

“The Tonic of Wildness”: Thoreau’s Critique of Industrial Capitalism

by

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**ABSTRACT:** This thesis is a critical intervention in contemporary Thoreau scholarship. It argues against Ashton Nichols’s application of his concept of “urbanature” to the writings and philosophy of Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau’s concept of “wildness” is not compatible with “urbanature;” indeed, “wildness offers solutions to ecological problems that “urbanature” fails to provide. It critiques the ideologies that undergirded industrial capitalism and other exploitive systems. Given that these systems cause or contribute to pressing ecological problems, as well as social, this thesis calls for a return to Thoreau’s *transformative* understanding of “wildness” to address them.



“THE TONIC OF WILDNESS:” THOREAU’S CRITIQUE OF INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM

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# **“The Tonic of Wildness”: Thoreau’s Critique of Industrial Capitalism**

## **Chapter 1: “How can you expect the birds to sing ...”<sup>1</sup>**

It could be easily argued that Henry David Thoreau is as important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as ever, if not more so—particularly, his concept of “wildness.” However, recent urban ecocritical scholarship could unintentionally unhinge Thoreau’s “wildness.” Of particular interest is the recent work by Ashton Nichols on “urbanature,” a term he uses to describe the deep connection he envisions between urban spaces and “wild nature” (Nichols 348). Ultimately, Nichols redefines Thoreau’s “wildness” to garner support for “urbanature.” But his interpretation raises several problems in terms of logic and ecological consciousness. If “urbanature” and Nichols’s appropriation of Thoreau are taken seriously and remain unaddressed, Thoreau’s practical value for the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be called into question. This thesis will articulate the problems with “urbanature and its appropriation of Thoreau, will reestablish Thoreau’s understanding of “wildness,” and will demonstrate how Thoreau has become more relevant now than ever—namely, because of his critique of the ideologies that undergirded industrial capitalism and other exploitive systems prevalent during his lifetime. Given that these same ideologies found many current social and ecological problems, this thesis will call for a return to Thoreau’s *transformative* understanding of “wildness” to address them.

### **Critical Foundations**

In recent years ecocriticism has re-envisioned urban environments. Critics including John Tallmadge and Ashton Nichols confront the status quo by reframing the urban *as* natural. This is

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<sup>1</sup> “How can you expect the birds to sing when their groves are cut down?” (*Walden* 192).

simply a new manner of treating the old nature/culture dualism, a problem that ecocritics have been articulating since the beginning of the field. Nature/culture dualism sees humans as distinct from the nonhuman world—that is, nature is somewhere “out there,” humans being separate from it, or even transcending it. This dualism has long been blamed for the human exploitation of the world, from pollution and deforestation to climate change and war.

The variety of critical responses to this dualism illustrates the sheer complexity of the problem. William Cronon relates dualism directly to our understanding of “wilderness,” critiquing its juxtaposition with civilization, and noting its implications for the authenticity of human experience in the “civilized” world (80). He suggests that the idea of “wilderness” causes us to consider the human experience in the “civilized” world as soulless and artificial, which only contact with “wilderness” can mitigate. Consequently, much of human experience in an “urban-industrial civilization” remains destructive, but excused as humans imagine the most sacred part of themselves as belonging to “wilderness” (Cronon 81). Rejecting “wilderness” becomes Cronon’s only solution to the ever-increasing environmental crises the world faces today.

At the opposite end of the spectrum stands Gary Snyder, for whom nature encompasses the entire material world, including cities. He distinguishes between nature and “wilderness,” however. Rather than rejecting “wilderness” outright as Cronon does, he rejects the idea that “wilderness” is somewhere “out there,” separate from humans. Humans are not erased from the “wilderness” landscape. “There has been no wilderness without some kind of human presence for several hundred thousand years” (Snyder 7). Even human language, he suggests, is wild (*Ecocriticism* 83). But “wilderness” and “wildness” are highly nuanced. “Wildness” is closely linked with “the term *Dao*: the *way* of Great nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-

organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple” (Snyder 11). Any space that embodies “wildness” may be termed “wilderness” (12). Ultimately, by placing the human back into the “wilderness” landscape, Snyder overcomes dualism. Simultaneously, by distinguishing between “wilderness” and nature, he leaves room in his argument for necessary critiques of non-wild nature (i.e. urban spaces).

Anne Whiston Spirn and Harold Fromm consider the problem of ecological destruction from different angles. Spirn understands that all material space is constructed—that is, all creatures, human and nonhuman, and environmental processes manipulate or otherwise affect their surrounding environments. “Garden, forest, city, and wilderness are shaped by rivers and rain, plants and animals, human hands and minds. They are phenomena of nature *and* products of culture” (Spirn 113). The question then becomes, how will we construct our environment? Her understanding lends itself to the appreciation of human responsibility for human destruction, avoiding dualism while encouraging environmental intervention. On the other hand, Harold Fromm argues that modern technology has caused humans to lose sight of their connection with Nature (Fromm 33). Most humans no longer hunt and grow their own food. Instead, food comes ready-made and wrapped in plastic, masking its source (Fromm 33). Many consumers, as a result, remain oblivious to the inhumane treatment of animals in factory farms, for example. Oddly, these same consumers would be appalled at similar treatment of the family pet. Detachment from our food sources feeds into a general ignorance of the many ecological and ethical problems associated with our food production processes. Indeed, Fromm implies that technologically dense spaces retain the greatest detachment from Nature.

Some critics, however, suggest otherwise. John Tallmadge recognizes the

interconnectedness of the material world to such a degree that he conflates terms—“urban nature.” Tallmadge concerns himself with the notion of civilization existing in opposition to nature. “Pastoral idealism” allows us to “revere nature at a distance” (Tallmadge 180), to conceive of civilization (including urban environments) outside of nature. Such “impersonal ecology” transforms nature into an idealized other, “[permitting] us to love the green world, while carrying on the usual business of clearing, mining, logging, plowing, or paving it . . .” (Tallmadge 180). By way of intervention, Tallmadge points out that the same chlorophyll makes green plants green no matter their location. He therefore advocates that a growing awareness of the nature present before us in urban environments could curb our propensity to exploit it.

Ashton Nichols reaches further than Tallmadge with “urbanature.” In his view, humans are *never* truly outside of nature, resulting in his connection of the “wild” and the city. “Hawks are roosting on skyscrapers on Central Park East and owls are nesting throughout Manhattan in the center of New York City” (Nichols 347). Nichols appropriates Henry David Thoreau, still the preeminent authority for ecocriticism, to garner support for his view. Nichols proposes that most readers incorrectly conceive of Thoreau as anti-urban, isolated from society, and consumed by “wilderness.” By reconsidering Thoreau’s take on “wildness,” Nichols attempts to establish an understanding of the wild—both human and nonhuman—harmoniously living within urban environments. If successful, “urbanature” would stand on much sturdier ground.

Nature/culture dualism is a longstanding problem, intrinsically linked to “wildness” and “wilderness” metaphors, and some would argue that this problem remains without a definitive solution. While on the surface “urbanature” (and “urban nature”) seeks positive ecological intervention, proponents fail to recognize its overarching consequences, both ecological and socio-political. Nichols’s reading of Thoreau offers opportunity to reconsider “wildness” and

“wilderness.” After confronting “urbanature,” the following chapter will reestablish Thoreau’s concept of “wildness.” Chapter two will articulate the manner in which Thoreau uses “wildness” to confront industrial capitalism, and then demonstrate the significance of “wildness” for treating current problems.

## **Urbanature**

In his article “Thoreau and Urbanature: from *Walden* to Ecocriticism,” Nichols observes that “animals wild and semi-wild pervade our urban and suburban spaces” (347). He juxtaposes the presence of wild animals in urban terrains with the hypocritical environmentalist, traveling “thousands of miles in jumbo-jets ... in order to ‘get back’ to nature ...” (347). From the outset Nichols sets up a straw man. While some wild and semi-wild animals live in urban and suburban environments, many cannot exist in those environments—bears, for example. Urban life, as we know it today, is directly linked to the exploitation of humans and nonhumans. For example, Kinder Morgan Energy Partners is planning an expansion of a Canadian pipeline, “sending more of the country’s controversial tar sands crude to Asia” (“Kinder”). The new twin line is said to pass through nine aboriginal reserves. “Opponents are looking at challenging the impact the project would have on their aboriginal rights, which include hunting and fishing on their traditional territories” (“Kinder”). As will be demonstrated later, urban civilization necessarily uses the idea of progress as a justification for its actions, as in the economic progress made by the new pipeline.

“Urbanature” paradoxically requires the dualism that it attempts to destabilize by permitting the isolation of urban spaces from their sustaining resources. Urban spaces, generally speaking, reach outside themselves for sustenance, especially for food production and building materials, thus implementing divisive technology (see Harold Fromm). They are set up in such a

way that most people remain unaware of the destructiveness of these spaces. For example, by outsourcing, they encourage factory animal farming. When the majority of Americans purchase animal food, they only see the end product: masses of protein wrapped in plastic. Most remain oblivious to the gritty details of industrial livestock production. In pork production, the demand for “uniformity” spurred on the practice of “thumping,” wherein runts are “picked up by their hind legs ... swung and then bashed headfirst onto the concrete floor” (Foer 187). Jonathan Safran Foer interviewed a Missouri farm worker, who described the process in detail:

We just swing them, thump them, then toss them aside. Then after you’ve thumped ten, twelve, fourteen of them, you take them to the chute room and stack them for the dead truck. And if you go in the chute room and some are still alive, then you have to thump them all over again. There’ve been times I’ve walked in that room and they’d be running around with an eyeball hanging down the side of their face, just bleeding like crazy, or their jaw would be broken. (187-88)

The divide between consumers and their food sources enables the inhumane treatment of animals. When the suffering of another is invisible, it becomes more tolerable. By exploiting the greater environment to sustain urban environments, the urbanite has transcended nature, and placed the human at the center of the proverbial universe.

Nichols attempts to confront the notion of nature’s existence somewhere “out there,” agreeing with the *majority* of ecocritics that nature is, in fact, everywhere. “... we are never cut off from *wild nature* by human culture” (Nichols 348, emphasis added). However, his conflation of “nature” and “wildness” gives rise to a key problem. It could be argued that if all is wild, then all is normal. Prairies, rainforests, smog, and carbon emissions would all fall under the same umbrella—“wild.” Catastrophe becomes a myth. Why intervene in any environmental problem,

or even any social problem for that matter? Contrast this with Gary Snyder, a modern day Thoreauvian,<sup>2</sup> for whom no amount of oppression of the human or nonhuman world can be categorized as “wild.”

New York City and Tokyo are ‘natural’ but not ‘wild.’ They do not deviate from the laws of nature, but they are habitat so exclusive in the matter of who and what they give shelter to, and so intolerant of other creatures, as to be truly odd.

Wilderness is a place where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and nonliving beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order ...

To speak of wilderness is to speak of wholeness. (Snyder 12)

For Snyder, “wildness” is the framework within which ecological problems ought to be faced. The consideration of “wildness” as distinct from nature enables the critique of the sources of these problems.

Nichols envisions his idea of “urbanature” through Thoreau’s life and work. He projects his particular ecological perspective onto Thoreau by recalling Thoreau’s lifelong proximity to urban spaces, noting particularly that the author always returned to the urban after his excursions, and travelled to and from town throughout his Walden experiment. He connects this to Thoreau’s supposed overall approval of urban spaces. However, as Lawrence Buell points out:

Thoreau did not sound the preservationist note loudly. Why? Probably not because he feared readers would disapprove but because his desire to imagine Walden as an unspoiled place overrode his fears about its vulnerability. You cannot argue simultaneously that sylvan utopia can be found within the town limits and that the locale is being devastated at an appalling rate ... (“Thoreau and the natural environment” 174)

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<sup>2</sup> Gary Snyder’s framework of Wildness closely resembles that of Thoreau. See *The Practice of the Wild* by Snyder.

Buell's reading takes the issue of proximity from a different angle. Although a rail line ran through Thoreau's woods and he could hear the town church bells from his cabin, he ignored the impending encroachment of civilization, and rather sought solace in the remaining wild spaces outside of town.

Nichols misappropriates Thoreauvian wildness, arguing that "wildness," as opposed to "wilderness," became the crux of Thoreau's philosophy. "He does not want us to drop our current lives and go and live in a hut in the wilderness so much as he wants each of us to wild our own minds, to turn away from our emphasis on society toward the wildness that is within us" (Nichols 350). Nichols forgets that for Thoreau, the most complete expression of "wildness" is found in "wilderness." Indeed, in the wilderness Thoreau became most finely attuned to that "wildness" within him.

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. *The cities import it at any price. Men plough and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind.* ("Walking" 239, emphasis added)

Cities' importation of the "wild" establishes the native setting of the "wild" *outside* of the city—precisely, in "the forest and wilderness." Nichols continues:

The result of such 'wilding' will be a closer link between the human and the nonhuman worlds. It is clear, however, that we are not meant to leave the social world so much as we are meant to *bring the wild world back with us*. Thoreau wants us to *import* the sensibility of pond and bean-field back into our drawing rooms and parlors. (Nichols 350, emphasis added)



Nichols contends that the solution to ecological problems must come from harnessing “wildness.” Oddly, this conflicts with his attempted merger of “wild” and “nature” (which ultimately signifies that *all* is wild, including urban spaces). The very project of harnessing “wildness” implies some lack of it. As it is, urbanature contradicts and cannot account for unsustainable nature.

To reinvent Thoreau as an advocate of the urban is to ignore the purpose of his excursions, and especially his Walden experiment: “I went to the woods because I wished 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* 90). To fulfill this purpose the author traded his normal mode of existence for another. He claimed, “Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it” (*Walden* 317). His excursions not only indicate the dissimilarity he perceived between his Concord home and the woods, but they provide the space for him to critique the ideological discourses masking the coercive, exploitive, and oppressive relations of power in the village (and in America as a whole). His critiques hinge on his concept of “wildness,” in light of which “urbanature” unravels alongside its assumptions about nature and culture.

### **Industry and Resistance**

Thoreau’s concept of “wildness” must be understood in historical context. Thoreau lived during a time that deepened class distinction throughout the country. The industrial revolution saw the transition from the craftsman and the artisan, who slowly and meticulously created products by hand, to speedy factory production. “The economic and political power that had been relatively dispersed among traders, merchants, clerics, and farmers of New England was

consolidated into the hands of the owners of commercial and industrial capital” (Newman 517). Several innovations of this period, especially textile production, steam power, and iron working, helped spark the revolution. Whereas inventions made manufacture quicker, the consumer demands of a capitalist society fueled the industrial machine, utterly transforming our modes of production and our perception of the human’s place within those processes. With goods becoming cheaper to produce and cheaper to buy, industrialists began to replace craftsmen. As might have been expected, many highly skilled craftsmen found themselves out of work because they could not compete with the factories. What was left for them but to join the ranks of the countless factory workers? Rich industrialists got richer at the expense of the poor laborers, who worked and lived in dreary circumstances, often becoming poorer in the long run.

This period saw the beginnings of demonstrations. For example, in the early 1830’s, “New York witnessed its first labor demonstrations as stonecutters protested the use of prison-cut stone in the construction of public buildings” (Newman 518). Many more demonstration occurred throughout the decade. Ultimately, when bloody battles broke out between “secretly organized Irish workers on the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal and a group of scabs,” Andrew Jackson ordered “the first use of federal troops in U.S. history to crush a labor rebellion” (Newman 518). The promise of progress was an increase of wealth and quality of life for all; the result was low-wage, intense labor for the majority—for cheap products must be produced *cheaply*—at whose expense the wealthy minority benefited. In the years prior to the Civil War, national tensions were mounting. While issues of slavery and states’ rights contributed heavily to the impending War, “The real issue—farm vs. factory—had already been decided by the increasing success of the Hamiltonian program, ... the inevitable choice of a country whose vast wealth and size made a mass-production industrialism mandatory and inescapable” (Horton 149). Demand

increased for Southern farmers to not only grow particular crops (especially cotton and tobacco), but to generate finished products from them. However, Southern farmers “had no factories of their own,” which subjected them increasingly to the demands of their Northern counterparts. They were forced to pay “fealty” to Northern industry (Horton 148). In this case, industrial capitalism’s success demanded Southern cooperation, or subjection. Southern resistance meant that war was the only viable solution to capitalism’s success in America.

By this time, the industrial revolution had already taken the inherent imbalance within capitalism and intensified it. The Transcendentalists, who were known for resisting the status quo, responded by experimenting with alternative lifestyles. The Associationists started an agricultural commune, Brook Farm, inspired by Charles Fourier and intended to be a light to the rest of the country. But Thoreau did not see the sense in this. In fact, after having visited Brook Farm, he said, “As for these communities, I think I had rather keep a bachelor's hall in hell than go to board in heaven” (*Journal* Vol. I, 227). As Newman points out, this does not imply that Thoreau removed himself from Brook Farm’s foundational framework. He, and his counterparts at Brook Farm, zeroed in on what capitalism had failed to deliver, not simply in terms of socio-economic status, but in terms of spiritual and intellectual wealth. They all attempted to reduce the “necessities” of their lives, in stark contrast to capitalist materialism. At Brook Farm, they were able to “steal enough time away from work to pursue their programs of improvement” (Newman 528). Newman quotes Elizabeth Palmer Peabody:

“The hours redeemed from labor by community, will not be reapplied to the acquisition of wealth, but to the production of intellectual goods. This community aims to be rich, not in the metallic representative of wealth, but in the wealth

itself, which money should represent; namely, THE LEISURE TO LIVE IN ALL THE FACULTIES OF THE SOUL.” (Newman 528)

Thoreau, of course, surrounded by this ever-increasing national tension throughout his life, grew increasingly intolerant of the state of the world around him. He despises materialism, wealth, and fickle consumerism. Indeed, industrial capitalism, the offspring of progress, became a central target of critique for him. With its power concentrated in urban spaces, Thoreau uses his excursions to the wild as a primary method of attack. While industrial capitalist power alienates the individual, and destroys the very core of the individual and the community, “walking” (Thoreau’s pursuit of wildness) exposes the nature of the power relations at play, along with their founding ideals. “Wildness” leads to awareness, resistance, and transformation. Thoreau’s projects, and “wildness” itself, thus become a mode of resistance to the orthodoxies of the day.

### **Unendurable “Wildness”<sup>3</sup>**

For Thoreau, “wildness” connotes a state of “boundlessness” (Hoag 134). In “Walking,” he integrates a series of binaries that establishes and reinforces his view of “wildness.” They include freedom/“wildness” and freedom/culture, human “improvements” and deformity, the landscape and civilization, positive and negative Biblical imagery, “wildness” and civilization, East and West, eating and drinking for strength and gluttony, fair and wild, lawns/cultivated fields/towns/cities and swamps, imported soil and cellar sand, the passerby and the dweller within, the beautiful garden (embodying vanity) and a dismal swamp, “wildness” and dullness (or tameness), light and darkness, disease and health, wild fancies and the order of time and development, tillage and the meadow/forest, and knowledge and ignorance. By balancing

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<sup>3</sup> “Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure” (“Walking” 240).

opposites, Thoreau persuades his readers to pursue “wildness,” an act he refers to as “walking.”

The concept of freedom poses a particular challenge. Thoreau contrasts his concept of freedom from the Enlightenment ideal, which remains decidedly anti-ecological. For the Enlightenment, the ideal of individual freedom became the foundation for liberal economy, which suggests that individuals left to their own devices will act out of their own self-interest, and thereby maximize their economic well-being. This theory purportedly secures individual freedom through individual responsibility; individuals alone are solely responsible for their lives and circumstances. Individualism incorrectly conceives of humans in isolation; it denies the reality of contingency. It does not account for the arbitrary nature in which some are born in “advanced” circumstances while others are born under tyranny. It does not account for the biological dependency of organisms on each other or the social nature of human animals. Perhaps most dangerously, the denial of contingency founds a hierarchy in which humans can dominate anything beneath them, including other human beings. Theodore Adorno exposes the contradictory nature of Enlightenment freedom, noting that social freedom and the social institution are “interwoven” (xiii). Therefore, social freedom is ironically not free, but *dependent* on an institution to make it “free.” In this sense, social freedom, as it has been envisioned here, is *not* purely free.

Thoreau’s concept of freedom (freedom/“wildness”) differs from that of Enlightenment thinkers (freedom/culture) in order to make way for civil equality and ecological consciousness. “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and “wildness,” as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (“Walking” 225). For Thoreau, if freedom is to truly exist, it must *not* neglect contingency. In fact, it must be grounded on that reality. This sense of freedom

recognizes the individual as a part of a much larger community (both human and nonhuman). A mere “inhabitant” of Nature believes she may separate herself from it, and rise above it. However, an inhabitant aware of the interconnectedness of all things will likely behave differently with regard to her surroundings. This means that individuals ought not to be mere receptacles of cultural knowledge (particularly of ideals), and therefore subjects, but coequal participants in life. For Thoreau, the outgrowth of any economic, political, or social system must reflect that.

Thoreau’s binaries illustrate the conflict between “wildness” and the ideological discourses pervading the country, particularly those that promote exploitive behavior, which produce a sort of *tameness*. Thoreau illustrates his frustration with the tame boundaries of civilization by using the imagery of fences.

I saw the fences half consumed, their ends lost in the middle of the prairie, and some worldly miser with a surveyor looking after his bounds, while heaven had taken place around him, and he did not see the angels going to and fro, but was looking for an old posthole in the midst of paradise. I looked again, and saw him standing in the middle of a boggy, stygian fen, surrounded by devils, and he had found his bounds without a doubt, three little stones, where a stake had been driven, and looking nearer, I saw that the Prince of Darkness was his surveyor. (“Walking” 230).

“Fences” provide artificial ideological and material barriers by which we fool ourselves into thinking we have somehow transcended and conquered Nature or each other.<sup>4</sup> Capitalism itself may be envisioned as a sort of fence to the degree that its promises justify its often exploitive behavior. It does seem to give humans dominance over nonhumans, and divides humans among

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<sup>4</sup> See Harold Fromm’s view of technology and Nature.

themselves, with elites at the top. “Fences” draw a line between elite humans and everything else; they manifest materially, as in many of the technologies fueled by capitalism: factory systems and the urban space itself. Thoreau’s Biblical allusions express contempt for the deception occurring here. He imagines wild spaces as “paradise” or “heaven” inhabited by “angels,” signifying a pre-fallen, uncorrupted, Edenic state.<sup>5</sup> By envisioning the surveyor as the “Prince of Darkness” and the miser as “worldly,” he evokes an image of Satan (the deceiver) leading sinful humanity down a hostile path against paradise (“wildness”). In other words, Thoreau relegates humanity’s destructive dualistic tendency—which often comes under the guise of “improvement” —to a “fallen” state. Fences come to symbolize the arbitrary divisions between the world without (“wild,” “savage,” paradise) and the world within (progressive civilization misconceived as a paradise or at least capable of achieving a degree of paradise). They are the product of a tame and “deformed” society that has lost its way—that is, its “wildness.”

Thoreau sets at odds two types of roads, which embody “man’s improvements” and “wildness,” respectively: the highways “made for horses and men of business” and old roads. Unlike the highways, which were made for society and lead to some “tavern or grocery or livery-stable or depot,” the old roads lead away from their namesake towns. The old roads serve other purposes, lead to other sorts of destinations, and provide other sorts of “profit.” They never cater to the needs and wants of civilization, but to those of the “walker.” The Old Marlborough Road, for example, is a rarely trodden, wild space: “Nobody repairs it, for nobody wears it” (232). Thoreau says of the Road, “Not many there be / Who enter therein,” (“Walking” 232), alluding

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<sup>5</sup> See Augustine on Original Sin

to a saying of Jesus,<sup>6</sup> and implying that most go through life oblivious of their own “wildness,” surrendering it to the social, political, or economic order of the day. Very few, except the “walker,” find the wild road.

Civilization generally denies its inner wild impulse and sticks to the heavily worn highway of commerce,<sup>7</sup> which requires too much of the individual in payment for the kind of life it promises. But the “walker” —the pursuer of “wildness” —seeks liberation from the chains of commerce, culminating in his material detachment. Interestingly, Thoreau was not impervious to these chains. Consider the very fact that he squatted on Emerson’s land and borrowed tools for his experiment, and that he also frequented the town. In fact, on one occasion Thoreau proceeded to town to retrieve a shoe that was being repaired in advance of a huckleberry outing the next day. On the way, he was arrested for nonpayment of the poll tax, and was released the next morning after someone else, described as “a veiled woman,” posted his bail (Petruionis 231). These examples of imperfection reveal the pervasiveness of the aforementioned chains, and the nature of “walking” as a continual process of liberation. Indeed, through “walking,” Thoreau was able to identify oppressive discourse and begin liberating himself from it, however imperfectly. “I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least—and commonly more than that—sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields, *absolutely free from all worldly engagements*” (“Walking” 227, emphasis added).

Materialism meant more than the obvious acquisition of goods; for Thoreau, it implied the goods’ acquisition of the individual. Materialism—antithetical to the “narrow way” —became a form of slavery. In *Walden*, Thoreau specifically targets Jean-Baptiste Say and Adam

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<sup>6</sup> “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” (Mathew 7:13-14, NASB)

<sup>7</sup> I am referring here to the series of canals and rail lines built during Thoreau’s day to increase commerce between the east and the west.



Smith. Richard J. Schneider explains that whereas Say “advised that saving money ... made it possible for new monetary investment,” Thoreau saved his time, investing it in “spiritual self-culture.” Smith encourages the procurement of freedom through the “exercise of enlightened self-interest” for financial gain; meanwhile, Thoreau demonstrates that people already have more freedom than they currently know (Schneider 99-100). Thoreau applauds mechanics and shopkeepers, who sit in their shops all day long, for resisting suicide (“Walking” 227). How dreadful must that kind of life have seemed to him! Thoreau’s natural appointments were not with the toil of acquisition apparent in civilization, but the wild enterprise of the soul. This is a privilege mechanics and shopkeepers (and the like) never have, as industry obsession narrowed the space for intellectual pursuits.

Thoreau counters the many who take the “highways” by contrasting the emptiness of their labors with the substance of “wildness.”

Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him. One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life. He would be climbing over the prostrate stems of primitive forest-trees. Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in impervious and quaking swamps. (“Walking” 240-241)

If “wildness” is linked to vitality, then subjugation is linked to stagnation or dullness—a sort of death in itself. The civilized laborer dutifully persists, rarely capable of pausing to reap a real “return” for his labor. How he dreams of escape to the wild, where he may free himself of needless “obligation.” Civilization has broken him in the manner of “horses and steers.” “Who

but the Evil One has cried, ‘Whoa!’ to mankind?’ (“Walking” 246). This constitutes a fall from humanity’s former wild state. In pursuit of progress, civilization has counter-productively tightened its reins on humanity, quelled creative energy, and transformed people into machines. Therefore, if civilization abides in the East (Europe), then Thoreau looks to the American West for a solution to civilization’s problems: “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world” (“Walking” 239).

While Thoreau looks to “wildness” to break free from the rolling stream of ideological discourse, he balances the tension between the boundless “wild” and tame civilization, bringing us full-circle to Nichols’s imposition of “urbanature” onto Thoreau. “I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than I would have every acre of earth cultivated: part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest ...” (“Walking” 249). Thoreau’s willingness to abide in the ecotone suggests that he does not call for the eradication of civilization, but its transformation, culminating in the disruption of dualistic thinking. Though urban spaces contain varying degrees of “wildness,” they have rarely been prepared for harmonious existence with wild spaces. Indeed, there was much about the urban that Thoreau reacted against, especially its intrusion into “wilderness” —both materially and ideologically. A conflation of the two in any reading of Thoreau is a categorical error.

**“Even trees do not die without a groan ...”<sup>8</sup>**

Some critical perspectives resist—wittingly or not—Thoreau’s invocation of “wildness.” Many propose that the Romantic conception of the natural world would move us backwards,

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<sup>8</sup> “But hark! there you only saw, but did not hear. There now comes up a deafening crash to these rocks, advertising you that even trees do not die without a groan” (*Journal* Vol. III, 163).

ecologically speaking. For example, John Tallmadge's pro-urban stance criticizes the notion of nature existing somewhere "out there." He falls in line with other "wilderness" critics, calling it "pastoral idealism" (180), an ideology that allows us to live our lives in ecologically destructive ways by envisioning a pristine nature outside of our destructive space. This romantic fancy, he argues, ultimately removes awareness of the causal relationship between humans and their environment. The idealization of "wilderness" gives us the illusion of a clean conscience because it reminds us that we have not utterly destroyed it yet. Few would disagree with the reality of this disconnect. However, Tallmadge's argument is one-sided. In a Thoreauvian sense, civilization idealizes *itself*. Reliance on tropes like progress permits this disconnect, promoting exploitation of the nonhuman world. We have "sacrificed" what we needed of the nonhuman world (and much more, arguably) to our "higher" cause.

For Tallmadge, being able to recognize and appreciate "nature" in *all* spaces, especially urban spaces, tends to make us more environmentally conscious. At first glance, his suggestion may appear promising, yet it remains problematic. He suggests that people should begin to recognize the immediacy of nature around them—the "Nature" they can see in the midst of the city, for example. However, it follows that any intervention one might take will likely only relate to the immediate—that is, that which they can actually appreciate, which itself is only immediate. As such, most intervention will have little-to-no bearing on long-term ecological problems. For example, one might fight to conserve some green space in the middle of one's city, but remain oblivious of the deeper problem of carbon emissions—an often intangible problem in terms of daily experience—which will in the long-run, ironically, negatively affect the green space they seek to preserve. Tallmadge's framework of "immediacy" allows people to do just enough to make them feel like they have "done their part," leaving the bigger problems

largely unknown and unaddressed. Arguably, this produces the same ill effects “wilderness” discourse.

Anne Whiston Spurr’s underscoring of the constructed nature of all spaces implicitly, if inadvertently, challenges Thoreau’s reaction to civilization. She argues that all humans and nonhumans, including the Earth’s processes, manipulate the spaces in which they exist. If this is characteristic of wild nature, we must ask: at what point can the manipulation of any space be considered not wild? Can any of the details of human culture deviate from “wildness?” By definition cultivation and domestication, and therefore civilization with all its problems, would fall into the category of “wild.” It would seem, however, that anything forced to act against its nature is not “wild.” *Coercion* is the antithesis of “wildness.”

I perceive that when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. *If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.* (“Civil Disobedience” 217, emphasis added)

For Thoreau, the difference lies between the felling of a few trees and clear-cutting a forest. The former permits the encompassing ecosystem to continue down its own path, without any seriously negative repercussions. The latter destroys entire ecosystems, and the many species that cannot coexist with humans must “move out.” “The wild fruits of the earth disappear before civilization, or are only to be found in large markets. The whole country becomes, as it were, a town or beaten common, and the fruits left are a few hips and haws” (*Journal* Vol. XI, 79). Again, “serpents, bears, hyenas, tigers rapidly vanish as civilization advances, but the most populous and civilized city cannot scare a shark far from its wharves” (*Cape Cod* 149).

Slavoj Žižek describes a paradox in which many people live: on the one hand, we are aware of the ecological crisis the world is facing; on the other hand, we live our lives as though that were not the case. As informed as we have become, we generally act as if a real ecological apocalypse isn't possible. Nevertheless, to confront the path we are on, Žižek claims that we should "cut ourselves off" from nature even more, to become "more artificial" (*Examined Life*). As Helena Feder explains, Žižek asserts that "human existence itself is, at this point in history, artificial, and we should openly acknowledge and embrace our anthropocentrism and fight for the future we want" (153). She argues that he endorses nothing less than an "anthropocentric war, one that exhorts us to embrace the costs of our desires openly," disregarding other creatures unless their lives benefit ours (Feder 154). Žižek's logic arbitrarily draws a line between humans and nonhumans, making further lines possible, such as between those who are genetically fit and those who aren't. His argument is for the protection of civilization as it has been done historically, via exploitation and violence. It allows for the commodification of *any* given group deemed a threat to human civilization. His logic reinforces the false juxtaposition of civilization and the "savage."

"Wildness" for Thoreau implies boundlessness working in tandem with the reality of contingency. On the other hand, Nichols's interchange of terms (urban and nature) disables the critique of ecological problems. He masks the urban exploitation of the "wild," and boldly pretends a degree of wholeness within urban spaces. Thoreau's "wildness" confronts the very foundation of "urbanature." In "wildness," the individual is led by conscience, not by majority, legislators, slave owners, or capitalists; in "wildness," one might step outside of ideological discourse (which produces *tameness*) to critique it. This, perhaps, is why Thoreau's excursions were so important. They provided the means by which he retreated, albeit imperfectly, from the

blatant dissemination of ideological discourse in the towns, thereby providing a space for social critique.

## Chapter 2: The End of the “Machine”

For Thoreau, “wildness” constitutes awareness of the presence of ideological discourse and of its effects—namely, that such discourse tames the individual and makes him a subject. It relates to both physical space and mental exercise in Thoreau’s work, constituting his retreat from the ideal and the social, political, and material products of the ideal. In this way, he resists being cultivated by a power-hungry society. Indeed, “wildness” provided him the space to observe and critique the underlying ideologies of an exploitive society, which based the value of the individual on her economic productivity. Ultimately, Thoreau provides us the tools to confront our own social, political, and ecological problems—through “wildness.”

### Civilization and the “Savage”

Civilization and progress carry specific connotations, historically and in Thoreau’s writing, which are vital to understanding Thoreau’s treatment of industrial capitalism. Capitalist civilization<sup>9</sup> relies on the notion of progress, its central ideal (and idol) that often masked the real issue at work—power. The idealization of progress haunted most corners of this country; it was an engine driving expansion westward, war (especially the Mexican-American War), and human exploitation. In fact, by 1837 several canals, modeled after the Erie Canal, were built to hasten commerce between “east” and “west.” Many of the major cities that missed their opportunity with the canals quickly invested in the new railroads, which grew into a system of 30,000 miles by 1860 (Horton 136). The U.S. government even encouraged expansion by offering grants for citizens to occupy public land in the territories (138). Then president James K. Polk stated in his

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<sup>9</sup> Thoreau notes that urban spaces are connected to the idea of civilization: “the large towns and cities, where civilization especially prevails ...” (*Walden* 30).

inaugural address that the annexation of Texas would “[open] to them new and ever-increasing markets for their products” (“Address by James K. Polk”). The country, backed by the president, even asserted America’s right to land that remained in dispute between Texas and Mexico—and this, all for the sake of the progress of civilization.

The idea of progress has its roots in Enlightenment thought. Marquis de Condorcet argues that since we can observe how the laws of nature regulate phenomena, and humans are a part of nature, then we should equally be able to predict with relative certainty the “development of the intellectual and moral faculties of man” (Condorcet 209)—that is, human progress. He also argues that the most civilized nations are the “most enlightened, most free, most exempt from prejudices,” and that what inequality does exist among the civilized rightly belongs to “the imperfections of social order,” not to the civilized per se (Condorcet 210). Therefore, the spread of enlightenment via education was thought to remove the so-called imperfections that founded inequality. Over time humans would progress to such a degree that “the slavery of countries subjected to kings, the barbarity of African tribes, and the ignorance of savages” would eventually vanish (Condorcet 210), and result in Condorcet’s utopian dream—the “perfection of the human species” (Condorcet 222).

Condorcet demonstrates his firm belief in the great measures of equality that should result from proper instruction:

We might shew, that by a happy choice of the subjects to be taught, and of the mode of inculcating them, the entire mass of people may be instructed in every thing necessary for the purposes of domestic economy; for the transaction of their affairs; for the free development of their industry and their faculties; for the knowledge, exercise and protection of their rights; for a sense of their duties, and



the power of discharging them; for the capacity of judging both their own actions, and the actions of others, by their own understanding ... the security of their rights ... defending themselves against prejudices ... *in fine, for escaping from the delusions of imposture, which would spread snares for their fortune, their health, their freedom of opinion and of conscience, under the pretext of enriching, of healing, and of saving them.* (220-21, emphasis added)

Condorcet's understanding of progress implies that some are more enlightened than others, since there must be some to identify and educate the uncivilized. By assuming ongoing social stratification, this process described as intending to further freedom and equality *requires* the continued existence of the inequality that it seeks to eradicate. As such, progress extends power to an elite by marginalizing the "savage," historically American Indians, women, African Americans, and many others. For example, consider the American Indian boarding schools that were established to assimilate indigenous people into Euro-American culture. Captain Richard Henry Pratt

established an educational system to isolate Indian children from their families, cultures, and languages where white teachers could indoctrinate them into nineteenth-century American society and the English language. At the same time, white people could teach Christianity and the value of the dollars to Indians ... (Trafzer, et al. 14)

The so-called spread of enlightenment and salvation of which Condorcet speaks demanded the subjection of these people to the whims of the dominant culture.

Thoreau's understanding of "wildness" resists Condorcet's ideas about progress through proper "instruction." For Condorcet, instruction means *cultivation*, and cultivation means

equality. “Instruction, properly directed, corrects the natural inequality of the faculties, instead of strengthening, in like manner as good laws remedy the natural inequality of the means of subsistence” (222). Cultivation implies the propagation of ideology. Indeed, equality must be attained through assimilation with the dominant ideology. Perhaps unwittingly, Condorcet promotes the cultivation of subjects, “machines,” and sedated citizens of the world in the name of equality. On the contrary, “wildness,” respecting the reality of contingency, might allow each “voice” (human and nonhuman) to be heard. It rejects the top-down model, which targets the “savage,” and would seek something akin to Paulo Freire’s dialogics.

Thoreau himself was well aware of how the “civilized” capitalized on progress by identifying and turning the “savage”—human, nonhuman, and even land itself—into a commodity. “The race that settles and clears the land has got to deal with every tree in the forest in succession. It must be resolute and industrious, and even the stumps must be got out ...” (*Journal* Vol. III, 269). Thoreau sees the recklessness of deforestation, a direct byproduct of Western colonization (and ultimately urbanization). The forest transforms from a thing with intrinsic value into “standing lumber” or at the very least a barrier to progress. Anything that stands in the way of progress must be hewn down: “It is a thorough process, this war with the wilderness,—breaking nature, taming the soil, feeding it on oats. The civilized man regards the pine tree as his enemy. He will fell it and let in the light, grub it up and raise wheat or rye there. It is no better than a fungus to him” (*Journal* Vol. III, 269). Civilization demands efficiency, advancement, and immediate pay-off, leading it to devalue indigenous flora and fauna, designating undesirable plant life as weeds. However, as Snyder observes, “wild nature cannot be called unproductive, and no plant in the almost endless mosaics of micro and macro communities is ever out of place” (85).

For the sake of progress, civilization inevitably produced the human commodity. The rule of law, established to safeguard against tyranny and injustice, has historically infringed on the rights of individuals under the guise of progress. An “undue respect for law,” as Thoreau puts it, led to the transformation of the individual into a military machine.

You may see a file of soldiers, colonel, captain, corporal, privates, powder-monkeys and all, marching in admirable order over hill and dale to the wars, *against their wills, aye against their own common sense and consciences*, which makes it very steep marching indeed, and produces a palpitation of the heart.

(“Civil Disobedience” 204-5, emphasis added)

Of course, it is well known that Thoreau is referring to the Mexican-American War here, controversial due to the United States’ dispute with Mexico and the war’s underlying motivation to aid in the expansion of slavery. The soldier is a tool by which civilization propels itself forward, simultaneously silencing individual conscience. “Law” becomes the new morality by which the individual lives. Civilization cares little for the “free exercise ... of judgment or of the moral sense” of individuals (“Civil Disobedience” 205), as long as it reaches its desired ends.

Thoreau confronts civilization and progress in his journal entry on February 26, 1852:

We are told to-day that civilization is making rapid progress; the tendency is ever upward; substantial justice is done even by human courts; you may trust the good intentions of mankind. But to-morrow in the newspapers that the French nation is on the eve of going to war with England to give employment to her army ... Does the threatened war between France and England evince any more enlightenment than a war between two savage tribes, as the Iroquois and the Hurons? Is it founded in better reason? (*Journal* Vol. III, 321-322)

Civilization fancies itself “progressive,” even on the brink of war. One might suggest that war has often been considered an inevitable means to progress. Instead, equally as often civilization uses progress—a conveniently mutable higher cause—as justification for violence, and violence a means of attaining economic and social power. This passage also reveals the relative nature of civilization, as it can only be defined by contrast to an objectified “Other.” The notion of the “savage” was the dehumanizing justification for the violent treatment of Africans and Native Americans; it permitted the destruction of nonhuman nature, and engorged the colonizing State with power. It is a process that continues worldwide to this day.

Recent events surrounding the Edward Snowden controversy illustrate this point well. In June 2013, Snowden, a former CIA system administrator, leaked classified National Security Agency documents. The documents revealed several surveillance programs, of which some specifically implicated the U.S. government in spying on its citizens in order to gather intelligence to preemptively aid in the prevention of terrorist attacks. While Snowden seeks asylum outside the U.S., the U.S. government has charged him with violating the Espionage Act. Snowden has been heralded as both a traitor and a hero, with emotions fuming on either side, illustrating the pervasive and obfuscating nature of ideology. Why is it that Snowden and his sympathizers are often “violently” touted as unpatriotic, while Snowden considers himself nothing of the sort? What would be the implications if they were considered otherwise? Certainly, one’s image of Snowden directly correlates to one’s image of the U.S. government. If Snowden is a traitor, then the government is vindicated. However, if Snowden is a hero, then the government must be a traitor to its constituency. In this case, ideological discourse masks power relations between in-group and out-group, and reaffirms the power of the hegemonic ruling elite. The discourse of patriotism implies unfailing allegiance to the State. It necessarily follows that

Snowden (or hypothetically any anonymous “whistleblower,” if Snowden had not revealed himself) would inevitably be demonized, despite whether it was warranted or not. By placing Snowden, and sympathizers, in a demonized out-group—that is, by making them “savages”—the U.S. government alternately defines itself as just, innocent, and worthy of devotion. All “patriotic” people must fall in line.

In another example, Paul Street demonstrates the U.S. as a “*minority*-ruled regime.” “As most Americans see it, the democratic ideal of ‘one person, one vote,’ is negated by the harsh realities of ‘dollar democracy’ and the ‘golden rule’ (‘those who have the gold rule’). The candidate selection and policymaking process belong primarily to the top 10 percent of Americans that own 73.2 percent of American wealth” (“Capitalism and Democracy” 2). In a political system where only the very wealthy can afford to run for office, campaigns turn out to be more about clever marketing than offering solutions to real problems. The underlying ideological demarcation of in-group and out-group justifies treatment of the out-group—that is, that they are not viable prospects for political office—and thereby reinforces power relationships based on economic class.

These two examples extend what Thoreau saw during his lifetime. The “savage” must be subdued, tamed, silenced, or overrun when necessary for the sake of civilization’s progress. Interestingly, Thoreau juxtaposes civilization with “savage tribes,” and thereby mythologizes them both: “Does the threatened war between France and England evince any more enlightenment than a war between two savage tribes, as the Iroquois and the Hurons? Is it founded in better reason?” (*Journal* Vol. III, 321-322). Civilization and “savage” are relative; the civil is only civil when contrasted with a marginal, “savage” entity. By defining the out-group, the in-group alternately defines itself. However, by demonstrating the equivalence of the two

groups' violent behavior, Thoreau diffuses both terms, rendering them meaningless.

Thoreau reveals the relativity of “progress” as an Enlightenment ideal. He confronts the notion of progress as a means of achieving the common good, articulating the manner in which it maintained the exploitive power of an elite class. He therefore demands consideration of the tactics used to attain that ideal—marginalization, dehumanization, commodification, and violence—and the systems grounded in that ideal.

### **Ideology, Identity, and the “Machine”**

Progress inevitably became the ideal that propelled capitalism and industry forward. It conveyed the hope that everyone could achieve some degree of “the good life,” the American dream. But the one making the promise—the Capitalist—gets to determine for everyone what “the good life” actually is, and how it should be achieved. In such a case, it will always underhandedly favor the powerful: material wealth, which should only be achieved through intense labor. Thoreau saw through this. He articulates his resistance especially well in *Walden*'s chapter on “Economy.” He assesses his neighbors' mode of life and uses his findings to inform his own alternative mode of life during the course of his experiment. “Wildness” becomes the bedrock of his own liberation from the toils of his townspeople.

Near the beginning of the chapter “Economy,” Thoreau creates space for critique by confronting conventional wisdom about the manner in which life should be lived. “When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. *Yet they honestly think there is no choice left*” (*Walden* 8, emphasis added). Many throughout the country, including Thoreau's townspeople,

placed faith in an industrial system, keeping them in the service of entities that have no real interest in providing them what they seek. Rather, as Karl Marx understands it, these entities offer only enough to sustain and replicate their work force—that is, their moneymaking machine. In this chapter, Thoreau addresses the common notions of the requirements of life because these notions, to a great extent, found the “need” for industry.

In preparation for his experiment, Thoreau considers what will be truly necessary for his stay at Walden Pond. He makes his determination in stark contrast to his townspeople, who have transformed what has never before been “the true necessities and means of life” into what is. “Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind” (*Walden* 14). He observes that their lives are harder and more complicated than they need to be, and presumably artificial to a degree, simply because of their requirements for their everyday existence. For example, many have become preoccupied with fashion, and would rather wear something respectable than be respected (*Walden* 21). They labor incessantly for the stuff of social status, exchanging inner substance for material gain. “The childish and savage taste of men and women for new patterns keeps how many shaking and squinting through kaleidoscopes that they may discover the particular figure which this generation requires today” (*Walden* 26). Thoreau reduces civilized, progressive society to an ironic state of childish and “savage” immaturity. Equally ironic, “tattooing is not the hideous custom which it is called. It is not barbarous merely because the printing is skin-deep and unalterable” (*Walden* 26). The reversal of the “savage” and the “current generation” defuses any authentic, status-granting power of the newest trends, thereby demonstrating their futility. “It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes” (*Walden* 22).

In determining what he will require for shelter, Thoreau observes the “positive hinderances” of the demand for luxury homes.

In the savage state *every family owns a shelter as good as the best*, and sufficient for its courser and simpler wants; but I think that I speak within bounds when I say that, though the birds of the air have their nests, and the foxes their holes, and the savages their wigwams, *in modern civilized society not more than one half the families own a shelter*. (*Walden* 30, emphasis added)

The high cost of civilized homes means that most people will work their entire lives and rarely be able to pay for them. And here is the irony: because of the tremendous cost of these homes, most of life must be spent working away from them. In turn, the “savage” who owns his home need not resort to similar labor, but can retain all the time and “life” that the “civilized” person loses.

But how happens it that he who is said to enjoy these things is so commonly a *poor* civilized man, while the savage, who has them not, is rich as a savage? If it is asserted that civilization is a real advance in the condition of man,—and I think that it is, though only the wise improve their advantages,—it must be shown that it has produced better dwellings without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run. (*Walden* 31)

Thoreau’s townspeople have been duped into believing that the most “progressed,” “civilized” individual has obtained all the newest, idealized comforts (or “fashions”) of the day. Industry’s success depends on it. It keeps products selling and workers working. The most “life” that must be exchanged for them belongs to the laborer. So, many civilized lives are spent “impoverished,”



even if they are surrounded by luxury. Here again, progress has become more of a restraint than advancement.

As it is, the demand for the newest luxuries, coupled with faith in the capitalist dream, warranted the factory system, which could timely supply the wants of the people. But this further incurred the necessary hard life of factory workers.

I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principal object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched. (*Walden* 26-27)

Progress, again, is held at bay by the very thing promising to extend it. Through industry's low cost mass-production, many comforts become more affordable for the general public; for example, a chair made in a factory is far cheaper than one made by a craftsman. However, this masks the reality behind the new mode of production: low cost translates to low wages with laboriously high output requirements. With one hand, industry proposes an easier, even luxurious life, but with the other it steals that life for its own benefit.

But how do the poor *minority* fair? Perhaps it will be found, that just in proportion as some have been placed in outward circumstances above the savage, others have been degraded below him. The luxury of one class is counterbalanced by the indigence of another. On the one side is the palace, on the other are the almshouse and "silent poor." (*Walden* 34)

Moguls "make bank," while the masses deceive themselves. Idealizing the "luxuries" and "comforts" of the day caused many to be willing to live in a system, however exploitive, which

could supposedly produce them. Hard labor becomes the necessary byproduct. “The myriads who built the pyramids to be the tombs of the pharaohs were fed on garlic, and it may be were not decently buried themselves. The mason who finishes the cornice of the palace returns at night perchance to a hut not so good as a wigwam” (*Walden* 34). The laborer is a machine in the capitalist system; he is only as valuable as he is productive, and never reaps the full fruit of his labor. He is a wage-slave, a subject to a master who cares for him just enough to keep up productivity. In his service, *he* ultimately feeds the system that starves him; he participates in the propagation of his own oppression.

Herman Melville’s “Tartarus of Maids” illustrates the irony between industry’s ideological discourse and the socio-economic reality. In the short story, the narrator’s business becomes so heavily dependent on paper that the narrator decides to visit a paper factory to determine future business prospects with it. During his visit, he observes the alienated lives of the factory girls. He notes first the close proximity in which they live to their work. Indeed, their living quarters surround the factory with their “cheap, blank air, great length, gregarious windows, and comfortless expression” (Melville 189). The factory consumed their impoverished lives. The factory “girls” produced blank paper, a product that they neither had the time nor the creative energy left to use. In other words, they produced something to which they themselves had no access, something that upon completion was immediately shipped away from their “out-of-the-way corner” of the world (208). The girls produced paper that could only be used by some elite who could afford it, and who would write on it anything they wished. This, of course, would likely amount to a means of extending their power (or wealth). In this way, the girls were alienated from their products. They could work, but not enjoy any fruit of that work—instead, only a filled stomach at the end of a long workday.

Interestingly, *paper* here is quite telling. The girls could not use it, meaning they could not express themselves, their individuality, and their unique identities. Indeed, production overshadowed their identities, making them empty and dull. They were as their products, “blank.” “At rows of blank-looking counters sat rows of blank-looking girls, white folders in their blank hands, all blankly folding blank paper” (193-194). Again, “I looked from the rosy paper to the pallid cheek, but said nothing (194). They gave their lives for the “life” of their products. What life the narrator actually saw in one young girl, could nowhere be found in the old: “I looked upon the first girl’s brow, and saw it was young and fair; I looked upon the second girl’s brow, and saw it was ruled and wrinkled” (194). Despite the failed promises of industry, they felt no recourse. Their lives were consumed by labor. “We want none but steady workers; twelve hours to the day, day after day, through the three hundred and sixty-five days, excepting Sundays, Thanksgiving, and Fast-days. That’s our rule” (209). In the end, the factory girls became alienated from each other and the world through their overly long workdays to the extent that they never married. “And so, having no married women, what females we have are rightly enough called girls” (209). In this way, the factory sustained its current workforce. Since they never married, they could never afford to leave for a better life.

Industry took hold of the individual, bound her hand and foot, and “unnaturally” isolated her from herself and her community. It transformed her into a slave of progress. “Machinery—that vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially served by human beings, who served mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan” (195). “Their own executioners; themselves whetting the very swords that slay them; meditated I” (200). Even if they would choose another life, they could not; they are stuck, to the benefit of the capitalist. This was the nature of industry that

Thoreau witnessed in his time. The demand of his townspeople for a “civilized,” luxurious life created more problems for themselves than they could foresee.

Thoreau’s fellow-townsmen perform the daily round without joy or anger or genuine exercise of will ... Thoreau discovers the same pattern of acquiescence, a dehumanizing reversal of ends and means, in all of their behavior. He finds it in their pretentious furnishings, their uncomfortable clothing, their grim factories, the dispirited way they eat and farm the land and work from dawn to dusk ... The moral, in short is that here ‘men have become the tools of their tools.’” (Leo Marx 381)

Industry coupled with the complexity of capitalist pursuits overcomplicated the world, and in so doing deepened the suffering of the masses. The poor suffer because of “the hardness of their lot or of the times,” and the wealthy because while they appear to have obtained the highest ideals of society—as superficial as they may be—they are “the most impoverished class of all, who have accumulated dross, but know not how to use it, or get rid of it, and thus have forged their own golden or silver fetters” (*Walden* 16). The one must labor in some industry, most likely under someone who will pay them meagerly, or just enough to sustain them, never achieving wealth; the other has wealth, but *it* possesses *him*. Thus, the industrial system failed both groups.

Ultimately, Thoreau would have us participate in “higher” pursuits—exactly what he did, and what his fellow townspeople thought so strange of him. Capitalism has reduced an entity’s worth to the degree to which it is lucrative. Sauntering, as Thoreau termed it, yields no fiscal return and was therefore viewed as a waste of time and energy by his neighbors. However, labor “produces wealth”—though not so much for the laborer—and was therefore valued. Oddly, or

perhaps expectedly, for most of Thoreau's townspeople the production of wealth consumed their lives, and they rarely enjoyed it.<sup>10</sup>

The very simplicity and nakedness of man's life in the primitive ages imply this advantage at least, that they left him still but a sojourner in nature ... but lo! men have become the tools of their tools. The man who independently plucked the fruits when he was hungry is become a farmer; and he who stood under a tree for shelter, a housekeeper." (*Walden* 37)

The desire for progress, grounded on the false disparity between "civilized" and "savage," encouraged the masses to trade in their lives as sojourners in nature for artificial ones as machines of progress. However, Thoreau seeks a transformation of ideals, which culminates in his call for simplicity. Reducing the noise and clutter that comes with the yearning for luxury would reduce industrial demand significantly. This could have hypothetically created a scenario in which the factory system could not have thrived and the capitalists could not have filled their pockets, but in which people would not need to toil under someone else's thumb to survive. Simplicity of needs and wants transforms human life from artificial, machine-like existence into engaged, purposeful existence. For Thoreau, a life lived wherein "gain" is decidedly *not* the chief end is much happier, fulfilling, and actually *lived*. In light of his Walden experiment, simplicity inevitably means a return to the boundless state of "wildness."

### **A Return to "Wildness"**

Thoreau provided an indispensable framework of retreat, to "wild" spaces, and return, transformation—a framework wherein "wildness" liberates. Indeed, "wildness" necessarily resists the tightening grip of society—especially when ideology leads to outright oppression—and

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<sup>10</sup> "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (*Walden* 8).

as such could be conceived of as the germ of revolution (as in the emancipation of slaves, and the Indian Independence, women's rights, and civil rights movements), necessarily combating any entity standing at odds with it. "A people who would begin by burning the fences and let the forest stand!" ("Walking" 230).

Fences, the boundary lines of humanity, have come to symbolize the taming of "wildness"—both in terms of material spaces, and of individuals and "classes" of people. Thoreau longs for our return to "wildness" because in "wildness" is relief from exploitation and the liberation of the individual. Returning to "wildness" must very often come by "burning the fences"—that is, through revolution. Consider what followed the American Revolution. The people established a government to perpetuate the independence that they procured for themselves. But, over several generations, the government came to be imagined as the *cause* of independence. "The American government,—what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity? ... It is a sort of wooden gun to the people themselves" ("Civil Disobedience" 203). Oddly, the masses began to feel *dependent* on a government to maintain their *independence*. In such a case, the State has morphed into a "Parent" figure and the majority has defended it for its supposed provisions, engorging it with power, which inevitably translated to oppression and the reduction of individuals into "machines" for its service.

The mass of men serve the state thus, not as men mainly, but as machines, with their bodies ... In most cases there is no free exercise whatever of judgment or of the moral sense; but they put themselves on a level with wood and earth and stones; and wooden men can perhaps be manufactured that will serve the purpose as well. ("Civil Disobedience" 205)

“Wildness”—that which has yet to become a subject—threatens the Parent State because it seeks awareness of the ideals that would “tame” us, and resists them. Thoreau himself evaded payment of the poll tax for several years in protest against governmental abuse of power, culminating in his arrest and famous night in jail. A prison, he says, “is the place where the State places those who are not *with* her, but *against* her,—the only house in a slave State in which a free man can abide with honor” (“Civil Disobedience” 213). The “wild” individual conscience threatens the stability of any unjust entity, as it stands against the maintenance of an oppressive status quo. If the powerful minority cannot cultivate the “wild,” that minority will restrain it.

For Thoreau, reconsidering Enlightenment freedom and progress would have undermined the foundation of industrial capitalism. For us today, the same reconsideration confronts the justification for the persisting human exploitation and ecologically destructive behaviors that found our lives. It demands an end to the age of the “machine,” and calls for the revaluation of humans and nonhumans as no longer mere economic entities and tools of progress.

The idea of “energy independence” provides an urgent example of the ongoing discourse concerning progress. While “energy independence” has been a topic of concern for several decades in the U.S., it has become central in political dialogue in recent years. Consideration is underway for the controversial Keystone XL Pipeline, which would deliver oil from the Canadian tar sands to American refineries in the Gulf of Mexico to reduce dependency on Middle-East oil reserves. In this example, progress means self-sufficiency both economically and in terms of where we obtain our natural resources. Interestingly, while “Energy Independence” discourse offers progress with one hand, it conceals regress with the other. It masks a series of underlying universal assumptions, which obscure power.

The Oklahoma Energy Resources Board (OERB), an Oklahoma state agency focusing on petroleum education and restoration of abandoned oil sites, released an ad in 2013 that reveals the nature of the ongoing energy discourse. Key portions of the ad are cited here for the sake of illustration:

Everyone agrees that it's a good idea, and that's all its been until now—an idea. ...Relying on our own energy means that we keep more troops at home. Moving towards energy independence strengthens our national security. It's mind-boggling that we send that much money to countries that don't support our way of life. This isn't just for us; it's for our children and grandchildren... So if we produce domestic energy sources, it automatically creates massive tax revenues. That's money that instead of being sent overseas, never to be seen again, stays here in the United States. Energy Independence in the United States will create about three million jobs. America needs jobs; energy independence is the way to do it. (OERB "Energy Independence")

The ad associates several fundamental ideals with "energy independence"—namely, patriotism, family, and freedom. The notion that "everyone agrees that it's a good idea" is not only full of patriotic fervor, but implicitly threatens opponents. Who is "everyone" but an unnamed majority that "altruistically" upholds Energy Independence for the sake of families and freedom? Indeed, Energy Independence promises to bring families back together by "[keeping] more troops at home," and even to ensure their safety and secure their financial futures for generations to come. Therefore, to oppose Energy Independence is to oppose the family, freedom, security, and economic growth. This means marginalization and indirect association with any other anti-American group—those that "don't support our way of life"—invoking the idea of the "savage."



The notion that “everyone” agrees ignores the serious public objection to the pipeline made by indigenous peoples throughout Canada. As such, proponents hold dearly to their own form of manifest destiny, as the pipeline must necessarily encroach on opponents’ land. By asserting that everyone agrees outright denies the voice of these people. The majority will benefit at the expense of a few. This is far from a new tactic. In the same way, the country “benefited” by ousting Native Americans from their homes and forcing their migration west, by using slaves to stimulate the economic growth of the new nation, and by sending countless people to die in a war to acquire land from Mexico and thought to extend the reach of slavery. Progress has driven exploitation from the founding of this country, and it continues today.

The responsible entity that “everyone” supports is cleverly masked by the ads focus on *what* that entity will produce for the country. Since “energy independence” means none other than turning to our own *oil* reserves, it implies that to truly support the progress of the nation, one must support Big Oil. Thus, the ad essentially proclaims with an almost utopian air that capitalism is the only way forward while ignoring its necessary imperfection as a human construction. As such, it overlooks class stratification that will be heavily prevalent among the “three million jobs” created, and that long and tedious work hours will ultimately alienate the workers from their own families—the same families that “energy independence” purports to bring together. The central, underlying suggestion of “energy independence” is that capitalism works. So, spend money and, most importantly, support Big Oil.

Through the ad’s focus on progress, it obscures the reality of the environmental problems posed by the pipeline. Oil from Canada’s tar sands, being especially dirty, requires special processing that emits significantly more carbon into the atmosphere than conventional methods. Additionally, extraction requires the destruction of Canada’s boreal forest and contaminates

nearby water sources, devastating the surrounding ecosystems. The ad's underlying assumption of the necessary continued use of fossil fuels overlooks the facts of environmental degradation due to their overabundant use and negates the possibility of investment in alternative energy sources, *mitigating* technological progress by capitalism itself.

If the general public were aware of the underlying messages of “energy independence” discourse and their consequences, they might reconsider the nature of the country's way forward. This means openness to critiquing ourselves, including our economic structure, our relationship with the nonhuman world, and even our most sacred ideals. Rather than throwing their money at major oil companies, the general public might pursue access to more renewable energy sources. While this promises bad news for the oil industry, it remains a viable option for real energy independence.

## **Conclusion**

Returning to “wildness” has several implications that culminate in the eradication of the exploitive ideals at the very core of our society, ideals which promote the marginalization of humans and nonhumans. Returning to “wildness” requires the transformation of the processes that found our lives, a transformation dependent on a renewed awareness of what those processes entail. Considering the scope of this project, a return to “wildness” may culminate in the rethinking of urban spaces, both their development and their specific locations of development, or investing in clean energy technology. If we are to “cultivate” some degree of human life (as in the domestication of a landscape), then we should do so with as full an awareness of the results of our actions as possible. For example, we should know where our animal products come from

and where our trash goes. A return to “wildness” means just such a return to self-awareness, to simplicity and accountability counterbalanced with the contingency of all things.

We need the tonic of wildness,—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. (*Walden* 317)

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