

“Language . . . Without Metaphor”

Soundscapes and Worldly Engagements in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*

Roxana Oltean

Abstract

Henry David Thoreau has been celebrated for his observation of the natural world. While noting Thoreau’s skills of observation in relation to the natural world and his responsiveness to sensory experience, scholars have, however, tended to privilege sight over sound. Even though Thoreau was recognized by musicians such as Charles Ives and John Cage for having an exceptionally fine ear for the symphonies of nature, sound still remains a neglected aspect of Thoreau’s *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*. This article is a corrective to this status quo, as it reads *Walden* as a transmedial project in which Thoreau frequently tuned in to the sounds encountered during his sojourn in nature in order to figure the essential parameters of his experiment and to relate to the entire world of experience. The complex soundscape of *Walden* engenders a multifaceted awareness of modern space, as sounds of nature, sounds of progress, and the clamor of people intersect. Accordingly, this article explores how Thoreau uses a vast array of sounds to relate to the world; how he apprehended, and even appreciated, not only the harmonies of nature, but also dissonance—within nature, as well as between nature, modernity and rurality. In doing so, this article proposes a reading of Thoreau’s auditory experience as a reflection on, and negotiation with, a multifaceted world where the pastoral and the industrial coexist.

Suggested Citation: Oltean, Roxana. “Language . . . Without Metaphor: Soundscapes and Worldly Engagements in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*.” *JAAAS: Journal of the Austrian Association for American Studies* 1, no. 2 (2020): 267–281, DOI: [10.47060/jaaas.v1i2.123](https://doi.org/10.47060/jaaas.v1i2.123).

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau; *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods*; sound studies; American transcendentalism; ecocriticism

Peer Review: This article was reviewed by the issue’s guest editors and an external reviewer.

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Roxana Oltean

American transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau frequently tunes in to the sounds encountered during his sojourns in nature, acting, as Murray Schafer might call it, as an “earwitness” to the industrializing nineteenth-century countryside and advancing what Sterne has called the “ensoniment” as a counterpart to the Enlightenment.¹ In fact, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (1854)—the text inspired by Thoreau’s two-year retreat in a self-built hut near Walden Pond, Concord (July 4, 1845–September 6, 1847)—presents a sense of the world as naturally speaking the language of “music and poetry”:

If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence,—that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality.²

Drawing on Schafer’s original definition of soundscape as “any acoustic field of study” and acknowledging later modulations by scholars such as Emily Thompson who have suggested that soundscapes are auditory or aural landscapes that include both the physical environment and its perception,³ this article will focus on Thoreauvian “soundscapes” in *Walden*. I will pay particular attention to the chapter “Sounds,” in which Thoreau records what he can hear over the course of an entire day. The descriptions of the vast array of sounds and their interpretations not only demonstrate the writer’s manner of engaging with the world, but his words become modes of apprehending the “language which all things and events speak without metaphor.”⁴

Thoreau’s acoustic alertness has drawn the attention of literary and sound studies scholars alike, although in manners that suggest a discontinuity between approaches. Turning to Thoreau from the perspective of sound studies, Jeff Titon has argued that “literary and cultural critics seldom have discussed the significance

of sound and music in Thoreau's writing"; if Thoreau's attentiveness to sound is mentioned, it is merely described as good listening.⁵ It should be noted, however, that, in the transcendentalist or general American literary canon characterized by "nature writing," Thoreau currently enjoys a prominent position precisely because of his powers of observation (including listening).⁶ This aspect has been recognized as indicating sensory involvement in nature to a degree of intensity and level of subtlety that the more theoretically inclined Emerson fails to engage with.⁷ Nevertheless, there is indeed a tendency to subordinate Thoreau's listening to his wider "renewed sensuous awareness" or to his interest in "nature as such," in line with a new epistemology.⁸ On the other hand, sound studies approaches remedy this neglect by insisting on the valuable corpus of sounds documented by Thoreau and by highlighting the salience of Thoreau's auditory perceptions.⁹ Titon, for example, forcefully argues that Thoreau's use of sounds shows an "underlying epistemology" that is "relational and phenomenological."¹⁰ And yet, sound studies readings tend to privilege Thoreau's connection to nature,¹¹ viewing it as disrupted by the noises of modernity.¹² To adopt this stance means to only partially reflect the richness of Thoreau's engagement with his environment.

This article aims to bridge the gap between literary and sound studies perspectives by drawing on both to propose a reading of Thoreau's auditory experience as a reflection on, and negotiation with, a multifaceted world where the pastoral and the industrial coexist. I will thus argue that Thoreau grasped, and even appreciated, not only the harmonies of nature, but also dissonance within nature, as well as between nature, modernity, and rurality. This fresh investigation of the Walden soundscape re-contextualizes Thoreau's writing as a point of reference for a new and complex mid-nineteenth-century relationship to nature and technology.

Hearing Natural (Dis)Harmony

Interestingly, musicians have often foregrounded Thoreau's auditory perception. In his "Essays before a Sonata" (1922), Charles Ives presents Thoreau as remarkably attuned to the sounds of the world. Ives insists that the writer "was a great musician, not because he played the flute but because he did not have to go to Boston to hear 'the Symphony'"; Thoreau "was divinely conscious of the enthusiasm of Nature, the emotion of her rhythms and the harmony of her solitude," while "the rhythm of his prose" alone would suffice to "determine his value as a composer."¹³ Another example is John Cage, whose "Lecture on the Weather" (1975) comprises a collage of Thoreau texts, including *Walden*,¹⁴ and who can be placed in the same American tradition as Thoreau with respect to experimentation or nature politics.¹⁵ Cage regards the writer's sensitivity to sound as a continuous openness not clouded by "vision": "Other great men have vision. Thoreau had none. Each day his eyes and ears were open and

empty to see and hear the world he lived in. Music, he said, is continuous; only listening is intermittent.¹⁶ Sound studies scholars have documented and explored these specific affinities between Thoreau and certain musicians in view of the former's auditory sensibility toward the world.¹⁷ At the same time, sound studies approaches have also occasioned ample reflection upon Thoreau's contribution to a modulated understanding of the world as perceived through sounds. For example, Titon has argued that Thoreau's attention to sounds signals awareness of the "more inclusive and significant category" to which music belongs and has highlighted how Thoreau promotes an understanding of "sound's enabling co-presence and a relational, subjective epistemology" to set up "an ecomusicology in opposition to the dominant subject-object economy."¹⁸

Testifying to Thoreau's profound commitment to auditory perception is the fact that *Walden* indexes all three kinds of listening identified by Chion (causal, reduced, and semantic listening). A special feature is Thoreau's ear for the neglected sounds of nature, for example in the passage describing bean-hoeing in "The Bean Field," where "sounds and sights" "anywhere in the row [of beans]" are "part of the inexhaustible entertainment which the country offers."¹⁹ Generally ascribable to causal listening, or listening to gather (supplementary) information about the source of sound, the descriptions also evince examples of reduced listening, for instance, when the narrator in "Baker Farm" documents the manner in which sounds are perceived ("some faint tinkling sounds borne to my ear through the cleansed air, from I know not what quarter").²⁰ In fact, there are numerous examples of sounds which are not invested with meaning: descriptions of noises occasioned by natural development or by organic growth, such as those produced by minute movements of the frozen landscape in "Winter Animals" ("the whooping of the ice in the pond," "the cracking of the ground by the frost") or those heard in late spring in "Sounds" ("a fresh and tender bough" suddenly falling "like a fan to the ground[,] . . . broken off by its own weight"). The text is also punctuated by instances of the hearing self phonetically transcribing the sounds of nature: the hooting owl or the chickadees in "Winter Animals."²¹

Semantic listening is, perhaps, most amply developed in *Walden*, extending Chion's definition of listening for meaning (such as when listening to someone talk) to the act of listening to appreciate not just the music, but the language of nature.²² If some music—for example, Haydn's—is akin to landscape painting, the reverse is also true for the Walden setting, where nature is a concert hall. What is more, the Walden landscape seems to exemplify an Apollonian view of music as "external sound, God-sent to remind us of the harmony of the universe," "exact, serene, mathematical, associated with transcendental visions of Utopia and the Harmony of the spheres."²³ Schaffer's own endeavor is described as finding the "secret of that tuning," with the earth as the "body of an instrument across which strings are stretched and are tuned by a

divine hand.²⁴ Interestingly, this perspective rhymes with Thoreau's aforementioned declaration of principle at the commencement of the chapter "Sounds," where listening to nature means access to the supreme language:

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. . . . Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer? Read your fate, see what is before you, and walk on into futurity.²⁵

Returning to Ives's perception of Thoreau's "susceptibility to sounds" ("probably greater than that of many practical musicians"), the former intimates that Thoreau "sang of the submission to Nature, the religion of contemplation, and the freedom of simplicity," evincing "a philosophy distinguishing between the complexity of Nature which teaches freedom, and the complexity of materialism which teaches slavery."²⁶ For Thoreau, one might add, hearing is explicitly linked to emancipation. The stance of tuning in to the "language which all things and events speak" is exemplified in a famous passage about how the first summer was spent not only hoeing beans instead of reading books but also, more importantly, "rapt in [a] reverie" that ultimately leads to an awakening. The state of dreamily taking in the Apollonian harmony of nature occasions all three types of listening, but it privileges semantic listening, as it allows the narrator access to "language without metaphor."²⁷ The "reverie" thus means immersion in the "bloom of the present moment" "amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs" and is conducive to "undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house."²⁸ Moreover, the "reverie" entails the experience of a natural temporality measured by bird trills, not ticking clocks. Birdsong is interestingly indexed by Schafer in view of its symbolic importance "for both music and the soundscape" as "rich and varied, without being imperialistically dominating."²⁹ Indeed, for the narrator, birdsong measures a time and an existence outside social norms of productivity and expresses an alternative standard, for the day passes quickly and "nothing memorable is accomplished." What is more, it provides a language to voice opposition to normative views of time and labor: "As the sparrow had its trill, sitting on the hickory before my door, so had I my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my nest"; what is "sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen" is appraised differently in nature's terms, for "if the birds and flowers had tried me by their standard, I should not have been found wanting."³⁰

And yet, it is not only the harmony of nature's music and its lesson of emancipation from normative modes of being that Thoreau is able to hear; he also demonstrates awareness of—and appreciation for—the disharmonies of nature. The Dionysian vision of music, which Schafer describes as "internal sound breaking forth from the human

breast,³¹ thus expressionist and chaotic, is discernible through Thoreau's idiosyncratic response to discord, and this complicates readings of Thoreau as solely listening for Apollonian harmony. In fact, Thoreau is, one might argue, particularly drawn to the "thrilling discord" in which he can detect "elements of a concord such as these plains never saw nor heard," evincing a modern ear for disharmony as yet another form of music. A salient example is his appreciation of the owl's screech, transcribed phonetically in "Winter Animals."³² Celebrating what one might associate with the Dionysian, the passage also exhibits unique instances of acousmatic listening (implying the separation of "sound from its 'source'" and "the idea of a reproduced sound's 'fidelity' to its source").³³ At the same time, attesting to the richness of Thoreau's auditory imagination, the description is illuminated by the observation that listening occurs within the mind,³⁴ and Thoreau's transcriptions of owl screeches are intermingled with a range of literary and emotional associations and imaginary outpourings of affect which do not, however, obscure fidelity to the sound as perceived by the ear. Thus the screech owls "take up the strain like mourning women their ancient u-lu-lu"; likened to "wise midnight hags," with a "dismal scream" that is "truly Ben Jonsonian," they sound "no honest and blunt tu-whit tu-who of the poets" but a "most solemn graveyard ditty," apprehended as "wailing, . . . doleful responses" which evoke the "dark and tearful side of music, the regrets and sighs that would fain be sung." As striking articulators of Dionysian modes, they therefore attest to the "variety and capacity of . . . nature," which speaks eloquently of disharmony, and their screech is translated into a language that rhymes with an imputed "restlessness of despair": "*Oh-o-o-o-o that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n!*"³⁵

Tuning in to Modernity

If the ear for discord is what makes Thoreau attuned not only to the Apollonian but also to the Dionysian music of nature, it is the noises of industry that most interestingly reveal Thoreau's complex awareness of the polyphony surrounding him. In "Sounds," the narrator turns from nature to the perception of modernity, which coalesces around the train that irrupts into the natural landscape. Trains, as Schaffer observes, invoking J. M. W. Turner's painting *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844), occupy a privileged space in the nineteenth-century soundscape: "Of all the sounds of the Industrial Revolution, those of trains seem across time to have taken on the most attractive sentimental associations."³⁶ In fact, Thoreau's perception in this regard can be understood as an instance of what Sterne calls thinking "sonically," a type of thinking that highlights relationality. Awareness of the soundscape entails cultural inquiry, for to "think sonically is to think conjuncturally about sound and culture"; thus, one might argue, Thoreau can be added to the galley of thinkers who, according to Sterne, "have used sound to ask big questions about their cultural moments and

the crises and problems of their time.”³⁷

Literary scholars have commented upon Thoreau’s attitude to modernity as, at best, ambivalent,³⁸ while, as indicated above, sound studies readings tend to highlight Thoreau’s dislike for the noises of modernity. From the direction of sound studies, however, Smith proposes to go beyond the classical view of “the pastoral” as an “escape from the ravages—aural included—of modernity.” To this end, Smith puts forth the concept of braiding, or “an understanding of the way that pastoral sounds were cobbled onto and braided with factory sounds,” mentioning Thoreau, in passing, as a Romantic who both “grimaced” when hearing industrialization, yet who was also capable of “hearing nature in modernity.” If Smith, in fact, views the train described by Thoreau as a “transgressive” technology that “literally pierced” the countryside, my reading will build upon Smith’s notion of the “braided” soundscape to reveal complexities in the Thoreauvian relation to modernity, including the famous train itself.³⁹

Interestingly, immediately prior to the oft-quoted passage in which the train whistle startles the narrator, the presence of the train is described as flowing continuously, if not seamlessly, into the natural soundscape:

As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivy of wild pigeons . . . gives a voice to the air; . . . and for the last half hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country.⁴⁰

A little later in the chapter, the train—with its “whistle” which “penetrates” the woods all year round—strikes a harsh note in the soundscape. However, if the train sound expresses brute force, it is akin to what is found in nature, for the train whistle is likened to the “scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer’s yard.”⁴¹ Not only is modernity thus “braided” into the world of nature (hawk) and rurality (farmer), but both train and hawk, in effect, irrupt into the harmonious soundscape of nature, and can be assimilated to the aforementioned “thrilling discord” that is an integral part of the music of Walden.

The train, it might further be argued, is also inscribed into a new mythology of modernity. An emblem of industrial progress connected to the world of commerce, the train signals “that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town, or adventurous country traders from the other side.”⁴² Rendered through a process of transduction (which Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld define as the conversion of sonic information into visual information⁴³), the train is apprehended through its whistle and is amplified visually as a “travelling demigod,” “with its steam cloud like a banner streaming behind in golden and silver wreaths,” taking “the sunset sky for the livery of his train.” An “iron horse,” it transforms into a supernatural creature, exerting power over nature in a manner that is both intrusive and alluring, with

the landscape of modernity reconverted into a fantastic world:

When I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils (what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon they will put into the new Mythology I don't know), it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it. If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends!

The narrator is indeed aware of the extent to which the railroad regulates human existence, for he comments a little later that “to do things ‘railroad fashion’ is now the by-word.” He also acknowledges its potential (auditory) violence when noting that he wished to avoid the encounter with the train so as not to have his ears “spoilt by its smoke and steam and hissing.” However, the fascination with the train and the invitation to speculate whether “men made the elements their servants for noble ends” suggests an even deeper engagement with modernity. Thus, the supernatural soundscape associated with the train (later enhanced by “snow shoes” and “giant plough”) raises issues pertaining not to the extent to which modernity disturbs the natural soundscape, but to the worthiness of people to reign in and direct its power. Thus, when awakened “at midnight” by the “tramp and defiant snort” of the snow-plough fronting “in some remote glen in the woods[,] . . . the elements incased in ice and snow,” or hearing “at evening” the train-horse “in his stable blowing off the superfluous energy of the day,” the narrator wishes “the enterprise were as heroic and commanding as it is protracted and unwearied.”²⁴ What is more, moral attributes are actually inscribed into the modern soundscape in the musings on the operation of the snow-plough during a snowstorm. Schafer’s indexing of the sonorous world of an imaginary North associates the “jamming of snow-ploughs and snowmobiles” with the “destruction of the quiet northern winter.” These noises mark “one of the greatest transmogrifications of the twentieth-century soundscape, for such instruments are destroying the ‘idea of North’ that has shaped the temperament of all northern peoples and has germinated a substantial mythology of the world.”²⁵ By contrast, in the *Walden* soundscape, the snowplow figures a “three-o’-clock-in-the-morning courage, which Bonaparte thought was the rarest,” and which is denoted by the “muffled tone” of the “engine bell” announcing “that the cars are coming, without long delay, notwithstanding the veto of a New England north-east snow storm.”²⁶

In fact, Thoreau’s soundscape also attests to the disturbing potential of literary production, borrowing from Philipp Schweighauser’s history of literary acoustics the notion that literature not only reproduces noise but, in itself, can be a noise capable of disturbing cultural production. In this sense, the narrator’s equivocal response to the train is usefully contextualized by wider considerations of the power drive inherent in transcendentalism in general and in Emerson’s writings in particular. Drawing

especially upon the “Prospects” chapter of *Nature*, where Emerson launches a tirade against humans becoming dwarfs, Buell substantiates the theory that Nietzsche drew inspiration for the *Übermensch* from that essay,⁴⁷ while Cornel West argues that certain passages of Emerson’s aforementioned writing constitute “a panegyric to human power, vision, newness and conquest.”⁴⁸ If the sonorous world of Walden resounds with, and actually constitutes, a disturbing force of American transcendentalism—the power drive, and the question of developing a superior humanity to match technological advancement—its imaginative extensions also testify to the commodification of nature in a manner reminiscent of Emerson’s writing. This is discernible in the description of the soundscape of the train as including the clamor created around an intense exchange:

Here come your groceries, country; your rations, countrymen! . . . And here’s your pay for them! screams the countryman’s whistle; timber like long battering-rams going twenty miles an hour against the city’s walls, and chairs enough to seat all the weary and heavy-laden that dwell within them.⁴⁹

Through the commerce effected by the train, the Walden soundscape comes to include an auditory and olfactory mindscape that reaches out from New England across the whole globe. When “the freight train rattles past,” the narrator is “refreshed and expanded” and is able to “smell the stores which go dispensing their odors all the way from Long Wharf to Lake Champlain,” bringing in to the world of Walden “foreign parts, . . . coral reefs, and Indian oceans, and tropical climes, and the extent of the globe.”⁵⁰

Braiding nature and modernity, the Thoreauvian soundscape suggests a polymorphous space of which the narrator is richly perceptive and toward which he positions himself ambiguously. Ostensibly a signal of an invasive modernity, the train thus attests to the connectedness of the perceiver to a continuous soundscape comprising both harmonies and as well as discords. Significantly, these are all inscribed not only in the immediate natural surroundings but also in the force of industry and the bustle of world commerce.

Connecting to Village Life

Adding to the complexity of the Walden landscape is the liminal character of the experiment itself, which falls short of a complete break with society. While Thoreau’s insurrectionist ethos has been at the center of readings focusing on his more overtly polemical writings,⁵¹ a sense of radicalism is traditionally also tied to the Walden experiment.⁵² Nuancing this view, Milette Shamir posits Thoreau as a writer not so much of nature but of suburbia, who expressed the nineteenth-century version of a “fantasy of man’s return to nature,” rather than the enactment of a mission into the

wilderness. In this sense, for Shamir, *Walden* delineates the space of the suburb as a proximate nature, where the myth of masculinity and the independent man can be lived out and where, “by owning and controlling a space of isolation and privacy,” the masculine subject “wards off the threats imposed by both domestic womanhood and his peers.”⁵³

Thus, one might note, it is not just nature and modernity that are indexed in the Thoreauvian soundscape, but also a third space, rurality. Most saliently, this third space is articulated through the bells of “Lincoln, Acton, Bedford, or Concord” heard on Sundays, “when the wind was favorable.” Significantly, it is included in a quasi-natural soundscape (“sounding a faint, sweet, and, as it were, natural melody, worth importing into the wilderness”) with which it resonates,⁵⁴ in an image strikingly similar to Schafer’s vision of the world as a universal instrument. These bell sounds are usefully contextualized by Alain Corbin’s analysis of the role played by village bells in the nineteenth-century French countryside—social and cultural differences notwithstanding—in point of the manner in which rural spaces, such as the village, should be understood in terms of soundscape (the distance over which bells could be heard) rather than administrative or natural boundaries. More precisely, Corbin argues that church bells played a key role in establishing an enclosure corresponding to the mental and symbolic space of the village, hence the protests from those who could not hear their chimes. This consideration of the area covered by bell sounds as mapping out the space of the village links productively to readings of Thoreau’s retreat as a partial—rather than complete—break with civilization.

Enriched by the soundscape of the bells prolonged into the music of nature, the *Walden* experiment thus emerges, one might argue, as at least partially inscribed by rurality. In fact, the rural and the natural world merge into each other, and—in what may be regarded as another instance of transduction—the narrator perceives the forest as vibrating to the sound of the bells. In a description finely attuned to mechanisms of sound propagation, the narrator tells how, “at a sufficient distance over the woods,” the bell sound “acquires a certain vibratory hum, as if the pine needles in the horizon were the strings of a harp which it swept,” with distance producing a “vibration of the universal lyre”; the “melody” reaching the narrator’s ears is “strained” by the air and, modulated and echoed by elements “from vale to vale,” has “conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood.” The *Walden* soundscape is, in fact, permeated by a host of noises—or melodies—of rural life (wagon, cart). Particularly expressive in this sense is the “distant lowing of some cow in the horizon,” which brings in “sweet and melodious” tunes of a rurality that has its own “cheap and natural music” and, in turn, reminds the listener of the minstrels’ “serenade,” a comment not so much on the youths’ singing as on the fact that they too are an “articulation of Nature.”

Bringing together the different strands of sounds identified above, the closing noises of the day again interweave rurality, technology, and nature, and are all filtered by the ordering intellect. Showing the process of transduction by which an aural world is transposed into an evening landscape, the latter comprises the “vespers” of “whip-poor-wills” immediately following the “evening train,” the “distant rumbling of wagons over bridges,” “the baying of dogs,” sometimes “the lowing of some disconsolate cow,” “the trump of bullfrogs,” to which the writer pays particular attention.

Imaginary sounds also substantiate the reading of *Walden* as a continuing negotiation with a complex threshold space. Carved out between juxtaposed perceptions of nature and modernity, and crossed by rural sounds, the Walden soundscape is thus enriched with an imaginary note, that of the chanticleer: “I am not sure that I ever heard the sound of cock-crowing from my clearing, and I thought that it might be worth the while to keep a cockerel for his music merely, as a singing bird.”⁵⁵ The desired sound of the chanticleer brings in a temporal dimension akin to that revealed by the archaeology of the soil in “Former Inhabitants,” for it is remembered as a “once wild Indian pheasant.” If, as has been argued, awareness of former civilizations highlights the perception of a layered present,⁵⁶ it also enriches the soundscape, rather than disrupting the experience of present habitation. Moreover, in the case of the chanticleer, the latter seems to be invested with the very substance of the Walden experience. Firstly, the sound of the chanticleer is expressive of the entire adventure, as it figures an excursus into a surrogate wilderness, signaling the potential of naturalization without domestication: “If [this bird] could be naturalized without being domesticated, it would soon become the most famous sound in our woods, surpassing the clangor of the goose and the hooting of the owl.” Secondly, the chanticleer song overtly carries moral attributes, potentially putting “nations on the alert,” for “who would not be early to rise, and rise earlier and earlier every successive day of his life, till he became unspeakably healthy, wealthy, and wise?”⁵⁷ These attributes are connected to the purpose of the book itself—the latter is figured as a chanticleer song promoting alertness and, in describing his experiment, the narrator proposes to “brag as lustily as a chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.”⁵⁸

Through the negation of a soundscape of domesticity, the chapter ends on a note which returns the Walden experiment to a space of poignant critique towards—and observation of—a “civilized world” that is neither wholly embraced, nor wholly rejected. The chapter “Sounds” closes with an absent soundscape signaled through a series of negations (“neither dog, cat, cow, pig, nor hens,” “no cockerels to crow nor hens to cackle in the yard”), and it also references the absence of companionship explicitly figured as female and familial (“neither the churn, nor the spinning-wheel, nor even the singing of the kettle, nor the hissing of the urn, nor children crying, to comfort

one”). This “deficiency of domestic sounds” projects Walden as a space of otherness, and the emphasis on imaginary sounds, and absent sounds, is as telling as the painstaking description of the sounds of nature, modernity and rurality. Continuing the logic of negation, the landscape of snows heightens the willed, partial isolation of the dweller: “Instead of no path to the front-yard gate in the Great Snow,—no gate,—no front-yard,—and no path to the civilized world!”⁵⁹

Coda: Sonic Imaginations

Built on attentive notation as well as on imaginative interpretation and underscored by delightful harmonies as well as by thrilling discords, Thoreau’s vast composition attests to multiple points of engagement with a complex world, as well as against it, and suggests a nostalgic penchant for nature as well as a modern fascination for power. A relatively underexplored strand of Thoreau’s writing in particular and of transcendentalism in general, the latter aspect anticipates canonical early twentieth-century renderings of America as (acoustically) overbearing in its mightiness. For example, referring to H. G. Wells’s *The Future in America* (1906), Henry James deplored the U. S. as a “yelling country,” a place of “clashing cymbals.”⁶⁰ Through its integration of a sometimes strident modernity into the continuous soundscape of *Walden*, however, the Thoreauvian model provides for ever-renewed modes of attunement by cultivating what one might call—borrowing from Sterne—a sophisticated “sonic imagination.” Building upon T.S. Eliot’s “auditory imagination,” Sterne argues that the sonic imagination indicates “an openness to sound as part of culture, a feel for it,” which can “rework culture through the development of new narratives, new histories, new technologies, and new alternatives.”⁶¹ In viewing his milieu in its entirety as a rich source of music, Thoreau indeed reworks culture by promoting new narratives that nurture a deeper sense of engagement with and a wider array of responses to an often-discordant contemporaneity. Given current interests in ways that literature can provide ecological modes of relating, the *Walden* soundscape is worth revisiting for its highly sensitive and nuanced auditory articulation of natural, social and technical strands that can never be unbraided.

Notes

- 1 Murray R. Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, 2nd ed. (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), 8; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.
- 2 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; Or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 398.
- 3 Schafer, *Soundscape*, 8; Emily Ann Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT

Press, 2002).

- 4 Thoreau, *Walden*, 411.
- 5 Jeff Todd Titon, “Thoreau’s Ear,” *Sound Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 1, no. 1 (2015): 145, DOI: [10.1080/20551940.2015.1079973](https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2015.1079973).
- 6 Philip Gura, “Nature Writing,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*, ed. Joel Myerson, Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, and Laura Dassow Walls (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 408–25.
- 7 While F. O. Matthiessen’s classic study *American Renaissance* (1941) granted Ralph Waldo Emerson the central role in America’s cultural rebirth in the mid-nineteenth century, Lawrence Buell makes a case for the canonicity of Thoreau (rather than Emerson) for the “so-called American literary Renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century.” Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1995), 6. Similarly positing Thoreau’s centrality to the American canon, John Gatta argues that he was among “the first Americans to turn a theology of natural ‘development’ into poetry.” John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 137.
- 8 David Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau’s Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 75. Kristen Case, *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 101.
- 9 Given the scarcity of documentation for nineteenth-century sounds, Schafer, for example, particularly appreciates Thoreau for providing a valuable corpus for the historian of sounds, and mentions the rich description of the soundscape of Merrimack River. Schafer, *Soundscape*, 18.
- 10 Titon, “Thoreau’s Ear,” 145–46.
- 11 Titon foregrounds the Thoreauvian “wild soundscape” of 1850 in terms of an “acoustic ecology or what aural environmentalist Bernie Krause calls a biophony, the combined voices of living things.” Jeff Todd Titon, “The Music Culture as a World of Music,” in *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World’s Peoples*, ed. Jeff Titon et al., 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Schirmer, 2009), 3. The natural Thoreauvian soundscape is also regarded as essential in creating “second life” versions of the Walden retreat. Phylis Johnson, *Second Life, Media, and the Other Society* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 148.
- 12 Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) outlines an important theme pursued by subsequent scholars. For example, Thompson casts Thoreau in the company of other nineteenth-century figures who “struggled with mixed emotions about the coming of industry,” signaled by the “steam whistle, which announced the arrival of both railroad and factory,” and reads Thoreau as “awakened from his agrarian reverie at Walden pond by the screaming whistle of a passing train.” Thompson, *Soundscape of Modernity*, 120. After indexing elements that point to Thoreau’s interest in technology, Titon similarly argues that Thoreau “was not ambivalent about American industrial progress; he despised it.” Titon, “Thoreau’s Ear,” 146.
- 13 Charles Ives, *Piano Sonata no. 2: “Concord” with the Essays before a Sonata*, introduction by Stephen Drury (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2012), xxvii.
- 14 For a description of Cage’s reworking of Thoreau and its relevance for the musician’s own relationship to the environment, see for example Joan Retallack, “Poethics of a

- Complex Realism,” in *John Cage: Composed in America*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 248.
- 15 Christopher Shultis, *Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the American Experimental Tradition* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1998); Benjamin Piekut, “Chance and Certainty: John Cage’s Politics of Nature,” *Cultural Critique* 84 (2013): 134–63, DOI: [10.5749/culturalcritique.84.2013.0134](https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.84.2013.0134).
- 16 John Cage, *Empty Words: Writings ’73–’78* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 3.
- 17 Schafer’s own understanding of “the world as a macroscopic musical composition,” with the “new orchestra” as the “sonic universe” and “the musicians” as “anyone and anything that sounds” draws on Cage’s definition, which, in turn, refers to Thoreau: “The definition of music has undergone significant change in recent years. In one of the more contemporary definitions, John Cage has declared: ‘Music is sounds, sounds around us whether we’re in or out of concert halls: cf Thoreau.’ The reference is to Thoreau’s *Walden*, where the author experiences in the sounds and sight of nature an inexhaustible entertainment.” Shafer, *Soundscape*, 5. Stuart Feder documents the references to Thoreau in Ives’s compositions and mentions the chapter “Sounds” from *Walden* as the source of “so many of his Thoreau quotations”; the affinity culminated in Ives’s composition “Sunrise,” “aural in mode, philosophical in idea, and poetic in imagery, while rooted in the local detail of everyday life.” Stuart Feder, “Charles Ives and Henry David Thoreau: ‘A Transcendental Tune of Concord,’” in *Ives Studies*, ed. Philip Lambert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 174. Similarly, Jannika Bock dwells on connections between Thoreau and Cage, in particular in view of the latter’s “Lecture on the Weather,” identifying a point of confluence between the two artists in the belief “in the (artistic) beauty of the ordinary” and “the musical merit of nature’s sounds.” Jannika Bock, *Concord in Massachusetts, Discord in the World: The Writings of Henry Thoreau and John Cage* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008), 4.
- 18 Titon, “Thoreau’s Ear,” 145.
- 19 Thoreau, *Walden*, 449.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 488.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 539, 413, 538, 541.
- 22 Michel Chion, “The Three Listening Modes,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (London: Routledge, 2012), 50.
- 23 Schafer, *Soundscape*, 105.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 25 Thoreau, *Walden*, 411.
- 26 Ives, *Piano Sonata*, xxvii.
- 27 This passage is regarded as particularly relevant in approaches to Thoreau as a philosopher of work—see David B. Raymond, “The Importance of Work: Henry David Thoreau and the American Work Ethic,” *The Concord Saunterer*, New Series, 17 (2009): 152.
- 28 Thoreau, *Walden*, 411.
- 29 Schafer, *Soundscape*, 29.
- 30 Thoreau, *Walden*, 411–12.

- 31 Schafer, *Soundscape*, 6.
- 32 Thoreau, *Walden*, 539.
- 33 Sterne, *Audible Past*, 25.
- 34 Chion, “Three Listening Modes,” 52.
- 35 Thoreau, *Walden*, 421–22.
- 36 Schafer, *Soundscape*, 81.
- 37 Jonathan Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne, (London: Routledge, 2012), 3.
- 38 See, for example, interpretations of Thoreau’s statements concerning the role of commerce, technology, and science as both explicit and contradictory: Thomas Claviez, “Pragmatism, Critical Theory, and the Search for Ecological Genealogies in American Culture,” in *Pragmatism and Literary Studies*, ed. Winfried Fluck (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), 374.
- 39 Mark M. Smith, “The Garden in the Machine: Listening to Early American Industrialization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, ed. Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 41.
- 40 Thoreau, *Walden*, 413–14.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 414.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, “Introduction: New Keys to the World of Sound,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, ed. Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3–35.
- 44 Thoreau, *Walden*, 413–20.
- 45 Schafer, *Soundscape*, 21.
- 46 Thoreau, *Walden*, 417.
- 47 Buell, *Environmental Imagination*, 221–22.
- 48 Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 16.
- 49 Thoreau, *Walden*, 414.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 417.
- 51 See, for example, Lee McBride’s reading of Thoreau’s views on violence, especially in response to the John Brown case. Lee A. McBride, III, “Insurrectionist Ethics and Thoreau,” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 49, no. 1 (2013): 29–45, DOI: [10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.49.1.29](https://doi.org/10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.49.1.29).
- 52 See, for example, F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955); Joel Porte, *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1965).
- 53 Milette Shamir, *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 186.
- 54 Thoreau, *Walden*, 420.

- 55 Ibid., 420–23.
- 56 Peter Bellis thus points to the constructed nature of the Walden landscape, and argues that Thoreau attempts to harmonize disparate impulses and local histories, seeking “to clear or demarcate a space in which observation, cultivation, writing, and political or cultural resistance may all find a ground.” Peter J. Bellis, *Writing Revolution: Aesthetics and Politics in Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 14.
- 57 Thoreau, *Walden*, 423–24.
- 58 Ibid., 389.
- 59 Ibid., 424.
- 60 Henry James, *Henry James Letters*, vol. 4, ed. Leon Edel (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1984), 421.
- 61 Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations,” 5–6.

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