

How to Author a Walk: Henry David Thoreau's and Mary Austin's Regional Narratives of Environmental Learning

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Over the course of the last decade, Mary Austin has been re-canonized as a regionalist woman writer and as an author in the Thoreauvian tradition of American nature writing. As a regionalist, Austin is thought to represent a female dominated branch of realist writing, given over to a feminist celebration of communal ways of life and "woman's culture." A representative instance is her inclusion in the Norton Anthology *American Women Regionalists* (1992). As a nature writer, by contrast, Austin is seen to work in a male dominated tradition of environmental nonfiction, producing scientifically based and philosophically inspired texts. Her early collection *The Land of Little Rain*, in particular, is considered a major work of American nature writing.¹

Hardly any critical attention has been paid, however, to the intersections between regionalist and environmental narratives in Austin's work. The penchant of many critics for gender-specific literary traditions has worked to obscure one of Austin's major achievements—her ability to reflect on and dramatize in her narratives the confluence of social and ecological issues. To overemphasize either strand—her concern with socio-cultural questions that initially seem to have little to do with the environment, such as gender or race issues, or her concern with human/non-human relations and definitions of the natural—is to miss a rewarding quality of Austin's writing. Her larger project, it seems to me, is a regionalist attempt to demonstrate that our concepts of the natural and the cultural are interrelated, that, for instance, our ideas about gender and race are intimately linked to our definitions of the natural and that vice versa our perception of the natural world often reveals as much about our cultural

¹ A representative account of the genre along these lines is Don Scheese's study *Nature Writing: The Pastoral Impulse in America* (1996).

identity as about the unbuilt environment. This article, then, will examine some of the functions that regionalist perspectives perform in environmental literature through a combined reading of Austin's critically most acclaimed environmental work, *The Land of Little Rain*, and the natural history essays of Thoreau, the writer often considered the progenitor of the nature writing genre.

Both Austin and Thoreau frequently address in their essays the question of how to author their walks, that is, how to explore, observe, and live in their environments, and how to communicate these experiences in writing. For Austin, the interest in natural history involved a transgression of late nineteenth-century gender codes.² In her autobiography *Earth Horizon*, she relays an advice she received as a girl from her mother:

Especially you must not talk appreciatively about landscapes and flowers and the habits of little animals and birds to boys; they didn't like it. If one of them took you walking, your interest should be in your companion, and not exceed a ladylike appreciation of the surroundings, in so far as the boy, as the author of the walk, might feel himself complimented by your appreciation of it. You must not quote; especially poetry and Thoreau. (112)

Austin obviously did not heed this advice. Instead, she became an accomplished environmental regionalist writer. The passage reveals an awareness of the intersections between environmental perception, literary traditions, and social dynamics, here specifically gender politics, that points to one of Austin's important contributions to the Thoreauvian tradition of American nature writing: her ability to draw attention to the conceptual frameworks that interfere with the acquisition and application of bioregional knowledge.

The similarities between Austin's and Thoreau's regional narratives are manifold. Both writers are known for their impatience with the materialistic inclinations of their contemporaries and for their moral outrage

² Austin seems to have grown up unaware of earlier genteel traditions that identified botany as a field of nature study particularly suited for women. For a brief account that locates the sources of American women's nature studies in sentimental flower books and Victorian botanical textbooks, see Norwood 1-24. For an anthology of writings by women naturists from the late eighteenth century to present times, see Bonta.

at the environmental degradation of the regions they cherished. Both rejected purely utilitarian concepts of nature. They objected to the general tendency they perceived in their societies to alienate its members from the non-human matrix of their lives and its spiritual dimensions or "higher laws." Due to this affinity, the following quote could almost be attributed to either writer: "But you, between the church and the police, whose every emanation of the soul is shred to tatters by the yammering of kin and neighbor, what do you know of the great, silent spaces across which the voice of law and opinion reaches small as the rustle of blown sand?" (Austin 1909: 166-67). The last word, reading "sand" instead of, say, "leaves," gives a sure indication of the author; it is Austin writing about the California desert rather than Thoreau addressing a Concord audience. The challenge sounds familiar—the poet returns with fresh insight from his or her sojourn in nature to reform his or her private life and community. Yet there is another side to this critique which has received comparatively little critical attention—the complementary inscription of regional learning processes into the environmental narratives. In light of this situation, it seems worthwhile to consider from an ecocritical perspective the tendency of regional writers to invest "the powers of artist and audience in an ongoing and communal project" (Apthorp 1990: 10) of social reinvention.

Both Thoreau and Austin incorporate meta-narrative elements into their nature writing to comment on the relation between literary, scientific, and social conventions and environmental actualities. Thoreau includes in his natural history essays, for instance, musings on the possibilities of inventing a localized language that could capture his regional experience and knowledge. In the essay "Wild Apples" (1862), he unfolds a humorous taxonomy of apples, listing such sorts as "the Apple which grows in Dells in the Woods (*sylvestrivallis*)," "December-Eating," "the Concord Apple, possibly the same with the *Musketaquidensis*," "the Railroad Apple, which perhaps came from a core thrown out of the cars," "the Saunterer's Apple,—you must lose yourself before you can find the way to that," and "pedestrium solatium" (204-5). Thoreau's jocose list obviously functions as a critique of

scientific discourses divorced from immediate regional experience. He probes the potential of language to adequately describe environmental realities in terms of personal experiences of place.

In a similar gesture, in *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin privileges Native American over Euro-American place names because she considers the flexible Indian practice of naming to have the greater propensity for capturing regional particularities. For Austin, names that inscribe the land with the names of its Anglo explorers are characterized by a "poor human desire for perpetuity" and mastery of nature (3). By contrast, her mode of naming is intended to give relational and specific accounts of the experienced world. It should express "the various natures that inhabit in us" and the "sweet, separate intimacy" that the land is said to offer to its individual human residents (3).

The self-reflexive mode of narration seeks to draw the reader's attention to the negotiations between self and world that are involved in developing and expressing a regional sense of place. In "Autumnal Tints" (1862), Thoreau discusses and dramatizes the "different intentions of the eye and the mind" required by "different departments of knowledge" (174). In describing how the attitude and mental focus of the narrator influences what he sees, the text invites us to participate imaginatively in his regional learning process. Rather than confront us primarily with "the scientific account of the matter,—only a reassertion of the fact" (138), the essay traces the narrator's explorations of the autumnal landscape. As he seeks to learn from the leaves how to "stoop to rise" (157), his account presents a multitude of different views and impressions of the woods. The intricate descriptions of the color, shape, scent, even taste of trees and leaves give us a sense of the intensity of the narrator's engagement with the forest and its seasonal changes over the years. In this way, the text seems to provide an affirmative answer to the narrator's query whether "there is any answering ripeness in the lives of the men who live beneath" the trees (151).

The strategy of engaging and refining our environmental sensibilities

by offering us a narrative proliferation of complementary perspectives also pervades Austin's *The Land of Little Rain*. Her narrative, like Thoreau's, is informed by an argument for environmental adaptation: "The desert floras shame us with their cheerful adaptations to the seasonal limitations. [...] One hopes that the land may breed like qualities in her human offspring, not tritely to 'try,' but to do so" (11). As the narrative unfolds, the narrator's ecological literacy and her ability to appropriately respond to her surroundings increase. The text renders this development palpable by alternating between anthropocentric and biocentric descriptions of the same natural phenomenon. The initially noted "babble of the watercourse (that) always approaches articulation but never quite achieves it" (127), for instance, is transformed into "the most meaningful of wood notes" (136). While the narrator observes that the sound of the current fails to communicate any message to the uninitiated, the narrator's increased attentiveness to details allows her to correctly interpret the "changing of the stream-tone following tardily the changes of the sun on melting snows" (136) as an announcement of impending major snow falls. Aware of this "warning," she can react appropriately and seek out protective surroundings—like the animals withdrawing into their burrows or descending from higher regions to the valley.

In their environmental narratives, then, Thoreau and Austin present human perception and representation of the environment as mediated and limited in character. In "Autumnal Tints," Thoreau may unfold an extraordinary fantasy about creating a complete, exact, and permanent naturalist record of the autumnal turning of leaves (139). Yet the actual essay makes no pretensions at offering such an exhaustive or objective account of the observed natural phenomena. On the contrary, the readers are explicitly advised to regard the descriptions as a subjective though exemplary and instructive response to the seasonal changes of the woods: "If, about the last of October, you ascend any hill in the outskirts of our town, and probably of yours, and look over the forest, you may see—well, what I have endeavored to describe. All this you surely *will* see, and much more, if

you are prepared to see it,—if you *look* for it” (173). Similarly, in the preface to *Land of Little Rain*, Austin’s narrator directly appeals to the readers to pay attention to both the cultural conditioning of their environmental perception and to the fact that her literary renderings of the environment can never fully capture the regional reality. Given the subjective nature of perception, the narrator considers unqualified claims to expertise a hoax. She states: “Guided by these you may reach my country and find or not find, according as it lieth in you, much that is set down here. And more” (3).

Thoreau and Austin probe in their narratives the social and environmentalist implications of scientific practices. They integrate their descriptions of regional ecologies with reflections on the assumptions and modes of observation that inform their natural history studies. Thoreau ends even “The Succession of Forest Trees” (1860)—an essay on the environmental factors and interrelations involved in the dispersion of tree seeds and on the related topic of scientific method—with an invocation of both the “mysterious” quality of nature and of the triteness of human culture (91). Thoreau deliberately closes his lecture on a supposedly “purely scientific subject” (73) on a note of enchantment with nature and gloominess about culture to indict his rural community for its lack of appreciation for its land base. He stresses the material and spiritual treasures that an attentive study of the environment is bound to yield to ensure that his audience will put the new knowledge not merely to the utilitarian use of forest management. By lending a magical quality to the natural processes that transform seeds into plants, he attends in his account to an aspect of forest succession that empirical or pragmatic studies ignore. A strong mystical element also runs through Austin’s nature writing. In *The Land of Little Rain*, entire chapters, like “Nurslings of the Sky,” are given over to the attempt to develop a synthesis of scientific and spiritual nature study.³ Both Thoreau and Austin frequently use their

³ Austin commented on her need to acquire both ecological literacy and to engage in mystical communion with nature in *Earth Horizon*: “But the fact is Mary was consumed with interest as with enchantment. [...] For Mary is one of those people

knowledge of natural history to redefine the relations between science, imagination, and spirituality and to point to their relevance for the community's land use practices.

Paying attention to narrative voice, then, can aid in the development of a better understanding of the confluence of scientific, psychological, and philosophical aspects in environmental writing. The triad of "natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretation of nature" (Lyon 1996: 276) is usually considered the defining characteristic of the genre. If we read Thoreau's and Austin's texts as narratives of environmental learning, we realize that it is the regional perspective of the narrators that brings poetics into reciprocal relations with science, experience, and (environmental) ethics. Thoreau's and Austin's environmental narratives remind us that our regionally based human perspective both enables and delimits our understanding of non-human nature. Since the constitutive elements of the genre converge in the regional point of view of the narrators, the regional outlook has to be considered an integral dimension of the genre.

As Thoreau and Austin author their walks and communicate their experience of particular places, their descriptions and meta-narrative passages trace, discuss, and inscribe bioregional learning processes that redefine human relations to the environment. Their regional narratives suggest the possibility that an environmental learning process which seeks to self-critically keep track of its own assumptions may provide us with a basis for questioning literary, conceptual, and social conventions that presuppose or reinforce human alienation from the natural world. Thus Thoreau's and Austin's work demonstrates the aesthetically and politically significant contributions that a regional orientation can make to our readings and writings of nature.

plagued with an anxiety to know. Other people, satisfied by the mere delight of seeing, think they pay her a compliment when they speak of her 'intuition' about things of the wild, or that they let her down a deserved notch or two by referring to her fortunate guesses" (194-95).

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