

Live Deep and Suck all the Marrow of Life

H.D. Thoreau's Literary Legacy

Edited by

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Series in Literary Studies



VERNON PRESS

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street,
Suite 1200, Wilmington,
Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Literary Studies

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020931470

ISBN: 978-1-62273-464-1

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our colleagues and mentors, whose guidance, encouragement and generosity have been essential in our academic research and in the achievement of this volume of essays. Also, thanks to the contributors to this collection, for their enthusiasm, dedication, intelligence and patience during the editing stage of this book. The Spanish Association for American Studies deserves our gratitude for their support and commitment to the study of nineteenth-century American Literature and of Henry David Thoreau's legacy into the twenty-first century.

María Laura Arce Álvarez and Eulalia Piñero Gil

Introduction: “Live Deep and Suck all the Marrow of Life”: H. D. Thoreau’s Literary Legacy

María Laura Arce Álvarez and Eulalia Piñero Gil

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

The year 2017 marked the bicentennial of Henry David Thoreau’s birth (1817-1862) and it was a time to celebrate his transcendental contribution to human culture and thought. International conferences, seminars, exhibitions, new books and translations, biographies, and many other events commemorated the extraordinary legacy of a man who had a dream of transformation and reforms for the United States. In his dreams, Thoreau, “the political dissident and the environmental activist” (Menard 5) imagined a holistic and equitable America which protected the rights of the underprivileged and of those who suffered slavery and social injustice, the ethnic minorities, the natural landscapes and cathedrals of America, and the indigenous fauna and flora. Indeed, Thoreau’s visionary writings foreshadowed the devastating effects of the anthropocene epoch in America. In his lecture “Walking, or, The Wild,” the writer reveals the need to protect nature and made clear that “in wildness is the preservation of the world” (185), and warned his contemporaries and the future generations about the extraordinary importance of the natural landscapes for human survival. In this vein, Walls explains that Thoreau firmly believed that nature was “an eternal fountain of renewal and regeneration, a sacred force capable of healing even the deepest acts of human destruction, including slavery, war and environmental devastation” (xvi).

For all those reasons, Thoreau has become one of the most acclaimed and respected voices in our contemporary world because he was a man of deep convictions, a spiritual visionary and seeker, a natural scientist, a political activist and an explorer of the human nature and his time. Thus, through the contemporary re-readings of his writings, two Thoreaus emerge “one speaks for nature and the other for social justice” (Walls vxiii). Thoreau wrote for his contemporaries but in his visionary writings, we perceive the deep conviction that his words would have an impact in the future generations to come. In many ways, he was urging us to know ourselves and to investigate in our

human nature as Menard rightly notes “Thoreau wasn’t pushing us to see the sort of things we might see if we only looked for ourselves” (9). Therefore, this volume celebrates Thoreau’s contribution to human knowledge and understanding through a comparative and transcultural re-reading of his works -autobiography, essays, poetry and journals-, and by reconsidering the influence his transcendentalist philosophy has had on American and world culture and literature.

Thoreau’s remarkable intellectual legacy can be perceived in the recent (re) interpretations by contemporary writers and scholars (Bennett 2002, Johnson 2009, Furtak et al. 2012, Petrulionis 2012, Specq et al. 2013, Sullivan 2015, Arsić 2016, Davis 2016, Walls 2017, Dann 2018, Menard 2018). As biographers, historians, naturalists and literary critics have acknowledged, the American writer was deeply engaged with the most important social debates of his day: slavery, mass consumer culture, education, individualism, the American Dream, living on the frontier, the emergence of consumerism, the importance of economy, the role of government and the ecological mind. In his masterpiece *Walden or, Life in the Woods* (1854), Thoreau recommends the American people to understand their human nature through a radical individualism based on self-exploration, self-discovery, self-education, and self-emancipation. Moreover, he encourages an ascetic life of “simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust” (15), and creative individualism against the discouraging reality of “the mass of men (who) lead lives of quiet desperation” (10). But above all, he shares with us his contagious vitality and the need to live consciously and in the direction of our dreams and endeavors: “I wanted to live deep and to suck out all the marrow of life” (66). In his influential autobiography, he also “undermines the culture of work and success and uses a double-voiced discourse that shatters the hegemony of a singular culture” (Schueller 11). Furthermore, Thoreau promotes, in his philosophical autobiography, the quest for human perfectibility and the development of imagination and creativity. These ideas were the result of the influence of his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson who proclaimed in his famous eulogy that “No truer American existed than Thoreau. He had no temptations to fight against – no appetites, no passions, no taste for elegant trifles. He chose to be rich by making his wants few, and supplying them himself” (qtd. in Dann 343). In this affecting description, Emerson emphasizes the extraordinary originality and coherence of Thoreau’s existence and how he struggled all his life to find a lucid and simple voice that could be inspiring for his contemporaries. In this regard, Walls has rightly observed that Thoreau “has never been captured between covers; he was too quixotic, mischievous, many-sided” (xvii).

The essays collected here seek to move forward our understanding of Thoreau’s enduring influence in the poetry, theater, fiction and cinema of the

twenty and twenty-first centuries. Moreover, the chapters in the present volume develop novel ways to read texts ranging from the strong influence Thoreau's work has had and currently has in the history of American Literature to the fact that his works became fundamental for generations and generations of American writers to understand not only their fiction but also their Americanness. In this light, Thoreau's projection into his future literary peers made him fundamental to understand American modernism and postmodernism as the following chapters show. Furthermore, his influence even reached cinema, something he could have never imagined.

The most famous hermit of American literature showed a different perspective of society, economy, environment, politics, and philosophy but, above all, literature. Our hope in assembling this volume is that readers will find much of interest in revisiting Thoreau, his works, and his literary legacy as one of those ghosts that will always haunt American literature with a selection of eight chapters that go from drama, poetry, fiction and cinema in all the literary movements from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century.

In chapter one, "Thoreau's Inner Geographies: Symmetries, Asymmetries and Triskelion," Asunción López-Varela explores the correspondences and affinities between a possible esoteric and Masonic heritage in Thoreau's writings, as well as the tensions between the Transcendental emphasis on individualism and the Fraternity emphasis on community. Indeed, many of the founding fathers of the Transcendental movement were freemasons, including Asa Dunbar, Thoreau's maternal grandfather. There is not enough research tracing the lineage between Transcendentalism and the Craft, something that might be crucial in order to consistently explore the American intellectual history of the period. In this light, López-Varela also seeks to open new avenues to advance such studies.

In chapter two, "On the Page and on the Stage: The Influence of Henry David Thoreau on Susan Glaspell's Works," Noelia Hernando-Real examines the intertextual influence Thoreau's oeuvre had on Susan Glaspell's plays. Concretely, Hernando-Real discusses, compares and contrasts the use of Thoreauvian principles in Glaspell's plays and fiction. Glaspell's work shows a strong influence of Transcendentalism especially in the creation of botanical metaphors and symbols she used to express her protagonists' self-exploration, self-discovery and self-reliance through nature. Indeed, as Hernando-Real asserts, Glaspell projected a romantic interpretation of his reading of Thoreau's work whereas her plays were more influenced by his political works, most notably in *The Verge* (1921) and *Inheritors* (1921). In order to argue this, Hernando-Real introduces in this chapter a comparison between Thoreauvian principles and how Glaspell adapts them to the stage and the page, especially in the following works: the play *Inheritors* and its

short story version “Pollen” (1919), the play *Bernice* (1919) and the unpublished short story “Faint Trails,” and the play-text *The Outside* (1917) and the short story “A Rose in the Sand: The Salvation of a Lonely Soul” (1927).

In chapter three, “A Group of Urban Thoreaus’: Gender and Romantic Transcendentalism in the Poetics of the Beat Generation,” Isabel Castelaogómez establishes the cultural and literary connections between the Transcendentalists and the Beat Generation, highlighting the figure of Thoreau as the model for their pastoral myth and individual rebelliousness. Beat women writers had to negotiate with the gendered implications found in Romantic and Transcendentalist paradigms. Castelaogómez connects, however, Thoreau’s philosophy and life praxis to Beat women’s poetics, by reading *Walden* from a contemporary feminist perspective and by studying Beat women’s poetic strategies to revise and transform Romantic transcendence. They managed this in two ways: through the inclusion in their poetry of the contingent realities of the material coordinates of their natural and built environment, as well as commitment and relationality as compatible with freedom; and by transgressing patriarchal artificial spatial borders, in order to create a room of their own in their post-war Beat milieu. To a very similar practical and conceptual conclusion arrived Thoreau in *Walden* within his counterculture antebellum movement. Drawing from John Clellon Holmes’ description of beatniks as “a group of urban Thoreaus,” she argues that Beat women poets could be considered the genuine representatives of a Thoreauvian “feminist” spirit in the Beat canon.

In chapter four, “Experts in Home-Cosmography: Thoreau from the Experience of Jonas Mekas and the Cinematographic Avant-garde,” Sergi Álvarez Riosalido offers a comparative analysis between Thoreau’s legacy in terms of the examination of a particular notion of intimacy, by regarding one’s lived experience as a past event still awaiting to be read and how this is reproduced in Jonas Meka’s films. In the last pages of *Walden*, Thoreau quotes a poem by William Habbington, inviting the reader to look into the unexplored regions within oneself; by means of this, one may become an “expert in home-cosmography.” The Lithuanian-born director Jonas Mekas is one of those filmmakers who have taken these words to their last consequences, already from his first movies throughout the 1950s, having made his own experience the content and object of his writings and films. Avant-garde filmmakers in America –Jonas Mekas being an exemplary case– approach through film language an issue already familiar in literature, one which Thoreau invited everyone to deal with: namely, to examine a particular notion of intimacy, by regarding one’s lived experience as a past event still awaiting to be read.

In chapter five, “Staging the ‘Peaceable Revolution.’ Henry David Thoreau and the Living Theatre,” Emeline Jouve explores the influence Thoreau’s work had on the work of the Living Theatre. The founders of the group, Julian Beck (1925-1985) and Judith Malina (1926-2015) found in Thoreau the inspiration to create a theatre that would react against their violence-ridden society and try to change it into a peaceful world. In fact, Henry David Thoreau’s anti-capitalist pacifism was a great influence on the ideology and the work of the Living Theatre. The tenets from *Civil Disobedience* and *Life Without Principles* appear to have not only informed the activism of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, who co-founded their theatre company in 1947, but also their art. From the 1960s, the Living Theatre dreamed of a “free theatre” emancipated from the constraints of traditional aesthetic forms, giving a dishonest vision of reality as well as from the pressures of a violent money-ridden society. By freeing itself and the spectators from all types of coercion, theatre became, for the troupe, a powerful means to wage the “peaceable revolution” and free the street.

In chapter six, “Draft Resistance and the Anti-War Movement as Civil Disobedience: the Influence of Thoreau’s Political Thought on the Protests against the War in Vietnam,” Cristina Alsina Rísquez examines the influence Thoreau had in the pacifist movement to stop the Vietnam War. This time, Alsina analyzes this influence in the widely acclaimed theater play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* (1971) and of the poetry and short stories included in two anthologies by Vietnam Veterans — *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972) and *Free Fire Zone* (1973)— paying special attention to the way they articulate the relationship between the individual citizen/soldier and the state and its institutions. Significantly, Alsina argues that Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience was re-published in 1969, at the peak of the protests against the war, and it became a cornerstone of the debate about the nature of the relationship between the individual and the state in those convoluted times. In this way, chapter five and six show the importance of Thoreau’s political texts during the America of the 1960s and concretely the Vietnam War.

In chapter seven, María Laura Arce Álvarez turns the focus on a comparative analysis between Paul Auster’s fiction, concretely the second volume of *The New York Trilogy*, *Ghosts*, and *Walden* in her essay “A Postmodern Reception of H.D. Thoreau’s *Walden*: The Construction of Literary Solitude in Paul Auster’s Fiction.” In her chapter, Arce argues that the concept of solitude is fundamental in Paul Auster’s fiction. He starts his literary oeuvre by writing what can be considered his theoretical work *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), a text that deals with the idea of solitude in an existential way. However, this approach to solitude has always been influenced by Henry David Thoreau’s work *Walden* (1854). According to Mark Ford in his article “Inventions of

Solitude: Thoreau and Auster”: “Both Thoreau and Auster are obsessively concerned with the powers of solitude to convert the socially induced anxieties of self-division into the creative forces of self-awareness” (204). In this way, Ford’s interpretation justifies the importance of solitude as a way to distract from society and turn the anxieties it provokes, as he calls it, into creative forces and experiences of self-awareness. In contrast with Ford’s proposal, Auster rewrites Thoreau’s concept of solitude and focuses on the power solitude has in order to write fiction or, in other words, to explain how solitude becomes the space that opens the realm of literature. This idea of solitude as a tool for literary creation is reflected in almost all of Auster’s works that deal with the figure of the writer and the task of writing. However, it is in the second novel of the trilogy *Ghosts* (1987) when Auster includes Thoreau and his work *Walden* as remarkable elements of the plot to depict the protagonist’s solitude as a necessity for the creative task to take place. In this chapter, Arce discusses how Auster rewrites Thoreau’s idea of solitude in order to understand it as an essential step in the construction of a literary space in his work *Ghosts*.

Finally, in chapter eight, “Then, I say, break the law’: The Intertextual Influence of H. D. Thoreau’s Social Criticism and Peaceful Resistance Poetics in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *I Love a Broad Margin to my Life*,” Eulalia Piñero Gil introduces a study of the pervasive influence Thoreau had in Maxine Hong Kingston’s poetry book *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* (2011). Kingston wrote her long poem in the form of an elegiac “broad-margin meditation” on pacifism, aging, her Chinese ancestors, the civic self and her pervasive political activism. In this poetic elegy, Kingston makes intertextual allusions, in the title and in her reflections against war, to Thoreau’s *Walden* and his passive resistance and civil disobedience protest against the American government’s involvement in the 1848 war against Mexico, “Thoreau heard the band playing military music, his neighbors were going to war against Mexico. He made up his mind not to pay taxes,” (11). Piñero Gil’s contention in this chapter is that Kingston apparently inspired herself in *Walden* but being the main intertextual source Thoreau’s “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,” as the author shows in her analysis of the long poem. To support her theory, she has found significant parallelisms between both texts such as the passive resistance strategy against war, the motif of the political journey, the descent or the katabasis into the underworld of imprisonment or physical incarceration, the rebirth process through anabasis, the heavenly and heroic mission of the self-reliant artist, and the significant role of the writer as political warrior in American society.

To conclude, it remains to say that the chapters in this volume present new, innovative and challenging looks at Thoreau’s work from a comparative and

intertextual perspectives. The contributors have reread the author's work, applying the broad range of their scholarship, experience and knowledge to reaffirm the outstanding significance of a canonical author from contemporary viewpoints. Besides, their essays show that Thoreau has remained popular with modern and postmodern American writers and remind us how relevant his literary legacy is to past generations and future generations in the United States and around the world, as Thoreau expressed in *Walden*, "Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations" (74).

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