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Soundscapes

Listening to British and American Languages and Cultures

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The Animal Soundscape of David Thoreau's *Walden*

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ABSTRACT – This essay singles out the peculiar animal soundscape that Thoreau sketches in *Walden*, especially in the following chapters: “Higher Laws”, “Brute Neighbors” and “Winter Animals”. In them, in fact, the ‘I’ describes and recollects the voices of the various animals at Walden Pond. In order to make sense of this variegated and multifarious soundscape, Thoreau resorts to many possible exegetic tools, among which there is literature.

KEYWORDS – Thoreau; *Walden*; Animal Studies; Soundscape Studies.

1. THINKING ABOUT HEARING

Thoreau's writings are populated with the most diverse and fascinating kinds of animals. This essay investigates the soundscape those animals generated, especially at Walden Pond, and the way Thoreau rendered it through words. In particular, it examines three chapters of *Walden* – “Higher Laws”, “Brute Neighbors”, and “Winter Animals” – that represent a relevant case study. These chapters, far from being the sole textual places inhabited by animals or resounding of their voices, are nevertheless exemplary, because they formulate a subtle discourse on the human-animal relationship. “Higher Laws” functions as a sort of philosophical preface to two practical forays where the subject of cohabitation gains center stage.

Soundscape studies have proved to be one of the most acute theoretical gateways into the study of the ecocritical sphere of the humanities ¹, clearing

¹ This useful label does not pretend to synthesize the lively critical debate that involves such key hyperonyms as ecocriticism, animal studies, environmental literature, etc. At least for the question of Nature writing in Thoreau studies, see Kerridge 2014 and Calarco 2018.

“a path for a range of understanding in both science and culture that leads to fresh ways of experiencing and understanding the living world” (Krause 2015, 18). Following this perspective, these pages investigate how Thoreau’s literary representation of animal sounds reflects his ideological commitment to the animal and his philosophical investment in nature. A soundscape-oriented reading of Thoreau’s writings can productively challenge the primacy of vision that is prominent in critical reflections of the human-animal relationship. Painter and photographer John Berger expresses it in a very precisely visual question in his *Why Look at Animals?* (1977). His seminal discussion rests solely on visual premises. He argues that once a human establishes a contact with an animal, their mutual unintelligible alterity cannot be bridged resorting to language, i.e., the *vocal* utterance of a shared code, but only via silent gazing:

Between two men the two abysses are, in principle, bridged by language. Even if the encounter is hostile and no words are used (even if the two speak different languages), the existence of language allows that at least one of them, if not both mutually, is confirmed by the other. Language allows men to reckon with each other as with themselves. [...] No animal confirms man, either positively or negatively. [...] its lack of common language, its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctness, its exclusion, from and of man. (Berger 2009, 14)

Even though Berger acknowledges language as not exclusively vocal in its agency as ontological recognition system, his use of the word “silence” and the visual hegemony all through his essay concur to suggest that, when linguistic exchange is excluded, sight gains an indisputably pivotal role in human-animal dialectical interactions. Berger touches on a crucial feature that permeates the majority of the accounts of the relationship between human and nonhuman animals as they are portrayed in literary nature writing. Human beings, as “highly visual animals”, tend to understand outer reality “through [their] eyes” (Denny and McFadzean 2011, 155). Nature writing has therefore always been strongly indebted to and mainly constructed by observational practices. A sort of cognitive reflex response promotes sight as the key sensory gateway to the experience of nature. In this sense, *Walden* is no exception. Not only does it invite a primarily visual interpretation of its material, but it also demands that we recognize the essentially visual nature of its project. Thoreau is one of the most famous upholders of the motto ‘Nature as Book’. In many respects the early chapter “Reading” – meant, as Stanley Cavell has rightly pointed out, “as a description of the book before us” (Cavell 1981, 14) – confirms this

assumption by elevating the act of reading, one of the eye's most remarkable abilities, to a sort of exegetic prerequisite to understand *Walden's* aesthetical value. More recently, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), a book that overtly follows Thoreau's archetypal desire of a full immersion into a natural environment, confirms his bias towards vision:

I've been thinking about seeing. There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. [...] Thoreau, in an expansive mood, exulted 'What a rich book might be made about buds, including, perhaps, sprouts!' It would be nice to think so. (Dillard 2013, 17)

This reference to Thoreau's book project confirms *Walden's* visual vocation and places it alongside many other nature writing of his, such as "A Natural History of Massachusetts", *The Maine Woods*, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Cape Cod*, as well as the *Journals*². Thoreau confirms the primacy of vision when he asserts that, among the other senses, the eye is "the Brahmin – it converses with the heavens" (Thoreau 1909a, 182).

All these things considered, however, we must not overlook the role of other senses in Thoreau's general project of nature writing. His *Weltanschauung* notoriously entailed a communion with nature that passed through all senses, being centered around the idea of natural experience as a holistic immersion into an organic whole regulated by a "unified sensibility" (Matthiessen 1941, 84), the same that would also shape an organic work of art. For example, during a walking tour in July 1855, the account of which was later published in *Cape Cod*, he recalls his eye-witnessing of the massacre hunt of pilot whales. He therefore shapes his memory around his haptic impression of the scene:

They were partly on shore and partly in the water, held by a rope round their tails till the tide should leave them. A boat had been somewhat stove by the tail of one. They were a smooth shining black, like India-rubber, and had remarkably simple and lumpish forms for animated creatures, with a blunt round snout or head, whalelike, and simple stiff-looking flippers. (Thoreau [1865] 1985b, 949)

Visual stimuli were not, indeed, the sole sensitive perceptions available to Thoreau. His involvement with nature rested on a balance between a poetical and scientific prominence (Walls 1999), and of course ranked sensory alertness as a prime prerequisite. The same pilot whale episode activates another

² A recent selection of it perfectly exemplifies this point (Thoreau 2017).

sensory gateway, the nose, and Thoreau is careful to put smell into his recollection of such a gory animal encounter:

About a week afterward, when I came to this shore, it was strewn as far as I could see with a glass, with the carcasses of blackfish stripped of their blubber and their heads cut off; the latter lying higher up. Walking on the beach was out of the question on account of the stench. (Thoreau [1865] 1985b, 951)

The present foray into *Walden's* representation of animal soundscape aims at highlighting the cardinal role such a specific soundscape performed on the writer's consciousness. Attaining higher awareness through hearing (McSweeney 1998, 101) was a sort of *leitmotiv* for Thoreau, given how often the transcendental dimension of existence was meant to assume the shape of a solemn music:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 125)

The present analysis will show that Thoreau is prone to read nature sounds as if they were symbols on a canvas, but never underestimates their constitutive difference from merely visual signs. By inserting conspicuous sonic descriptions, Thoreau unquestionably demonstrates that he keenly realizes how quite intensely the natural landscape is molded by its aural tracteries and how urgently a nature writer should fashion a literary way to incorporate them. He therefore proposes one of the first sustained claims for the irrevocability of listening to the world as a prime method of engagement with it (Voegelin 2010, 1-14).

2. ESSAYING THE SOUNDSCAPE OF WALDEN POND

In a recent and impressive experimental project on *Walden*, Christina Katopodis has managed to create an “immersive website experience” (Katopodis 2017). She collected contemporary sounds – comparable to those we might assume

Thoreau experienced during his original stay – and put them on a historically faithful interactive map. The richness of such a project is clear evidence of the richness of the auditory dimension of Thoreau's work, which we start realizing as early as its fourth chapter, entitled "Sounds"³. Thoreau reflects upon Walden's soundscape by making a plea for the necessity of a careful aural receptiveness of the individual immersed in a natural environment:

But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular written languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard. Much is published, but little printed. The rays which stream through the shutter will be no longer remembered when the shutter is wholly removed. No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert. (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 108)

Advocating a state of alertness for the "language which all things and events speak" outside of printed texts stands as a solemn claim for a sensory receptiveness that should exceed the mere optical fruition of written language. The idea of Thoreau being alert to such a (super)natural language calls for re-readings of *Walden* with specific attention to the interfacing perspective of words and sound (Calanchi 2017, 211), and for an attentive inquiry into the animal import for the definition of Walden Pond's soundscape. Among the many theoretical frameworks variously connected to Schafer's influential first attempt (1977), we might use the category *Weltanhorchung* (Mayr 2012), if only by virtue of its intellectual vicinity to German idealism, notably one of the firmest bases (Faflik 2017, 100-01) of American Transcendentalism of whose teachings Thoreau was the most distinguished second-generation "apprentice" (Gura 2008, 199). Mayr's idea of a "listening to the world", when tripped of its technicalities, provides a useful framework to organize an interpretation of the ecologic dimension of the auditory stream (Bregman 1990). When, for example, Thoreau describes the "booming of the ice" in "Spring", we immediately perceive that the aural component has become the very vehicle of the whole natural process of phonological renovation:

³ Given how striking is the prefatory aim of both "Economy" and "Where I Lived, and What I Lived for", we might even maintain that the soundscape of Walden Pond was deemed by Thoreau of the most urgent importance, only to be preceded by "Reading", which, by none other than Stanley Cavell, has been masterfully read as a manifesto for the entire endeavor, a sort of third branch of the prefatory couple of chapters.

The pond began to boom about an hour after sunrise, when it felt the influence of the sun's rays slanted upon it from over the hills; it stretched itself and yawned like a waking man with a gradually increasing tumult, which was kept up three or four hours. It took a short siesta at noon, and boomed once more toward night, as the sun was withdrawing his influence. (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 291)

The metamorphosis of the lake into a sort of anthropomorphized *genius loci* passes through a distinctive sonic dimension. A note in Thoreau's journal helps us understand that these sounds were among the most appealing sensory stimuli at Walden Pond to be processed with a further dimension in mind:

Nature always possesses a certain sonorousness, as in the hum of insects – the booming of ice – the crowing of cocks in the morning and the barking of dogs in the night – which indicate her sound state [...] I drink in a wonderful health – a cordial in sound. (Thoreau 1909a, 277)

While the “cordial” Thoreau so eagerly aims at interiorizing comprises so many animal voices, an analysis of his perception of the animal soundscape might help unveil his transcendental design. Nevertheless, this philosophical import must not adumbrate the literary feature of *Walden*, which is ensured by the strongly essayistic quality of Thoreau's writing⁴. He clearly states his work's subjective and introspective essence, when he boldly declares that:

In most books the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body whom I knew so well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience. (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 1)

⁴ Many important general studies on the essay as a genre note this point. Cristina Kirklighter (2002, 39-65) considers the canonic couple Emerson-Thoreau and articulates a discourse on democratic identity by retracing the importance of *Walden* to the history of the essay as a genre and taking into account also its early reviews. Douglas Atkins, on a similar vein but more diffusely, argues for the inescapability of a serious engagement with Thoreau's work to understand the essay can convey personal experience in written form, and concludes that “Thoreau's self-styled ‘experiment’ and the masterpiece it spawned are, in every sense, an essay, a genuine trial upon life and meaning that is also a deeply effective assaying” (Atkins 2005, 75).

Such a statement, however, does not necessarily prelude to an autobiographical project. This proemial assertion is to be read alongside and on the backdrop of Michel de Montaigne's famous "Preface au Lecteur". Although focusing on the individual human being responsible for the enunciation and arrangement of their various "chapitres", Montaigne's *Essais* do not intend to give a comprehensive narrative account of a life, but to describe it in its processual experiential component. Rather than a succession of chronologically ordered facts, Montaigne favors "le progrez de mes humeurs" (Montaigne 2019, 758). The goal of such a *post facto* harvest of dispersed opinions, philosophical musings, and personal recollections is not narrative wholeness, but a challenging live description (Nocera 1998, 56-59) of, for example, the gradual process of refinement of the senses that a woodland isolation could allow⁵. In spite of the autobiographical expectations aroused by the subtitle "Life in the Woods", Thoreau chooses an essayistic arrangement of his materials and, even more importantly, an essayistic treatment of his personal experience, his holistic goal entailing a leap from immanence to transcendence. The latter does not result from a forced Emersonian intellectual harmony, but from the subtle and continuous sense refinement (Hoddler 2001, 72) that Thoreau described in his journal as follows:

We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish, a purely sensuous life. Our present senses are but the rudiments of what they are destined to become. We are comparatively deaf and dumb and blind, and without smell or taste or feeling. Every generation makes the discovery, that its divine vigor has been dissipated, and each sense and faculty misapplied and debauched. The ears were made, not for such trivial uses as men were wont to suppose, but to hear celestial sounds. (Thoreau [1849] 1985a, 382)

While ears should in fact attend to *hyperuranian stimuli*, the hearer must find a perfect communion with his environment and let the many "sound objects" (Chion 1983) that naturally populate it exert their acoustic influence over his sensory transducers and sketch a higher and more subtly organized harmony out of them:

There was a time when the beauty and the music were all within, and I sat and listened to my thoughts, and there was a song in them [...] I sat and listened by

⁵ In this sense, the Walden Pond hut is not at all different from the famous round tower of the Montaigne estate where Michel Eyquem decided to spend his days after his retirement from the Parliament of Bordeaux.

the hour to a positive though faint and distant music, not sung by any bird, nor vibrating any earthly harp. (Thoreau 1909c, 294)

The experiment at Walden Pond can thus be fruitfully evaluated from an acoustic perspective, even though very few have done it so far (Titon 2015, 145-46). Ecocritical readings of Thoreau's interest for the acoustic edge of the sensorium have interpreted sounds in *Walden* either as symbols "carry[ing] the weight of his cumulative experience with nature" (Paul 1949, 520) or as signals of an epistemological transition towards a more "empirical and 'scientific' approach to nature after 1850" (Buell 1995, 171).

Thoreau was intensely familiar with music. He "was raised in a musical family" (Titon 2015, 147) and played the flute. He was fond of singing and dancing. Nonetheless, the musical experience he managed to translate into words mainly concerned the natural universe; he was keen, in other words, on a sort of pastoral symphony, heir to an atavist devotion to the melic dimension of the world, far from academic rigor but endowed with deeper sensitivity:

St. Francis, it is said, spoke to the birds as he fed them. Did they sing back to him? What could Thoreau hear in the sounds of the natural world? Could he sing back? Obviously, sounds presented the environment to Thoreau's consciousness; but through that presence was there the possibility of knowledge? Toward what epistemology does sound lead? The question fascinated Thoreau. (148)

Answers are obviously hard to find at an epistemological level. What is interesting here is the effort to provide an analysis that should privilege the import of sound and of sound decoding in Thoreau's treatment of animals within his experience of American wilderness.

The question of the anthropological significance of animal sounds has been recently investigated in a wide-ranging study of ancient Greek and Roman *phonospheres* (Bettini 2008) – a term that for the purposes of this essay is to be considered a synonym of soundscapes. Deploying anthropology's finest tools, Maurizio Bettini not only reconstructs the many ways in which animal voices are rendered in literary texts, but he also interprets and deciphers how ancient human beings capitalized on the "affordances" (Gibson 1979, 127) animals offered by becoming proxies for certain specific cultural configurations (Bettini 2008, 15). Similarly, *Walden's* animal sounds can be interpreted in order to reconstitute a tableau of Thoreau's relationship not only with the acoustic vibrations emitted by nonhuman animals, but in general with these 'neighbors' toward whose domain he markedly made a move when deciding to settle near Walden Pond.

3. LISTENING TO ANIMAL VOICES IN *WALDEN*

When turning to “Higher Laws”, however, it seems as if the animal voices that have been such a distinctive sonic background in the earlier chapters – like the mosquito in “Where I Lived and What I Lived for” or the symphony of birds in “Sounds” – go momentarily dumb. In light of the ideological weight of the chapter, Thoreau seems to clear the soundscape of all noise from the outer world in order to attain the audible stillness required for attentive and profound philosophical meditation.

The only animal noise in the chapter is just imagined, and it is recorded as an exemplification of the core ideological message against any type of unmotivated murderous act directed towards animals:

No human being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature, which holds its life by the same tenure that he does. The hare in its extremity cries like a child. I warn you, mothers, that my sympathies do not always make the usual philanthropic distinctions. (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 204)

Making the cry of a murdered hare similar to that of a child⁶ serves to join together the realms of humans and animals. Thoreau has no intention to establish a relationship of ontological equality, but that he nevertheless considers them as coexisting in a holistic balance tie that violence inevitably and unreasonably disrupts. This desire is reflected in the morphological splitting of the compound word “philanthropic”, a stylistic underscoring which features also in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* where Thoreau states: “Away with the superficial and selfish phil-anthropy of men” (Thoreau [1849] 1985a, 31-32).

Thoreau does not wish to postulate a common ground between humans and animals; that is reflected in another silent and abstracted apparition of an animal, or at least of a part of it, i.e. the hog’s skull, in a very dense passage that confirms the separation between the two spheres:

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly

⁶ In ancient culture, hares were entitled a whole set of different anthropological ‘affordances’, spanning from the innocent realm of infancy to the uncanny one of witchcraft (Bettini 2008, 1087-112). For Latins hares were known to vagire, as children (and also as doelings and bucklings), and this may well be read as an attempt to raise a sympathetic attitude towards said baby animals (see paragraph 4).

expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, yet not pure. The other day I picked up the lower jaw of a hog, with white and sound teeth and tusks, which suggested that there was an animal health and vigor distinct from the spiritual. This creature succeeded by other means than temperance and purity. (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 210)

Thoreau's dilemma about the impurity of the animal is connected with this intimidating relic of a living beast, whose oral appendages are still to be found in place, suggesting the possibility of an oink: this hog, had it been alive, would have surely been a piercing element of the soundscape indeed. "Higher Laws", however, confirms its place as philosophical prelude to the livelier animal soundscape of the next two chapters. The actual sound that characterizes it is, in fact, a humanly produced flute melody that can hardly be associated with the authenticity and spontaneous overflow of beastly voices in the wild:

He had not attended to the train of his thoughts long when he heard some one playing on a flute, and that sound harmonized with his mood. Still he thought of his work; but the burden of his thought was, that though this kept running in his head, and he found himself planning and contriving it against his will, yet it concerned him very little. It was no more than the scurf of his skin, which was constantly shuffled off. But the notes of the flute came home to his ears out of a different sphere from that he worked in, and suggested work for certain faculties which slumbered in him. (213)

The flute's note, however, comprehend both the ideological necessity of dominating the "reptile and sensual" inner animal, and the structural prerequisite of human silencing in order to achieve such philosophical conclusions. John Farmer's music seems to attract two other human characters, a Hermit and a Poet, whose dialogical exchange articulates the same compulsion to turn to a nonhuman, exclusively animal soundscape in "Brute Neighbors". Differently from John Farmer, whose train of thoughts is interrupted by music, the Hermit gets his desired quiet isolation that entails, significantly, his disappearance. The exchange between the two only serves as an allegorical introduction to the very first animal-exclusive soundscape of *Walden*⁷. The

⁷ Even though "Sound" contends "Brute Neighbors" the primate of representing an animal soundscape in the book, it is only in the latter chapter that animals alone are protagonist of the sonic scene.

objects Thoreau considers are, I argue, important not only as animals, but much more because, within the final literarily refined fabric of *Walden*, they represent the authentic trace of a natural environment unaffected by abstract philosophical distillation and remain as uncontaminated by anthropological interference as possible. Nevertheless, the fact that this sonic purity emerges from the voluntary silencing of human voices, marks the break-in of Walden Pond's animal voices both as a casual encounter and as the awaited result of the efforts towards a naturalistic project.

The first colonies of brute neighbors that we face in the chapter are silent, almost as if the Hermit had indeed the power to get the quietness he is seeking from the surrounding natural landscape. Locusts are “not heard” (214), pigeons give “no flutter” (*ibid.*) and Bose's barking is a remote possibility in that particularly peaceful moment. The only background noises are the faint tapping of the woodpecker and the rustle made by the Poet. Once he goes out fishing, Thoreau moves closer to the animals. He characterizes this perspective shift by an introductory remark about the very nature of the cohabitation and proximity between humans and beasts: “Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world? Why has man just these species of animals for his neighbors, as if nothing but a mouse could have filled this crevice?” (216). Other low-Fi animal voices in the chapter include mice, phoebes and robins, a raccoon “whinners at night” (218), a few fluttering turtledoves and red squirrels coursing down the cabin, some dogs and a flock of newborn kittens “fiercely spitting” (223).

This gradual sonorization preludes to three very audible beasts that most prominently characterize Walden Pond: the partridge, the ants, and the loon. The first neighbor to leave a sonic trace on the pages of the chapter is a partridge. This bird has had a recognizably sound profile from classical Antiquity onwards. Claudius Ælianus, for instance, described partridges as endowed with a differentiated set of calls according to their geographical origin. He thus anticipates contemporary naturalistic discoveries about animal dialects (Mâche 1991). While classical authors frequently equated birds' calls to proper voices speaking or singing (Bettini 2008, 122), Thoreau describes the partridge as a mother using her skills to protect her younglings. She engages in a physical stratagem which, though noisy, is not in fact vocal: “[t]he parent will sometimes roll and spin around in such a dishabille that you cannot for a few moments detect what kind of creature it is” (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 217). Also the woodcock uses this sort of bodily deception to protect his brood, i.e. pretending to be injured to distract the source of danger. It produces a set

of sounds – rustling and stirring – similar to that of a feathered boy moving through the woods. A similar acoustic situation occurs in “Winter Animals”, where the partridge is said to burst “away on whirring wings, jarring the snow from the dry leaves and twigs on high, which come sifting down in the sunbeams like golden dust” (267).

The second animal encounter Thoreau connotes in a very peculiar aural manner is that with two fighting colonies of ants. Quite predictably, the scene does not possess a strong sound imprint: “[o]n every side they were engaged in deadly combat, yet without any noise that I could hear” (219). We appreciate how this silence gap is filled with two very peculiar sounds: the “Conquer or die” battle cry (220) borrowed from Felicia Hemans’ poem “The Spartan Mother and her Son”, and the more complexly belligerent military undertone of war marches: “I should not have wondered by this time to find that they had their respective musical bands stationed on some eminent chip, and playing their national airs the while, to excite the slow and cheer the dying combatants” (*ibid.*). This fictionalization must not be interpreted as a creative compensation for a scientific lacuna. Thoreau was in fact well acquainted with the work of two of the most respected entomologists of his time, William Kerby and William Spence, whose *Introduction to Entomology* (UK 1818; US 1846) had laid the foundations of the scientific study of the life of insects. As alluring as science might have been, classical epics could characterize such a ferocious battle much better. In *Walden*, recalling the feats of Homeric Myrmidons seemed a more suitable response to such a sight. Only later on did Thoreau decide to participate more actively to entomologic observation. Following the sound of a cricket on August 20, 1851, he engaged in a more scientifically and less literary inquiry as to the origin and signification of insect life:

I hear a cricket in the Depot Field, walk a rod or two, and find the note proceeds from near a rock. Partly under a rock, between it and the roots of the grass, he lies concealed, – for I pull away the withered grass with my hands, – uttering his night-like creak, with a vibratory motion of his wings, and fluttering himself that it is night, because he has shut out the day. He was a black fellow nearly an inch long, with two long, slender feelers. They plainly avoid the light and hide their heads in the grass. At any rate they regard this as the evening of year. They are remarkably secret and unobserved, considering how much noise they make. Every milkman has heard them all his life; it is the sound that fills his ears as he drives along. But what one has ever got off his cart to go in search of one? I see smaller ones moving stealthily about, whose note I do not know. *Who ever*

distinguished their various notes, which fill the crevices in each other's song? It would be a curious ear, indeed, that distinguished the species of the crickets, which it heard, and traced even the earth-song dome, each part to its particular performer. I am afraid of be so knowing. (Thoreau 1909b, 408; all italics mine)

Again, we find the crevice mentioned, but here we have many more actual naturalistic observations, rather than imaginative fantasies. The *Journal's* more acute and objective research impulse further confirms the literary nature of *Walden*. We might even remark that, had Thoreau not being distracted by his classical Achillean echoes, he might have been tempted to pick one of the soldiers, and discover what another couple of entomologists groundbreakingly contributed to spread some decades ago, i.e. that “a majority of ants also communicate by sound. They produce high-pitched squeak by rubbing a thin, transverse scraper located on their waist against a washboard of fine, parallel ridges on the adjacent surface of the abdomen. Entomologists call this behavior stridulation” (Hölldobler and Wilson 1994, 51) ⁸.

The last and loudest, animal voice Thoreau reproduces on paper is the loon ⁹, and he does so by recounting an episode that has engendered a lot of critical debate (Walls 1995, 227). His – Thoreau never uses the pronoun “it” to address the bird – appearance is prefaced by a human gathering. The main feature of Thoreau's description of the loon voice rests upon a dichotomy: on the one hand, he always describes him *laughing*, an action which has been almost exclusively associated with human nature. On the other hand, the description of the loon and of his interaction with Thoreau features a clear process of gradual characterization towards a de-humanized and demonic metamorphosis of the bird. The loon, coming to Walden Pond during the fall to moult, immediately makes his presence *heard* by “making the woods ring with his wild laughter” (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 224). Passing from a general description to a specific October afternoon encounter, Thoreau describes how he came by one loon during a boat search exactly thanks to

⁸ An impressive recording of stridulation in leafcutter ants is available online, <http://blog.wildaboutants.com/tag/ant-stridulation/> (15/10/2019).

⁹ A recording of a loon's call edited by The Cornell Lab of Ornithology is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ENNzjy8QjU> (15/10/2019). The iconic John James Audubon's early nineteenth-century drawing (plate 306 of *Birds of America*) has been recently made available online at <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america/great-northern-diver-or-loon> (15/10/2019). In his 1842 *Dial* essay “Natural History of Massachusetts”, Thoreau inserted a sketch that partakes Audubon's taxonomic endeavor (Thoreau 2007, 555).

that “wild laugh” through which the bird “betrayed himself” (*ibid.*). Here Thoreau begins the description of his loon-chase, continuously frustrated by the ability of the bird to disappear underwater, and ghoulishly accompanied by the harsh sounds the bird emits while reappearing far from the boat after a dive.

Having miscalculated the distance and finding himself very far from the bird, Thoreau is almost ridiculed by the loon who again “laughed long and long” (224-25). Realizing that the bird’s ability to disappear in the pond is too much for him to overcome by rowing, Thoreau stops and stretches his ears: it does not take too long for him to “be startled by his unearthly laugh behind me” (226). This habit of accompanying re-surfacing with a cry is commented quite trenchantly: “But why, after displaying so much cunning, did he invariably betray himself the moment he came up by that loud laugh? Did not his white breast enough betray him? He was indeed a silly loon, I thought” (227). Thoreau comments on the loon’s cry as a sort of avoidable recognition sign, whose uselessness earns him the far from flattering attribute of “silly”, which further characterizes the bird as an anthropomorphized entity. A clean break from this path comes when Thoreau connects the loon’s cry to the bird’s mocking of the observer’s curiosity:

His usual note was this demonic laughter, yet somewhat like that of a waterfowl; but occasionally, when he had balked me most successfully and come up a long way off, he uttered a long-drawn unearthly howl, probably more like that of a wolf than any bird; as when a beast puts his muzzle to the ground and deliberately howls. This was his looning, – perhaps the wildest sound that is ever heard here, making the woods ring far and wide. I concluded that he laughed in derision of my efforts, confident of his own resources. (226)

The idea that the loon would engage in a willing process of derision of the human being in search of a closer contact with him is denoted as “demonic” not only for its inherent malignant penchant, but also, as specified at the end of the chapter, for his ability to summon natural elements in his defense, exactly through his ominous call:

At length, having come up fifty rods off, he uttered one of those prolonged howls, as if calling on the god of loons to aid him, and immediately there came a wind from the east and rippled the surface, and filled the whole air with misty rain, and I was impressed as if it were the prayer of the loon answered, and his god was angry with me; and so I left him disappearing far away on the tumultuous surface. (*ibid.*)

Thoreau's interest in the loon's cry lies in its being both unmotivated *and* derisive, underscoring the bird's ability to dominate the encounter with the human, and not *viceversa* (Matheson 2011, 20). The loon, with his natural and supernatural powers, eludes the human attempt to contact him, and uses his cry to remark his "mysterious subjectivity" (Rossi 2004, 88), earned by the possibility to gaze at that human being totally undisturbed by the latter's attempts to get a hold on him:

The later walker or sailer, in the October evenings, may hear the murmuring of the snipe, circling over the meadows, the most spirit-like sound in nature; and still later in the autumn, when the frosts have tinged the leaves, a solitary loon pays a visit to our retired ponds, where he may lurk undisturbed till the season of moulting is passed, making the woods ring with his wild laughter. (Thoreau 2007, 555)

In "Winter Animals", the phonological distinctive trait given to this second array of crying beasts enhances the intensity of the animal soundscape. Thoreau even attempts to transform animal sounds into their most easily perceivable linguistic appearance: onomatopoeia. We thus encounter the "*Hoo hoo hoo, hooper hoo*" and "*how der do*" and "*hoo hoo*" (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 263; italics mine) of owls, and the "*boo boo*" of cat-owls, and the "*day day day*" and "*phe-be*" of chickadees (266; italics mine), all of these intermingled with other animal sounds, most notably in the long digressive section about fox-hunting, and in the episode of the parliament of beasts gathering to feast on "half a bushel of ears of sweet-corn, which had not gone ripe" (264) that Thoreau purposely throws out to attract them under the window of his hut. This attempt to interact with the animal soundscape might not be as dynamic as the pursuit of the cricket in the Depot field, but it is certainly more immersive than the "Brute Neighbors" attitude according to which "[y]ou only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns" (219). The semantic frame of this spontaneous exhibition, however, is primarily visual, and so is the similar description of the motions of a squirrel, which "even in the most solitary recesses of the forest, imply spectators as much as those of a dancing girl" (265). Also, Thoreau's sweet-corn lure might be imagined as a more acoustic experience, even acousmatic (Kane 2014), provided he is inside his hut when the wild animals are to be feasting on the bait¹⁰. In this wintry zoo-

¹⁰ The pun with "ear" in the section regarding the squirrel episode (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 265) might appear entirely casual from an etymological point of view. Yet, in the

logical garden, it is the hare that stands out, underpinning also a sort of circularity since its appearance in the chapter “Higher Laws”. Entering as a single acousmatic presence, choosing the ground under Thoreau’s hut as a form, “separated from me only by the flooring”, and startling him each morning “by her hasty departure” (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 271), the *Lepus Americanus* seems to proliferate and turn into a proper pack that gather *around* the woodland dwelling, and eventually again reduce to a singularity when one gets startled by the sudden appearance of its human neighbor:

When I opened my door in the evening, off they would go with a squeak and a bounce. Near at hand they only excited my pity. One evening one sat by my door two paces from me, at first trembling with fear, yet unwilling to move; a poor wee thing, lean and bony, with ragged ears and sharp nose, scant tail and slender paws. It looked as if Nature no longer contained the breed of nobler bloods, but stood on her last toes. Its large eyes appeared young and unhealthy, almost dropsical. I took a step, and lo, away it scud with an elastic spring over the snow crust, straightening its body and its limbs into graceful length, and soon put the forest between me and itself, – the wild free venison, asserting its vigor and the dignity of Nature. Not without reason was its slenderness. Such then was its nature (*Lepus, levipes*, light-foot, some think). (*ibid.*)

Thoreau’s classical source is Varro (*Rerum Rusticarum*), who in his *Lingua Latina* had claimed that many terms had been metaphorically translated into human language from animal calls¹¹. Given Thoreau’s solid background in the classics, (Bakratcheva 2017), however, we might be as bold as to maintain that he must have had some knowledge of a more eerie facet of this wild animal: i.e. its relationship with the episode Trimalchio narrates about his youthful experience with some *strigae* aiming to steal the entrails of a young *amasius* recently dead in his master’s house. The arrival of the witches is signaled by a hare similitude: “subito strigae coeperunt, putares canem leporem persequi” (63.4)¹². The idea of a covert and furtive sound produced in a chase

marked animal soundscape we are here sketching, a phrase like “selecting a suitable ear” gains an extra connotation, since it is Thoreau’s own auricles that are chosen, even if only by proximity, to become the sensory organ appointed to translate the soundscape animals so keenly reproduce in the vicinity of his woodland abode.

¹¹ The passage on the hare Thoreau quotes is *Rerum Rusticarum* 3.12, the passage from *Lingua Latina* comes from 7.103.

¹² “[...] suddenly the witches began to screech; you would have thought there was a dog pursuing a hare” (Petronius 1913, 139-41).

reflects the idea of 'scudding', normally associated with clouds¹³. Petronius' uncanny image of *strigae* and their *stridere* sound perfectly fit with "squeak" (*ibid.*), the noun Thoreau refers to the hares' call just before the passage above quoted. Paired together, squeaking and bouncing reveal Thoreau's intention to sketch a distinctively dynamic hare soundscape, totally different from the one produced by the same animal's first appearance in the tercet of chapters here examined. The sonic imprint of the hare in "Higher Laws" was, as discussed above, merely imaginary and rather functional to an abstract musing on human/animal sympathy (Matheson 2011, 2).

4. WHY LISTEN TO (WALDEN POND'S) ANIMALS?

The present incursion into *Walden's* animal soundscape mainly emphasizes how Thoreau's attitude towards animals actively shapes the literary rendition of such an intense personal experience. Understanding the text's zoological edge is important to highlight Thoreau's abilities as a natural philosopher, as well as to rank *Walden* into a hypothetical millennial history of the literary representation of animal sounds, like the one Bettini has proposed for the classical world. What emerges from the three chapters so far analyzed is a distinctive veer, on the part of the narrating "I", not to coordinate the various animal voices into a harmony, but rather to leave them in their atavistic monadic essence. In other words, the self, who is the very center of the whole experience and so often plays the part of the demiurge, imposes no order on the various sound stimuli he collects near the shores of Walden Pond. Animal voices remain asystematically placed in a sort of sonic patchwork that does not reach a melodious synthesis, but flourishes in a series of individual and autonomously sound-emitting sources. If indeed a *Weltanhorchung* is to be extracted from "Higher Laws", "Brute Neighbors", and "Winter Animals", it can only come from an *ex post facto* intellectual order imposed upon them by the reader. Once he s/has comprehended *Walden's* philosophical blueprint, the reader is enabled to plunge into a transcendently oriented, yet unquestionably authentic, natural experience. In the first part of the book, in fact, the idea of a divinely ordered arrangement of the natural soundscape is very

¹³ "scud, v.1". OED <https://oed.com/view/Entry/173799?rskey=QZfgNa&result=4&isAdvanced=false> (15/10/2019).

much present. We can see it in “Solitude”, which, in concert with “Sounds”, forms a sort of consonant duet disseminating a luxuriant bundle of tunes:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight though every pore. I go and come with strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature’s watchmen, – links which connect the days of animated life. (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 125)

In this passage, *Walden*’s “I” evidently acts as an intrusive director caught in the act of conducting a sort of woodland orchestra. This orchestra plays in a sort of perfect unison that reproduces a state of balanced sympathy. This state overcomes the human/animal divide and postulates a sort of common condition – testified to by the use of the *vox media* “creature”. The human conductor shows his demiurgic powers with even more intensity when he is depicted as capable of translating the sounds of a storm into music¹⁴: to a “healthy and innocent ear” (127) as his own, he claims, everything is but Æolian music. The image of the Æolian harp comes from Romantic poetry, especially from Coleridge’s *Dejection Ode*¹⁵: “Æolian lute” (1.7). It represents, primarily, a metaphor of disembodied and ethereal harmony, the same principle of the *music of the spheres* first elaborated by Pythagoras. The Aeolian harp, how-

¹⁴ One very recent and useful comparison for such an attitude might be retracted in Paolo Sorrentino’s film *Youth* (2015), when the orchestra director Fred Ballinger, stimulated by the countryside soundscape of cows and cowbells, contravenes his personal prohibition and begins to actually conduct the sounds of the Swiss natural environment as if he were in front of a human orchestra.

¹⁵ An overt reference to this ode is made in one of the most explicit manifesto for Thoreau’s existential experiment in “Where I Lived, and What I Lived for”: “I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag lustily as a chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up” (Thoreau 2004, 81).

ever, can also counterbalance disproportionately idealistic and ethereal ideas of supernatural harmonies: recent studies have interpreted this symbol in a more markedly bodily and scientifically precise context, as an “acoustic model of embodied consciousness, which could serve as a bridge between the ‘classical’ and ‘modern’ accounts of sensitivity” (Trower 2009). This meaning is possible if we momentarily disregard the harp’s supernatural attributes and focus on the materiality of the actual instrument¹⁶ operated by natural phenomena. A passage from Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici* (II.8), a work that Thoreau did in fact voraciously peruse¹⁷, can illuminate how frequently, in an essayistic recollection, the personal experience of celestial harmonies might voluntarily combine not only the transcendence of an ecstatic state of rapture (in Browne’s case of a religious kind), but also, at the same time, the triviality of the everyday:

For there is a musicke where-ever there is a harmony, order and proportion; and thus farre we may maintain the musick of the spheares; for those well ordered motions, and regular paces, though they give no sound unto the eare, yet to the understanding they strike a note most full of harmony. Whosoever is harmonically composed delights in harmony; which makes me much distrust the symmetry of those heads that declaime against all Church musike. For my selfe, not only for my obedience but my particular genius, I doe imbrace it; for even that vulgar and Taverne Musicke. (Browne 2012, 79)

In order to appreciate this bathetic ambivalence and simultaneous presence of hyperuranian and earthly sounds, we can draw a parallel between the representation of birds singing in “Where I Lived, and What I Lived for” and in “Brute Neighbors”. When he describes the reasons for his decision to retreat to Walden Pond, Thoreau considers the possibility to be serenaded by birds a perk of his life in the woods:

Such was my abode, for I found myself suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them. I was not only nearer

¹⁶ A beautiful image by Athanasius Kircher – from his *Phonurgia nova* (1673) – is available at the Athanasius Kircher at Stanford, https://web.stanford.edu/group/kircher/cgi-bin/site/?attachment_id=667 (15/10/2019).

¹⁷ Another important connection between Thoreau and Browne might be found in their status of ‘specialists’ in the works here compared. If Browne wrote *Religio* as an apology for his faith, under accusation exactly for his medical profession, Thoreau’s *Walden* is equally pervaded by a care to present the final product not as the diary of a secluded, but as a detailed description of a communion with nature entailing a great deal of specialized cognizance. For a survey of Browne’s agency on Thoreau’s writing, see (Grey 2009, 143-50).

to some of those which commonly frequented the garden and the orchard, but to those wilder and more thrilling songsters of the forest which never, or rarely, serenade a villager, – the wood-thrush, the veery, the scarlet tanager, the field-sparrow, the whippoorwill, and many others. (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 82)

It is clear that such an aesthetic benefit derives from an idealization of Walden Pond fowls, that are metamorphosed into “songsters”. The anthropomorphizing of these animals finds its *controcanto* in the utter trivializing process of domestication undergone by the partridge in “Brute Neighbors”, which is described as analogous to farm poultry: Thoreau calls the mother and her younglings “my hens and chickens” (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 218). This process might not look very relevant; but, if we bear in mind the famous description of partridges as sources for imitative human poetry by the poet Alcman (Bettini 2008, 122)¹⁸, we are surely struck by the fact that Thoreau pursued this equation, focusing not on sounds connected to the partridge’s singing skills, but on those made by a mother trying to protect her children. The symbol of the Æolian harp works in two ways that contradict each other only apparently. In early chapters like “Sounds”, animals act as proper transcendental sources, almost supernatural in essence. Conversely, in “Brute Neighbors”, animals are considered almost like ‘everyday suppliers’ of sonic vibrations, rooted in a more matter-of-fact architecture of aural production and less in an other-worldly universe of poetically loaded natural harmonies.

What we can argue from the perusal of these literary translations of an animal soundscape is that Thoreau is aiming at a peculiar form of domestication of the animal wilderness, a sort of attempt to rationalize the inherent undisciplined and uncontrollable essence of nonhuman animality. Together with many other critics (Matheson 2011; Neely 2017), we can easily single out a similar attitude in Thoreau’s first reaction to the sensuality of Walt Whitman’s poetry:

It is as if the beasts spoke. I think that men have not been ashamed of themselves without reason. No doubt, there have always been dens where such deeds were unblushingly recited, and it is no merit to compete with their inhabitants. (Thoreau 1958, 444-45)

¹⁸ Thoreau did in fact own two books that included poems by Alcman (Seybold 2007, 34), but did not directly quote him. This classical allusion is, similarly to that made with Petronius, not meant to a philological reconstruction of Thoreau’s personal classical library, but to an evaluation of his relationship with the traditional cultural value of the voice of the animals, in this case with the bird’s calls, which appears, in this sense, immune to hardened cultural assumption about natural musicality.

Thoreau's concern about animality and his attempt to familiarize with it by retreating to Walden Pond are connected to his view of the transcendental elevation connected with vegetarianism. They both evince a strong conviction about the impurity of animal flesh, and indeed of all flesh. By adopting a "transcendental anthropocentrism" (Neely 2017, 273), Thoreau acknowledges the possibility of a philosophical sympathy between human and animal only as long as the animal is "ensconced" (*ibid.*) within an anthropocentrically grounded hierarchy.

The recognition of the animal, however, remains a very unstable and dangerous subject, because it implies a sort of subtler and profounder recognition of human inherent animality and instinctual unruliness. A "perception of affinity or kinship" mixed with "respect for the animal neighbor" is everywhere in *Walden*, but proximity causes also "a recognition of our own creaturely life, our sense of disorientation or self-estrangement at the foreign animal presence within us" (Matheson 2011, 16). The combination of domestication process (undergone by the partridge) and supernatural depiction – the ants become Homeric warriors and the loon a demonic figure – further serves the purpose of dissociation. In these three chapters, apparently the animal realm goes through both debasement (farming) and imaginative transfiguration (the animal as epic hero or demon), and is eventually set aside from the human.

In *Walden* Thoreau therefore defines an animal kingdom that is both extremely authentic and strikingly literary. Recognizing a literary matrix does not at all hinder the rigor of the author's 'scientific' gaze, but further confirms the aesthetic base of his naturalistic observation. Turning back to "Higher Laws", Thoreau makes a crucial remark quoting Sanskrit author Pilpay, the supposed creator of a set of interrelated animal themed fables known by the title of *Panchatantra*, which Thoreau presumably read in Charles Wilkins's translation¹⁹ (*The Heetōpadēs of Veeshoō-Sarmā*, 1787). The remark was published in *The Dial* in July 1854: "I suspect that Pilpay&Co. have put animals to their best use, for they are all beasts of burden, in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts" (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 216). This view resonates with the standard aesthetics of the animal fable, which was one of the four typologies of literary treatment of animals that W. H. Auden proposed

¹⁹ One of the fables in this collection is quoted also, significantly, in "Sounds", although the extract Thoreau chose does not mention animal voicings or even animal sounds (Thoreau [1859] 2004, 117).

about Marianne Moore's poetry. Auden ranks among the first critics who fully appreciated Moore's painstaking effort to describe animals in order to find the perfect way to create a literary simulacrum of the wild, as well as of the homely (Malay 2017). In this specific sense, Moore is heir to Thoreau's depiction of nonhuman animality. Auden aptly summarizes Moore's attitude in his idea of the "romantic encounter of man and beast", in which "the animal provides an accidental stimulus to the thoughts and emotions of a human individual. As a rule, the characteristics of the animal which make it a stimulus are not those in which it resembles man – as in the epic simile – but those in which it is unlike him" (Auden 2012, 214).

Ultimately, the animal seems to be perfectly at ease in its own *Umwelt* – i.e. the portion of the outer world that is functional to his existence postulated in 1934 by Jakob von Uexküll – living his life and producing its sounds not for the humans, who are left with a series of perceptive gaps they ought to fill resorting to their sensual (auditory, visual, haptic, odorous or palatable) apparati. One can choose to cope with the shortcomings of senses through erudition, generating Homeric ants or prankster loons. The animal soundscape is only a datum that a nineteenth-century transcendentalist might be tempted to decode with all the means he deems suitable, including, obviously, literature.

Relying on his acoustic pathway, Thoreau bestows his readers with a special insight into his ontology of the animal. When he carefully reproduces the fascinating aural trceries generated by the sonic agency over the natural soundscape of Walden Pond's animals, Thoreau is implicitly confirming the necessity of the empirical experience of an earthly *Weltanborchung* for the achievement of a transcendental *Weltanschauung*. In Thoreau's prose never coincide perfectly with humans. On the contrary, they retain their separate ontological status. Nonetheless, they concur in a process of decoding the natural mystery, seemingly impelled by a sort of ancestral cross-species solidarity. Human and nonhuman animals are neighbors and "share a vulnerable life References beyond or beneath species distinctions" (Matheson 2011, 21); but the unison of their soundscapes is never perfect, nor does Thoreau ever claim it to be. The literary effect towards which he aspires is not a proto-modern Kafkian impersonation, but, if anything, a remediation of the Aesopian fable, where animals can speak, but no ontological barrier is actually breached.

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