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"The Poem of Concord" and the Structure of Thoreau’s "Natural History of Massachusetts"

by NING YU

ALTHOUGH THOREAU’S interest in geography screams to be noticed even in the titles of his major works—A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, Maine Woods, Cape Cod and A Yankee in Canada—few critics have seriously considered the important role geography, the science of space, plays in Thoreau’s imagination and composition. The Humboldtian “new geography,” the most sophisticated science of geography of Thoreau’s time, provided Thoreau with a congenial model which represents the cosmos as a spatially interrelated whole. The physical landscape of New England, too, inspired Thoreau and informed his writings. The Concord River, for instance, as “a huge volume of matter, ceaselessly rolling through the plains and valleys of the substantial earth” (A Week 11), connects the first inland town in New England to the rest of the country and the world; it offered Thoreau a chance to “associate our muddy but much abused Concord river with the most famous in history” (12). “The Mississippi,” Thoreau continues, following the law of association, “the Ganges, and the Nile, those journeying atoms from the Rocky Mountains, the Himalæh, and Mountains of the Moon, have a kind of personal importance in the annals of the world” (12). The slightly elevated position of Walden Pond also gave Thoreau a perspective from which he viewed the neighboring swamps as connected with the boundless “prairies of the West and the Steppes of Tartary” (Walden 87). Thoreau’s geographical association helps convince readers that they don’t have to go to a remote place to get a fresh view of the world. In Walden Thoreau symbolically uses geography to present the vision of an immediate connection between the local and the universal. The meandering course of the river and the intermediate position of the pond between heaven and earth are appropriately the organizing symbols of Thoreau’s two major works published in his lifetime.

Indeed, from the beginning of his literary career, Thoreau was aware of the importance of the spatial relations among natural phenomena and the potential of such relations for his literary endeavor. In one of his early journal entries Thoreau laid out a plan for a local epic that he wished to write:


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I think I could write a poem to be called Concord—For argument I should have the River—the Woods—the Ponds—the Hills—the Fields—the Swamps and Meadows—the Streets and Buildings—and the Villagers. Then Morning—Noon—and Evening—Spring—Autumn and Winter—Night—Indian Summer—and the Mountains in the Horizon. (Princeton Journal I, 330)

This apparently sketchy plan is rich in suggestions. In this passage Thoreau presents Concord as a microcosm, an organic whole whose component parts are knit together primarily by space and secondarily by time; Thoreau begins the picture of his hometown with “the Rivers—the Woods—the Ponds—the Hills—the Fields—the Swamps and Meadows—the Streets and Buildings,” and then moves on to scenes of “Morning—Noon—and Evening—Spring—Autumn and Winter.” The connection between the world of Concord and the larger environment is also spatially depicted; the hills, fields, swamps and meadows in Thoreau’s town are linked to the outside world by the Concord River that once led the Thoreau brothers to the mountains “in the Horizon” in New Hampshire. The most interesting characteristic of Thoreau’s plan is perhaps the position that human beings and civilization occupy in the small world of Concord. The villagers, together with their buildings and streets, are not at the center of Thoreau’s microcosm; instead, they are tagged at the end of the list of spatial objects, as a few ordinary items in the landscape and nothing more. This plan also reveals Thoreau’s intention to use spatial relations as well as diurnal and seasonal cycles to organize his experience of Concord, and thereby to structure his literary works.

Although Thoreau didn’t fully carry out this plan in any of his finished works, its essential elements inform most of his major literary projects ranging from Walden to the Journal. His earliest published experiment with this plan, however, is the “Natural History of Massachusetts,” nominally a book review written for the July 1842 issue of The Dial.

Most Thoreauvians regard “Natural History of Massachusetts” as an early nature essay weak in form. Sherman Paul points out that at its best the essay has an “incipient” use of the seasonal cycle as an organizing principle (121). Robert Sattelmeyer reflects a consensus when he says that the essay was “an apprentice work which neither finds a structure of its own nor actually reviews the volumes named.”2 Not until recently did critics attempt to offer revisionist interpretations and evaluations of the purpose and the structure of “Natural History.” Kevin P. Van Anglen, for instance, argues that most critics regard “Natural History” as weakly structured because they read it only as a nature essay. Van Anglen offers an alternative reading of Thoreau’s nominal book review as an attempt to empower the author himself with “cultural authority,” and to claim that literary imagination is at least as reliable

and authoritative as the Baconian method based on detached observation and scientific classification. Assuming such authority in order really to gain it, Van Anglen argues, Thoreau wrote this essay in the form of a Puritan sermon, faithfully filling the rigid sections of the sermon: doctrine, proposition, demonstration, application, and peroration.

While remaining open to Van Anglen’s religious and political reading of “Natural History,” I don’t think that read as a nature essay Thoreau’s early piece is necessarily weak in structure. In this study I propose a spatial reading of the essay which reveals a structure at once more flexible than the formula of the Puritan sermon and less arbitrary than the incipient seasonal and diurnal cycles that fail to provide readers with a satisfactory sense of form as the essay develops. Moreover, Thoreau’s meticulous use of a spatial organization in his essay reflects his response to a profound change in American natural history as a form of discourse.

After Great Britain recognized American independence, American natural history writing began to lose the “political urgency” (Regis 136) that had provided a nationalist motive for Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia. An economic promise replaced the political motive to inform natural history with a rhetoric of profitable enterprise. Granted that a strong element of promotion rhetoric had permeated American travel writing since the first European discovery of the continent, American natural history in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries became more and more concerned with reporting the distribution and accessibility of natural resources over the vast land. In 1784, for instance, John Filson published Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke “[i]n an effort to increase the value of this land . . . and . . . to serve as an inducement to additional settlers” (Regis 136). The spirit of enterprise that informed American natural history writing of that period also propelled the westward expansion that changed the landscape of the nation, including, of course, that of Henry Thoreau’s hometown, “the most estimable place in all the world” (Journal 9, 160). On 27 January 1852, Thoreau climbed a small hill in Concord, looked “over the plains westward toward Acton” and saw

the farm houses nearly half a mile apart—few & solitary—in these great fields between these stretching woods—out of the world—where the children have to go far to school—the still stagnant—hearteating—life everlasting gone-to-seed country—so far from the post Office where the weekly paper comes— Wherein the new-married wife cannot live for loneliness— And the young man has to depend upon his horse—— See young J Hosmer’s House whither he returns with his wife in despair—after living in the City. I standing in Tarbells’ road which he alone cannot break out. (quoted in Neufeldt 6)

The “young J Hosmer” who failed to make a living in Boston soon sold “the old ancestral farm which had been in the family possession, (passing from father to son) for 220 years” (quoted in Neufeldt 5) and moved to the then emerging town of Chicago, where he helped his two sons to become millionaires and made himself a member of the most elite clubs of the city.

According to Thoreau, the ideal natural history writing, as also advocated
by Emerson, should teach readers a higher use of land than mere materialistic gains that concern most of the natural history reports sponsored by state or federal government, a genre that includes the five books that Thoreau supposedly reviews in his “Natural History of Massachusetts.” 3 The purpose of Thoreau’s “first major prose work” (Harding, Days 116) is to educate his fellow townsfolk, in keeping with the general purpose of The Dial in which the essay was published. In the first issue of The Dial Emerson explicitly defines the general aim of the transcendental periodical as to “lift men to a higher platform . . . to the level of nature,” to bring “them worthy aims and pure pleasures,” and to take “away [life’s] melancholy from the landscape.” 4 Thoreau’s “Natural History of Massachusetts,” which actually depicts the landscape of the town of Concord in a quiet and uplifting enthusiasm, fits perfectly in The Dial’s campaign of removing the “hearteating” melancholy from the landscape and helping people like Joseph Hosmer, Jr. to “break out” of a life “in quiet desperation.” There is a basic difference in the purposes of Thoreau’s natural history and the natural history practiced in America between late eighteenth century and mid-nineteenth century. Thoreau and other transcendentalists saw natural history as an instrument for moral and spiritual reform while the reports that Thoreau was supposed to review belong to a type of natural history serving the settlers as a practical guide about how to identify, classify and exploit natural resources.

To lift his audience to the higher spiritual level of nature, Thoreau sets up the narrator in this early essay as an exemplary misuser of natural history who is to be educated in the process of the essay. The essay basically follows the spatial and mental movements of the narrator, who at the opening of the essay appears to be a prototype of armchair natural historian. The essay’s structure parallels the narrator’s movement from indoors to outdoors and then along the river through the town, enveloped at the beginning and the end with comments on books of natural history. Such a structure enhances the message of Thoreau’s unconventional book review. It helps resolve a set of polarities central to the theme of the essay, and holds together otherwise scattered glimpses of Thoreau’s world view.

Thoreau introduces the didactic purpose of his essay with a discussion of the contrast between nature and society: “In society you will not find health,

3. In March 1842 Emerson bought in Boston five books of scientific surveys of the flora, fauna and natural resources of Massachusetts: T. W. Harris’ A Report on the Insects, C. Dewey’s Report on the Herbaceous Flowering Plants, D. H. Storer’s Reports on the Fishes, Reptiles and Birds, A.A. Gould’s Report on the Invertebrata, and E. Eemon’s A Report on the Quadrupeds. He convinced Thoreau that these books provided a congenial subject matter that “admits of the narrative of all his woodcraft, boatcraft and fishcraft” (quoted in Richardson 116, 119). On April 10, Emerson was able to report to Margaret Fuller that Thoreau was “on good track of giving an account of” those books, and Thoreau’s “Natural History of Massachusetts” appeared in the July issue of The Dial.

but in nature. . . . Society is always diseased, and the best is the most so” (3). Human society is sick because it is corrupted by greedy and purposeless demand for economical development; therefore, from the beginning Thoreau wants his readers to consider the physical geography of America with more concern than popular politics:

How much more than Federal are these States! Much more is doing than Congress wots of. . . . What is transpiring from summer to winter in the Carolinas, and the Great Pine Forest, and the Valley of the Mohawk? The merely political aspect of the land is never very cheering; men are degraded when considered as the members of a political organization. On this side all lands present only the symptoms of decay. (2)

As a remedy to the sick society, the narrator offers himself as an example and tells his audience how to avoid the fatal influence of society: “I would keep some book of natural history always by me as a sort of elixir . . . ” (3). Indeed, this is what the narrator claims to be doing in the very opening line, probably sitting comfortably in an armchair, “High in [his] chamber in the frosty nights”:

Books of natural history make the most cheerful winter reading. I read in Audubon with a thrill of delight, when the snow covers the ground, of the magnolia, and the Florida keys, and their warm-sea-breezes; of the fence-rail, and the cotton-tree, and the migrations of the rice-bird; of the breaking up of winter in Labrador, and the melting of the snow on the forks of the Missouri; and owe an accession of health to these reminiscences of luxuriant nature. (1)

At this point the narrator is uncritical of books of natural history but relies on them for his life as “elixirs.”

However, Thoreau the educator does not stop at encouraging his audience to read books of natural history. In fact, as early as his school teaching years, Thoreau realized how important it was for his pupils to read not only books but also nature itself directly in the woods. Thoreau’s school, as Walter Harding has noted, “was one of the first in our educational history to operate on the principle of ‘learning by doing’ and to devote a considerable part of its program to field trips” (Days 82). But as a literary artist, Thoreau can’t physically lead his general audience on a field trip as he once led his pupils; instead, he has to depend on the written word to “elevate” his townsfolk to “the level of nature.” To achieve that goal, Thoreau sets up the narrator and dramatizes his educational process, showing the character’s metamorphosis from a smug gentleman to a “true man of science.”

In the opening paragraphs the narrator has a problematic voice; his tone is “complacent and nostalgic . . . bordering on the sentimental” (Fink 70). Confined in an isolated chamber by the cold of the “frosty nights,” the self-described lover of nature contrasts sharply to the real naturalist Linnaeus.

5. Walter Hesford has noted that it is habitual of Thoreau to begin his representation of natural phenomena with a comment on books. See Hesford, “Coming Down the Pages of Nature: Thoreau on Language and Nature,” Essays in Literature 12 (1985): 38.
6. I am aware of the sexist language in this remark. While I avoid using gender specific pronouns as a general term referring to human subjects, I don’t attempt to make anachronistic corrections of nineteenth-century texts.
who could get ready to set “out for Lapland” at any time with a simple outfit (Thoreau, Natural History 5); meanwhile the narrator evokes a persona of an idle bachelor that “dominated the popular magazine sketches of such contemporaries as Nathaniel P. Willis, Donald Mitchell (‘Ik Marvel’), George William Curtis, and James Russell Lowell” (Fink 71).

Reading books of natural history at least enables the narrator to encounter exemplary naturalists such as Audubon and Linnaeus. And the narrator knows that lessons learned indoors from sermons, lectures and polite conversations, compared with the lessons learned outdoors from the “great pulse of nature,” are only the “three-inch swing of a pendulum in a cupboard” (4) and are soon forgotten. So, encouraged by the “quiet bravery” of Linnaeus (5) and bored by the thought of the “din of religion, literature, and philosophy” (4), the narrator leaves his chamber and walks into the open to discover that in all seasons, the “frosty nights” not excluded, lives are prospering in nature. The movement out of the chamber is a very important step in the narrator’s education; if indoors he needs “some book of natural history . . . as a sort of elixir” to ward off the decaying influence of society, he does not need it at all outdoors, for in nature “joy is the condition of life” (4).

Simply getting outdoors, however, does not complete the narrator’s education at one stroke. For quite a while, the narrator can barely see nature with his own eyes. Wandering with a vague sense of space, the still bookish man can’t make sense of simple facts in nature such as the shrill of cicada or the melting ice in rivers in spring. He depends on books to represent the familiar sounds and sights to readers, interpreting the cicada as a happy singer according to Anacreon’s ode, and depicting the breaking New England rivers in the tone of the Teian’s song. While thus connecting New England with ancient Greece, Thoreau begins to suggest his picture of the world as an interrelated whole, but the lack of detailed features of Massachusetts scenery fails to make the idea of universal connection convincing. At this stage, though already in the midst of nature, the narrator is not yet able to know nature through “direct intercourse and sympathy” (29).

To complete the narrator’s education doesn’t have to take a long time; instead, it takes him a brief transition in space, or rather in his sense of space, to become capable of acquiring in-depth knowledge directly from nature. In paragraph nineteen the narrator and his narrative finally move into a specific and familiar space—Concord. The landmark used to bring about this revelation is the river which gives the town its name; the narrator knows it well enough to come up with its other name: “The Indians are said to have called it Musketaquid, or Prairie River” (13). Here he becomes certain of his facts: he can tell us that one trapper “in our midst” can take “from one hundred and fifty to two hundred muskrats in a year, and even thirty-six have been shot by one man in a day” (13). He no longer has to depend on books of natural history as an “elixir” for a special winter treat; instead, winter is the season for him to chase the fox on a frozen pond or to observe the playful muskrats breathing in the air bubbles beneath the ice on the Concord River. Nor does
he need to withdraw into his high chamber in the “frosty nights”; night is the
time to carry a torch on the bow of one’s boat and to spear fish. Nor does he
need to quote the Greek poets to lend authority to his description of lives in
nature; here he is the master of his materials and dares to challenge Aesop: in
place of the villain that complains about the sour grapes or robs the crow of
its dinner by flattery, Thoreau’s fox looms large as “the Spirit itself,” the
“true proprietor” of the Concord backwoods, and it has “a visible sympathy”
with the sun (15). The fox is now peculiar to the place, no longer a Greek
personification of slyness, but a Concordian spiritualization of wild life,
more fabulous than the Greek fox because it is depicted with transcendental
insight gained through accurate observation of the actual environment.

At this point, after an educational tour in the still wild areas of Concord,
the narrator’s voice merges with that of Thoreau and the narrator becomes
identical with the author. He now deserves the title of “the true man of sci-
ence” because in many episodes along the Concord River he proves that he
can “smell, taste, see, hear, feel better” and can articulate better his “deeper
and finer experience” (29). His extraordinary ability to know nature directly
and sympathetically and to represent nature in vivid paragraphs composed of
“colored sentence” after “colored sentence” (28) gives him the power and an
authoritative voice to criticize the five books he started out to review: “These
volumes deal much in measurements and minute descriptions, not interesting
to the general reader, with only here and there a colored sentence to allure
him” (28). These works are weak because of two important reasons: first, the
motive for their composition is that the “State wanted complete catalogues of
its natural riches, with such additional facts merely as would be directly use-
ful” (18). Second, they were the products of “more labor than enthusiasm,”
the products of meticulous method without artistic sympathy.

Van Anglen argues that the last few paragraphs of “Natural History of
Massachusetts” are a critique of the Baconian method or any other method
that falsely assumes to be scientific. According to Van Anglen, Thoreau’s
idea of a “true scientific method would take account of the fact that the sci-
entist himself is a fellow creature in the natural world” (122). The Baconian,
empirical method based mainly on measurement and the senses is not satis-
factory to Thoreau because it requires that the scientist be “a disconnected
post-Cartesian observer” rather than “a participant in the flow of things”
(122). Van Anglen’s argument is sound and convincing, and Thoreau indeed
demands a “finer experience” from what he calls the “true man of science,” a
higher empiricism that leads to transcendental insight in the study of nature
through direct communication and sympathetic participation. In his own ver-
sion of natural history, as witnessed in the passages describing the fox,
muskrats, fish, snake and crystalline foliage, Thoreau practices what he
preaches and represents the wild life with sympathy and imagination.

However, Thoreau’s concluding paragraphs are not merely a critique of
scientific method; what Van Anglen and other critics have not discussed is
Thoreau’s repudiation of the purpose of some books about natural history
such as the ones he is reviewing: “The State wanted complete catalogues of its natural riches, with such additional facts merely as would be directly useful” (28; my emphasis). Here Thoreau criticizes the state’s pragmatic attitude towards nature as mere commodity and reveals two different world pictures that underlie Thoreau’s own and the state’s positions. Behind the state’s utilitarian attitude towards nature is a teleological picture of the world. In this world, human beings are at the center, and everything else at the margin, created to serve them. From this point of view, human beings want from nature only those things that fit in the catalogues of human needs, the “natural riches . . . directly useful” (28). Because they are motivated only by utilitarian purposes rather than a transcendental love of nature, the reports that Thoreau reviews understandably “imply more labor than enthusiasm” (28). In Thoreau’s world picture, in contrast, humankind is a part and only a part of the interrelated whole; people are not the center of the universe, and they should treat other lives in nature as fellow beings instead of materials created to meet their needs. Thoreau proves with the “growth” of his narrator that only through such a sympathetic coexistence can human beings gain truly valuable insights into the mystery of nature. This motif of the human as a member of an organic whole is also reflected in the narrator’s spatial movement.

The narrator’s tone of voice in the opening paragraphs indicates a smug, bookish and self-centered gentleman, sure of the importance of his idle reading, but with help from the insights offered by human geography and “the poetics of space,” it is possible to examine the deeper significance of the opening scene. The high chamber mentioned in the poem in the first paragraph evokes the image of an attic or probably even Thoreau’s own “little bedroom at the head of the front stairs” (Harding, Days 128) in Emerson’s house where Thoreau resided as he wrote this unconventional book review. An attic or any upstairs bedroom is often conjured up by poets and psychoanalysts as an image of egocentricity (Bachelard 10, 17-26). Shaped by our childhood memory, an attic room is our central space of intimacy: it may be large or small, but it is always the child’s own. The sense of centrality associated with the attic or upstairs room does not vanish when the child grows into adulthood, according to Bachelard. That explains why after children grow up they still feel a certain intimacy with the room upstairs: ascending the steep stairs they often feel to be withdrawing “to a more tranquil solitude” (Bachelard 26).

The elevation of the room provides the human subconscious not only a refuge in solitude, but also a prospect, because we usually see further from the attic or upstairs window. Refuge and prospect therefore are the two factors by which we choose our habitat. They have been encoded in our genes since the days of our cave-dwelling ancestors (Appleton 3-22). Yet Thoreau presents his high chamber in “frosty nights” when the advantage of prospect is blackened out. With the prospect cut off, Thoreau’s narrator in the first paragraph understandably resorts to Audubon for seeing the prospect of
Lapland and for experiencing nature secondhand. This is how Thoreau begins his story—with a smug gentleman isolated in a confined space strongly defined by his ego, cut off from the advantage of the prospect of, or direct visual contact with, nature.

In this light, the educational function of the narrator's movement outdoors becomes clear. By moving out of the high chamber he is actually moving out of a confined space permeated with egocentrism. Thoreau's spatial arrangement based on "his profound grasp of his land" gives him a chance to develop his special brand of transcendentalism that emphasizes the "spirit of place." Moving out of the self-centered attic, the narrator leads readers to nature in Concord where the self, or humankind in general, ceases to be the center. In wilderness, as Thoreau would read a decade later in Alexander von Humboldt's *Cosmos*, nature is not organized around humans and their needs, but is enlivened by the impulse of an inner life of nature itself, which is the true unity in the variety of nature. The open space of nature enables the narrator to shed values human beings usually impose on wildlife: that's why the fox is no longer Aesop's embodiment of evil treachery, but the "Spirit itself" and the "true proprietor" of nature; the snake is no longer an incarnation of Satan codified by the New England Puritan tradition, but a wonderful miracle whose movement makes human limbs redundant; a trapper may still hunt muskrats for their furs, but it would be more interesting to watch the beasts' show of "wisdom" in building their holes; the narrator starts out spear-fishing on the Concord, but the fish's peaceful night life in their "under-water abode" enlightens him to "the real object of" human pursuit—finding "beauty and never-ending novelty of his position" on earth (21). This position is not the position of "the master" of other lives in nature, but that of a fellow creature engaged in a sympathetic interrelation with different forms of life. If human beings accept nature on her own terms, it will regard the fisherman's "small seines of flax [as] no more intrusion than the cobweb in the sun" (17).

As a critique of the anthropocentric world picture as well as false "scientific method," "Natural History of Massachusetts" is indeed a book review, though quite unconventional. Although Thoreau mentions the books he was commissioned to review only in the beginning and at the end, he nevertheless reviews them by setting up an alternative kind of natural history throughout the essay. He also vividly reviews a larger book—nature itself as manifested in the woods and on the pastures along the Concord. In reviewing nature's living book, the author doesn't use the traditional method of classification, but organizes the various natural facts along the muddy and majestic river, which itself symbolizes the ultimate source of all lives as opposed to...
the resource of material riches.

Through movement in space rather than with the lapse of time, the narrator grows out of his posture as an idle gentleman and achieves the status of a true scientist. His movement from the high chamber to the banks of the "Prairie River" suggests a shift from anthropocentric to what Max Oelschlaeger calls a "biocentric" view of the world (140). This shift in perspective is the hallmark of Thoreau's version of transcendentalism, and it persists in his best works through his entire career. When Thoreau announced his faith in a fact's potential to flower into a truth, he was not making an abstract statement, but a declaration of his literary independence based on his intimate knowledge of a real, specific place and his unique gift in using spatial relations to map his earth-based transcendentalism. In this sense, "Natural History of Massachusetts" is an important early short piece remarkable for its structure as well as its substance.

Works Cited


