of methods in critical analysis nor does it revolve around a central figure. It is therefore interesting and useful to look at its history

and introduce some of the main ideas in the process. Buell describes how a number of the “early ecocritics looked to the movement chiefly as a way of ‘rescuing’ literature from the distantiations of reader from text and text from the world that had been ushered by the structuralist revolution in critical theory” (*Future* 6). This view is of course highly polemical and nobody can claim ownership of the right vision of how literary theory and criticism should be. I find the door opened into the field of literary criticism by the ecocritics inviting and needless to say any new door that attracts people towards the field of literary studies must be regarded as a gain for the whole field. Why spend years studying something that you do not want to know to begin with and nothing less than a miracle seems to be able to change that situation? Hypothetically put: it is easy to think of theories that could become a hindrance between the reader and literature. When the terminology and theoretical framework surpass a certain level of complexity and abstraction the literary text runs the risk of being overpowered. The student, or reader, may be at fault for this situation and with patience and dedication he might be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel or, on the other hand, there is the possibility that some theories simply are a waste of time.

Ecocriticism is often compared to the topic-driven literary criticism of class, gender and race. There is of course one fundamental difference, that “no human can speak *as* the environment, *as* nature, *as* a nonhuman animal” (Buell, *Future* 7). We always have a human voice describing and interpreting nature and this situation becomes somehow surrealistic when one of the key concepts in ecocriticism is anthropocentrism and the goal is to avoid its implications. In short this term signifies “the view that the interests of humans are of higher priority than those of nonhumans.” The antonyms would be biocentrism or ecocentrism (Buell, *Future* 134). It takes considerable effort to come to terms with this concept and the consequential loss of human superiority, that is such an integral part of our culture’s ideology. Often when the discourse is highly elevated a word of warning is necessary: “Although there is something potentially noble about human attempts to speak ecocentrically against human dominationism, unless one proceeds very cautiously there soon becomes something quixotic and presumptuous about it too” (Buell, *Future* 8). There is always this danger in literary theory that the theoretical aspect overshadows literature and in the case of ecocriticism the correct position in environmentalism can become the main issue

and the ideological battles are fought in the field of pure theory with all the similar “labelling” mechanisms and power politics as within the theories concerning class or gender. If literary criticism is considered in a purely materialist tradition as any other industry then the situation can become paradoxical when works of art are judged according to how they fit a certain theory.

Peter Barry says that ecocriticism as a special approach began in the USA in the late 1980s and in the UK in the early 1990s. The term first arose within the Western Literature Association and the “movement” is strongest in the universities of the West, away from the most prestigious universities, thus embodying a notion of decentralism. Relatively early, or in 1992, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, ASLE, was founded and its journal is called *ISLE* (Barry 239-240). As a result of ecocriticism’s now over 20 years history of solid organisation in the USA an enormous amount of information has been gathered and is easily accessible. During those years the movement has developed and matured. Lawrence Buell differentiates between what he calls first wave and second wave ecocriticism (*Future* 8). His own definition from 1995 would then serve as an example of first wave ecocriticism. He defines the premises for a literary work to be labelled environmentally oriented, in a shortened version, thus:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.
2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.
4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text (Environmental 7-8) .

First wave ecocritics concentrated on the natural environment and nature writing while second wave have incorporated the built environment and the social aspect of literature. The definition above is a typical “first wave” definition and Buell has revised it. He says that he found nature writing to be “too restrictive, and that a mature environmental aesthetics – or ethics, or politics – must take into account the interpenetration of metropolis and outback, of anthropocentric as well as biocentric concerns” (*Future* 22-

23). Now, he explains, he finds it “more productive to think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text – to maintain that all human artifacts bear such traces, and at several stages: in the composition, the embodiment, and the reception” (*Future* 25).

The ecological movement is very colourful and different ideological positions are perhaps its most typical characteristic. What is most interesting from the point of view related to Thoreau’s legacy is the revival of theories of spirit in nature and a holistic view of the universe. One such theory is James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis. He regards the totality of living matter to constitute a “single living entity” (Buell, *Environmental* 200). This personification of the planet has various implications and of course there are controversial interpretations of the theory. Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism* analyses this debate and mentions among others, deep ecologists and eco-spiritualists as attracted to the idea. He says that the Earth-goddess name “allows Gaia to be appropriated as the object of global environmental consciousness, and perhaps veneration too” (174). Buell agrees with the importance of the “living” planet concept and even states that the position of some scientists is the acknowledgement of the impossibility and desirability of separating “serious science” discourse from “popular superstition” discourse (*Environmental* 201). Garrard chooses Ernest Callenbach to represent a highly critical view of the Gaia idea: he says “Gaia is not a conscious entity” and those who think of her as “a stand-in for a Supreme Being or God are misinformed” (174). The debate is open but it is a sign of a different argumentative discourse culture if people are willing to accept ideas contrary to their convictions because of their value from an ethical point of view.

The mechanical universe proposed by the scientific revolution leaves no room for spirit in nature. Many ecologists oppose this view and Plumwood finds it “reductionist” when nature “ceases to have any worth or meaning beyond that assigned to it by reason.” She connects this view of nature with the rise of capitalism (qtd. in Garrard 62). Buell describes the position of the feminist neopaganism and its figure of the Goddess as the “unshakeable persistence of the repeatedly discredited dream of a living, sentient earth” (*Environmental* 217).

4.3 A critical voice and a vision of the future

Professor Michel P. Cohen is an environmental historian but there seems to be a professional friction between environmental historians and ecocritics in university circles. In his article, “Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism under Critique,” he starts with a warning: “If you want to be an ecocritic, be prepared to explain what you do and be criticized, if not satirized” (10). He says that ecocriticism should draw on “science, history and philosophy while critiquing these sources” otherwise its interest is of little more value than “the unexamined views of literature professors who are also amateur environmentalists” (11). Cohen’s position is not that we should think like scientists “but we should know how they think” (13).

Cohen discusses the writings of the ecocritics stating that many of their books lack “focus”, they are “accumulative” rather than “analytic”. He calls this version the “praise-song school” (21). He also mentions the style called “narrative scholarship” a meditative but not analytical style and “in homage to Thoreau, perhaps, it includes the first person” (22). He goes on in relation to this topic: “Such lyrical, nearly religious work approaches a timeless harmony, and seems to be beyond rational scrutiny” (22). Here Cohen touches a delicate subject. It must be confessed that this analysis of the elevated dialogue in nature writing can be straight to the point. Spirituality combined with poetic language is not to the liking of most people and can be mind-bogglingly boring to the majority. It is always difficult to deal with personal taste when it comes to literature so in an attempt to respond to this criticism, it must be pointed out that just as it is necessary to know how a scientist thinks when discussing ecological matters the critic must, to give an example, know how to think like a mystic when criticizing mystical texts. They must be of the same varied quality as other texts and regarded as such. An elevated theme demands an elevated style but the problem is indeed stylistically complicated and Buell’s use of the term “quixotic” in discussion above, can be recycled in this context.

Cohen identifies the most obvious dangers of narrative scholarship: The books tend to turn into travelogues, the environmental topics are not based on scholarship and tend to shift “to lessons on ‘the kind of life worth living’ that are testimonial” (22). According to Cohen the ecocritics must realize that:

Criticism is not the same as sermonizing; it must be able to entertain ideas as they are established. Not simply descriptive, it requires making judgements, positive and negative, about the texts under inspection and about the critical perspective being used. (23)

Cohen claims that there are no negative book reviews in *ISLE* and suspects that internal critique is suppressed in the ASLE movement (23).

Another cause of warning from Cohen is that there is a tendency to use “established nature writers to be reliable theorists on nature writing” (26). The critic becomes a “fan” (25). If the critic writes like Emerson “the critical art becomes an affirmation and a religious art” (26). He also points at the obvious fact that as “Ecocritics constitute an interpretative community whose work focuses primarily on literature not ‘nature’ and this activity must be ‘anthropocentric’ ” (26). Finally he states that the goal for both ecocriticism and environmental history is “to facilitate clearer thinking in the future about human transactions with environments, and to facilitate better nature writing in the future” (30).

After this strong criticism by professor Cohen I want to end this with Lawrence Buell’s vision of the future of ecocriticism. He says: “If such a thing as global culture ever comes into being, environmentalism will surely be one of the catalysts” (*Environmental 3*). Nobody knows how exactly the development will be in the next few years, however the importance of environmental issues seems only to increasing both inside academic circles and in the public discourse. Regarding the practise of ecocriticism he discusses four challenges that face the ecocritical movement: the challenge of organization, the challenge of professional legitimation, the challenge of defining distinctive models of critical inquiry, and the challenge of establishing their significance beyond the academy (*Future 128*). Regarding the first challenge the “gains are impressive” as ASLE has become a “worldwide network”. The second challenge is not such a success as environmental criticism “clearly does not yet have the standing within the academy of other such issue driven discourses as those of race, gender, sexuality, class and globalization” (*Future 129*). The third challenge, the one of “methodological originality” has not been met. As an explanation Buell mentions feminist, black studies and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as theories that changed the subject and demanded attention. According to Buell this is far from “being trivial

achievements” (*Future* 130). The fourth challenge has met success in the “pedagogical arena.” Teachers and artists have been highly inventive but the market for ecocritical writings has been within academia (*Future* 132). According to his evaluation there is “nothing inherently shameful about the present situation” (*Future* 132). Buell points out that the intellectual quality of Said’s *Orientalism* and Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* changed history and he thinks that environmental criticism will be regarded as having “established environmentality as a permanent concern for literary and other humanists” through a “constellation” of intellectual works (*Future* 133).

5. Conclusion

The Transcendentalists represent the naissance of American thought. They have been described as a group and then some individuals in particular. Their pioneerism in many fields and spirit of reformation connected with direct action is exemplary: from experimental farms to reformatory schools. The ideology of the movement has been discussed and connected with some ideas within the ecological movement and ecocriticism.

Ralph Waldo Emerson is a colossal figure in American culture history. His poetry, his essays and his career as a public speaker is of utmost importance but his influence on so many artists is particularly noteworthy and often other artists seem to be responding to an idea first expressed by Emerson, or even just to some of his vibrant personal energy. Walt Whitman said: "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to the boil" (qtd. in Ruland and Bradbury 129).

Henry David Thoreau and his precious pond form the centre of this essay. His book *Walden* is remarkable in multifacetous ways and even though books on ecocriticism are probably not on any best-sellers lists, he is surprisingly often quoted in this relatively new and vigorous field of literary criticism. He demonstrates that one man in a hut by a pond can lead his life in fullness. There are so many things to be learned from him today both for scholars and literary critics and also for the common man. His absolute commitment to nature on the physical, spiritual and artistic levels is inspiring to say the least. Thoreau blended scientific knowledge with systematically cultivated power of perception in an artistic way. It is interesting to think of his intellectual development because he only had a very superficial knowledge of nature when he moved to Walden as has been discussed in this essay. As many scholars have pointed out when he describes how Walden frees itself of the ice in spring he might just as well be describing the radical transformation of his own soul.

The relatively new movement of ecocriticism needs its saints and Thoreau is the most powerful historical figure in American nature writing. He attracts attention to the values of nature and generates affection towards the living nature that must be the single most important issue for the ecocritical movement. There are so many interpretations of Thoreau's life and work. In this essay his holistic vision of a spirited nature has been

emphasised drawing largely on Robert Kuhn McGregor's work. These ideas about nature's spirituality have risen to the surface in the environmentalist movement. No far reaching conclusions will be drawn; no predictions about the development or importance of these ideas will be made here. The fact that they are present is simply fulfilling.

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