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Alma natura, ars severa
Expanses & Limits of Craft
in Henry David Thoreau

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ABSTRACT

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The American naturalist, philosopher and writer Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) lived and wrote in a time of vibrant change. During his short life his rural Concord, a small satellite town to Boston, Massachusetts, was rocked by religious and scientific debates, later by erupting passions over slavery and federal cohesion. Concord's landscape was also transformed by railroad and telegraph technologies, promising economic revival after periods of crisis and stagnation, while radically altering the land and the prospects for those choosing to stay on it. Thoreau took part in many of the wider debates ensuing upon these developments, while remaining loyal to his home environs and to what these still offered him by way of natural surroundings. The present work focuses less on overtly political issues of his writings than on what may be called the egocentric and biocentric Thoreau – the man ruminating on epistemological questions regarding how nature, human as well as environmental, can be understood, and on ensuing aesthetic ones concerning how to portray and promote one's findings. Inspired by the thematic criticism of the so-called Geneva school, involving the simultaneous embrace (*confidence*) and scrutiny (*méfiance*) of issues found pertinent to an authorial consciousness as this emanates from its oeuvre, it also makes use of more recent deconstructive and ecocritical perspectives focusing on the anthropocentric limits and biocentric reach of linguistic representation, respectively. The running queries of the thesis – assumed to be integral to Thoreau and here spread over several, self-contained articles – can be summarized as follows: *How to comprehend, evaluate and convey the natural realm as a self-contained ideal, but also with due attention to its increasing hybridity as transformed by human technologies? Will outward nature taken as a whole present an immanent or transcendent order? Which rhetorical tools to wield in portraying it, and what faith to put in their fidelity to the task of translating its truth, whether empirical or spiritual? Or, for that matter, to what degree may one trust human language to the challenge of conveying the elusive interiorities of the writing self (i.e. human nature)?* Thoreau's at once idealistic and empirical outlook was grounded in his ambitious readings in natural history, in his latent Transcendentalist leanings, and above all in his faithful walking and close observation of his local landscape, host as this was to a wealth of denizens and seasonally shifting features. This much appears already – as explicated here, and in contrast to the proposals of earlier research – from the variably immanent and transcendent approaches to a peaceful natural environment on display in Thoreau's early essay "A Winter Walk." Yet as Concord was transformed by new technology and infrastructure, Thoreau had increasingly to contend with a landscape hybridized by human culture – a troubling insight ultimately bearing also on how the expanses and limits of his own craft were to be conceived. In a social context where powerful discourses of modernity were asserting themselves via technical nomenclatures and contemporary propaganda (saliently "Manifest Destiny" and the "Commercial Spirit," both reified in the railroad's threatening Iron Horse in the "Sounds" chapter of *Walden*), what kind of language could Thoreau seek to muster, defiantly and redemptively appropriate to a vision of a more naturalized (self-)culture such as he sought to ground and formulate in *Walden* and elsewhere? Thoreau's narrator in *Walden* arguably tries everything available to him rhetorically, but in his eventual failure to overcome the momentum of transforming technology seeks not only deflection to this reading, but also sweeping re-naturalizations and a return to direct experience. Thoreau's devastating insight, as thematized subtextually to my view, is that language itself constitutes an intrusive technology, laying its tracks and gradings and causeways in both spoken and written form – and that it is thus laden with the burdens and soilings inherent to the history of human handling of nature. The thesis further discusses how Thoreau could hope to attain an authority of voice sufficient enough to be recognized as a legitimate critic of conventional life and progress in *Walden*, and proposes a deliberate rhetorical strategy of obscurity as complementing Thoreau's reputed perspicuity. The dissertation then turns to address a query regarding Thoreau's vast accumulation of Journal entries on local natural phenomena during the 1850's and early 1860's, an activity the records of which have often prompted the question of how Thoreau would eventually have chosen to present these materials. While the answer must remain a speculation, an analogy to Thoreau's extant attitudes toward (cyclical) myth and (cumulative) human character is here explored, thus deviating from previous interpretations in seeing Thoreau's journal-tending over the years not as a species of antisocial activity in its disdain for figurative language, but as indicative of a long-term plan for a synthesized, archetypal calendar of Concord. Turning finally from the aggregate portrait of outward nature as gleaned from Thoreau's Journal, the thesis considers the composite self-portrait of the author in *Walden*. What could his readers expect of his self-exposure in the book: a full-disclosure, redemptive narrative, or perhaps rather a prompting toward analogous, readerly self-scrutiny? Here as elsewhere Thoreau explores the boundaries and extents of language and communication, revealing a metacritical mind acutely aware of its chosen tools.

KEYWORDS: *Thoreau, nature, nature-writing, ecocriticism, poetics, aesthetics, modernity, technology, railroad, autobiography, immanence, transcendence, rhetoric, perspicuity, obscurity, parable, animals, myth, mythology, Walden, "hound, bay horse, and turtle dove," "A Winter Walk," Journal, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers.*