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Thoreaus Surreal Imagery of Homemaking : A Comparative Perspective on Thoreau, Adalbert Stifter, and More Recent Cultural Phenomena

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Thoreau's images of homes and homemaking often feature descriptions and rhetorical figures that give objects new, unusual shapes, or question their usual functions. This technique projects onto symbolic meanings, which Thoreau usually ascribes to his images, so that symbolic meanings seem unexpected and difficult to absorb; the images upturn the reader's mind, which is most likely their intended function. Systematically, the imagery can be grouped into several groups, which boggle the mind in various ways: magnifications and diminutives, recontextualizations, and ironic treatments of symbols. The paper will present and interpret the rhetorical devices used in his descriptions and comments on building and ownership of houses, furnishing and arranging interiors, cleaning and washing, cooking, sewing and repairing. The texts under discussion are *Walden*, selected essays, and journal entries.

It is a traditional observation that most of Thoreau's images are ambiguous, or "indeterminate" (Sherman 1962, 5), which results in a variety of contradicting interpretations. Thus, the famous declaration of interest in domestic imagery, as voiced in his journal in 1856, "Give me simple, cheap, and homely themes" (Torrey 1906, vol. XI, 135), may have both a positive and negative meaning. In another entry in Thoreau's journal, for example, the meaning of the house depends on the angle of observation, especially when looking at the roof:

To go into an actual farmer's family at evening, see the tired laborers come in from their day's work thinking of their wages, the sluttish help in the kitchen and sink-room, the indifferent stolidity and patient misery which only the spirits of the youngest children rise above, that suggests one train of thoughts. To look down on that roof from a distance in an October evening, when its smoke is ascending peacefully to join the kindred clouds above, that suggests a different train of thoughts. (Torrey 1906, vol. xv, 135)

This is one of many bitter comments on domesticity in *Journals* and in Thoreau's works, which suggest that descriptions of his desired home were constructed by means of a rhetorical transformation of domesticity into a set of unusual images. This observation has been made by numerous critics, perhaps most comprehensibly in Drake's (1962) discussion of Thoreau's metaphors of the self in *Walden*, and in Laura Dassow Walls's treatment of musical imagery (Walls 1995, 108–116). Below, the paper will discuss several construction strategies of Thoreau's domestic imagery, illustrated with examples from *Walden*.

The first strategy consists in recontextualization of domestic objects. Many images of domesticity in *Walden* consist in removing domestic objects from their usual background, and placing them in new, unexpected relationships with nature and with the subject. Removal of furniture from the house, when Thoreau washes the floor in "Sounds," is perhaps the most evocative image of this sort.

When my floor was dirty, I rose early, and, setting all my furniture out of doors on the grass, bed and bedstead making but one budget, dashed water on the floor, and sprinkled white sand from the pond on it, and then with a broom scrubbed it clean and white; and by the time the villagers had broken their fast the morning sun had dried

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my house sufficiently to allow me to move in again, and my meditations were almost uninterrupted. It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, making a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories. They seemed glad to get out themselves, and as if unwilling to be brought in. I was sometimes tempted to stretch an awning over them and take my seat there. It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and black-berry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. It looked as if this was the way these forms came to be transferred to our furniture, to tables, chairs, and bedsteads – because they once stood in their midst. (Thoreau [1854] 2004, 112–113)

Furniture, when placed among trees, shed their utilitarian function, and blend into nature, which underscores the material unity of all nature, the obvious unity between wood in trees and artificial wooden structures. However, Thoreau's response suggests that this recontextualization is a source of pleasure; the new and unusual context is akin to the work of surreal imagination, as exemplified by the famous, and very similar, passage from Max Ernst's programme notes for the surrealist exhibition in 1948, where the German painter comments on recontextualization of teaching aids:

One rainy day in 1919 in a town on the Rhine, my excited gaze is provoked by the pages of a printed catalogue. The advertisements illustrate objects relating to anthropological, microscopical, psychological, mineralogical and paleontological research. Here I discover the elements of a figuration so remote that its very absurdity provokes in me a sudden intensification of my faculties of sight – a hallucinatory succession of contradictory images, double, triple, multiple, superimposed upon each other with the persistence and rapidity characteristic of amorous memories and visions of somnolence. These images, in turn, provoke new planes of understanding. They encounter an unknown – new and non-conformist. By simply painting or drawing, it suffices to add to the illustrations a color, a line, a landscape foreign to the objects represented – a desert, a sky, a geological section, a floor, a single straight horizontal expressing the horizon, and so forth. These changes record a faithful and fixed image of my hallucination. They transform the banal pages of advertisement into dramas which reveal my most secret desires. (Morthewell 1948, 16)

The affinity between Thoreau's imagery and surrealism consists in recontextualization, and can be described as a sort of surreal domesticity; this is how Thoreau constructs a home for himself. An interesting theoretical background

for recontextualization of domesticity is provided by Bachelard in *Poetics of Space* (1958), in the chapter on corners. This is where the phenomenologist of imagination describes the dysfunctional, de-contextualized elements of a house: an imagined, or “lived-in” corner is a set of walls and fixtures which is incomplete, not fully house-like, but rather a “half-box, part walls, part door” (Bachelard 1958, 137), perceived without connection to an entire structure, just like the pieces of furniture on the shore of Walden Pond. Thus, decontextualization is related to Bachelard’s phenomenology of the angle and the corner.

Every corner or angle is, according to Bachelard, “a symbol of solitude for imagination; that is to say, is the germ of a room or of a house” (136), but in a way that leads to isolation and rejection of the world, as “a corner that is ‘lived in’ tends to reject and restrain, even to hide, life.” This seems not to be the all-encompassing house that Thoreau was looking for at the pond, but rather a germ of a house that he built inadvertently in some of his images. “The corner becomes a negation of the Universe. In one’s corner one does not talk to oneself” (136). Images of recontextualized objects form angles, which are radically different from the generally recognized circularity of space imagery in *Walden* (Anderson 1968). Unsurprisingly, there are few angles (literally 8) and corners (5) in Thoreau’s book, and they mostly relate to optical angles of light reflected from the ice in “Spring,” and “The Ponds,” or to other people’s houses and places, including toponyms. There are two remarkable angles unrelated to domesticity, a paradoxical angle on a cloud in and an angle in the mind in “Brute Neighbors.” But in Thoreau’s hut there are only three, and maybe that is why they are both rather famous: in “Visitors” there are two opposite corners into which interlocutors drift during their conversation, and in “Conclusion” there is the most famous of all Thoreau’s corners, the acoustically germinating prison wall: “I live in the angle of a leaden wall, into whose composition was poured a little alloy of bell-metal” (Thoreau [1854] 2004, 329). This image is related to Bachelard’s discussion of miniatures, which will be discussed presently.

Another representation strategy in Thoreau’s work consists in the use of magnification and diminution of interiors. In his discussion of miniature houses, Bachelard observes that the most vivid image of the miniature is an impossibly vast interior in a very small building, as in bean-sized palaces known from some fairy tales, or an alternate universe accessed through a small, secret passage:

There is really a fantasy on Riemann’s curved space. Because every universe is enclosed in curves, every universe is concentrated in a nucleus, a spore, a dynamized center. (...) This nucleizing nucleus is a world in itself. The miniature deploys to the dimensions of the universe. (Bachelard 1958, 157)

This passage seems to point out to the fact that curves of any magnitude can be drawn, constructed, from very small (size-less) points, or foci, which, in imagination, operate in the same way as the germinating corners and angles that had the potentiality to generate an entire house. When seen separately, such a germinating point (or angle) creates a surreal image. It has been frequently observed that “the metaphor in *Walden* usually combines the small specific fact with an enormous one” (Drake 1962, 84), but in the context of domesticity, results are very similar to images discussed by Bachelard, with an inside

that is larger than its outside. For example, this long quotation presents an elaborate image of solitary confinement as freedom, and homeliness as open space, both of which Thoreau frequently uses in *Walden*:

I sometimes dream of a larger and more populous house, standing in a golden age, of enduring materials, and without gingerbread work, which shall still consist of only one room, a vast, rude, substantial, primitive hall, without ceiling or plastering, with bare rafters and purlins supporting a sort of lower heaven over one's head – useful to keep off rain and snow, where the king and queen posts stand out to receive your homage, when you have done reverence to the prostrate Saturn of an older dynasty on stepping over the sill; a cavernous house, wherein you must reach up a torch upon a pole to see the roof; where some may live in the fireplace, some in the recess of a window, and some on settles, some at one end of the hall, some at another, and some aloft on rafters with the spiders, if they choose; a house which you have got into when you have opened the outside door, and the ceremony is over; where the weary traveller may wash, and eat, and converse, and sleep, without further journey; such a shelter as you would be glad to reach in a tempestuous night, containing all the essentials of a house, and nothing for house-keeping; where you can see all the treasures of the house at one view, and everything hangs upon its peg, that a man should use; at once kitchen, pantry, parlor, chamber, storehouse, and garret; where you can see so necessary a thing, as a barrel or a ladder, so convenient a thing as a cupboard, and hear the pot boil, and pay your respects to the fire that cooks your dinner, and the oven that bakes your bread, and the necessary furniture and utensils are the chief ornaments; where the washing is not put out, nor the fire, nor the mistress, and perhaps you are sometimes requested to move from off the trap-door, when the cook would descend into the cellar, and so learn whether the ground is solid or hollow beneath you without stamping. A house whose inside is as open and manifest as a bird's nest, and you cannot go in at the front door and out at the back without seeing some of its inhabitants; where to be a guest is to be presented with the freedom of the house, and not to be carefully excluded from seven eighths of it, shut up in a particular cell, and told to make yourself at home there – in solitary confinement. (Thoreau [1854] 2004, 243–344)

This is a rather problematic description, as images of confinement and homeliness become vehicles for various parts of an open land and landscape: the sky is a hall, the cellar is the ground, the hanging peg seems to be a sort of universal axis of the world. A house magnified in this manner, in accordance with Bachelard's analysis, turns inside-out, so that the opening the outside door can create a confusion between entering and leaving (the inside is an outside). Bachelard provides an interesting example from a fragment by

Hesse, written during the Second World War, a miniature which is similar to Thoreau's solitary confinement in the angle of leaden walls. "A prisoner paints a landscape on the wall of his cell showing a miniature train entering a tunnel. When his jailers come to get him, he asks them 'politely to wait a moment, to allow me to verify something in the little train in my picture. As usual, they started to laugh, because they considered me to be weak-minded. I made myself very tiny, entered into my picture and climbed into the little train, which started moving, then disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel. For a few seconds longer, a bit of flaky smoke could be seen coming out of the round hole. Then this smoke blew away, and with it the picture, and with the picture, my person . . .'" (Thoreau [1854] 2004, 150). Bachelard considers this image to be typical in literature in general, and observes that "if need be, mere absurdity can be a source of freedom" (150). Thoreau described several such corners in the dark moments of his journals, such as this, from an undated entry in October 1850:

Cultivate poverty like a sage, like a garden herb. Do not trouble yourself to get new things, whether clothes or friends. That is dissipation. Turn the old; return to them. Things do not change; we change. If I were confined to a corner in a garret all my days, like a spider, the world would be just as large to me while I had my thoughts. (Torrey 1906, vol. III, 25)

Correspondingly to this observation, interiors enlarged so they become larger than the building, as well as other distortions of structure, occur in contemporary literature in other countries, and may be interpreted as symptoms of rejection of the contemporary urban and industrial expansion. For example, there is a number of similarly absurd domestic imagery in the prose of Adalbert Stifter, a representative of Austrian *Biedermeierzeit*, a post-Romantic period between 1815 and the 1850. By placing the descriptions of Thoreau's cabin in the context of Stifter's texts, it is possible to discover wider historical and political connotations of Thoreau's imagery, especially in the context of German and Austrian contemporary spirit of resignation, provincialism, organic harmonism, and conservative discipline. The comparison seems viable given the fact that Austria and German states, much in the same manner as Thoreau's idea of New England, were temporarily lingering in "roads not taken," or blind alleys, as societies sidetracked from colonial expansion and industrial revolution. The comparison is also encouraged by the fact that both Thoreau and Stifter have been read in terms of Romantic natural science represented by Alexander von Humboldt.

Stifter's short stories often feature hermits living in uncomfortable and slightly absurd conditions such as doorless cellar rooms or ad-hoc planks and blocks of stone used as a decontextualized furniture. In one of the stories from his most famous collection, *Bunte Steine* (Colorful Stones) ([1853] 1982),¹ feature settings such as a semi-open hermitage with furniture made of rough planks ("Kalkstein"), a miniature house, complete with miniature furniture and house utensils, built by adults to lure a wild mountain child into civilized family life ("Bergmilch"), or an inhabited cellar, which serves as the place of lifelong

1 Stifter's collection, called *Bunte Steine* in German, has not been translated into English, with the exception of one story, "The Rock Crystal," which has a notable translation by Marianne Moore.

confinement for a deranged father and his little daughter (“Turmalin”), and a shelter built of boughs in deep woods, where two children survive a plague after the death of their parents (“Granit”). Stifter used these settings for descriptions of lives that might seem unfulfilled, forgotten, and abnormal, and yet were presented as quaint and harmonious natural phenomena, which sometimes become important episodes in a local history. An extensive study of setting in Biedermeier fiction, especially when compared with German realist novels, might lead to the conclusion that Stifter’s slightly surreal settings represent a blind alley in historical and civilizational development of the time, a movement that runs against the development of what Lewis Mumford called “the megamachine.” Thoreau, seen in a comparative perspective, would be an American example of this movement. This movement will be further discussed below.

The alternative civilizational movement can be identified in the already traditional terms of American pastoralism, presented by F.O. Matthiessen (1942), R.W.B. Lewis (1953) and Leo Marx (1968), as the middle-way between the wilderness and urban society. It is also possible to argue that the more recent eco-critical studies on Thoreau (Buell 2001) are discussions of pastoralism, too, especially when they present the theme of technology in Thoreau in terms of invasion of machine into the garden. Ecocritical studies, however, also discuss alternative visions of nature in the 19th century, derived from what Lewis Mumford described as “nature as home,” known from holistic naturalists such as Humboldt and Agassiz. Thoreau’s reading of these authors has been discussed by Laura Dassow Walls (2001; 1995), some authors in the collection of essays on Thoreau’s sense of place, edited by Richard J. Schneider (2001), and by Laurence Buell in *Writing for the Endangered World* (2001). Earlier, the theme was partially mentioned by Lewis Mumford in *The Myth of the Machine* (1966). In terms of myth-and-symbol criticism, *Walden* is discussed as a set of oppositions between the natural and the artificial, developed along the lines presented by Leo Marx; it is rather difficult to read *Walden* in a different way. The present argument refers to these different readings, because they focus on the image of home and domesticity as questionable combinations of the opposites, in the sense of being living machines, and mechanical gardens, or “organic machines” (Walls 1995, 70); this is the context explained by Walls in her study of relationships between Thoreau and his contemporary Romantic naturalists such as Alexander von Humboldt (Walls 1995, 95–116). Thus, Thoreau can expand an artificial house into a natural universe in the image presented above, or ironically describe a stove as a chemical apparatus which hides a natural face (Thoreau [1854] 2004, 254), or de-contextualize artificial objects so that their artificial function is lost in a natural setting. Thoreau is not an isolate in this, and quite to the contrary, such paradoxical images seem to be quite common in commercial and technical texts.

Numerous examples are best described by Lewis Mumford’s mythographic study of technology as imaginary activity, oscillating between the “megamachine” and domestication of nature. The megamachine is an organization of matter and society based on procedure-based organization, remote control, and functionalism (1966, 188–191); many social organizations (especially military ones), and most civilizations, including pre-industrial ones, are megamachines according to Mumford. The alternative is a domestication of nature, that is technical civilization based on human adaptation to natural conditions, conformity with natural cycles, divisions, distributions, and limitations; Mumford relates this idea to Alexander von Humboldt’s “science of mutual connections” (quoted and discussed in Walls 1995, 99). In terms of thematics

of Thoreau's writings, this usually translates into representations and designs of stable human settlement, harmoniously responding to its environment which sustains it, as in idealized New England farmland. Mumford's discussion of Thoreau in *The Golden Day* (1926) is based on the notion of "habitat," to which Thoreau tries to adapt, looking for the "degree of food, clothing, shelter, labor (...) necessary to sustain" a "truly human life" (110). To achieve this, Thoreau apparently "lived in his desires" (120), an image which will be recalled here with reference to surrealism. Thoreau's home built of desires refers to reified and magnified products of imagination, and usually consists of technological imagery related to domestication of nature, which features machines that are analogues and extensions of natural and human life, and are often metaphorically described as machines that are somehow "alive," corporeal, as not entirely mechanical, or conversely, of environments and organisms that are somehow mechanical; this dialectic is the link Mumford established between his thought and Thoreau. Walls elegantly presents this dialectic, discussing arguments by Coleridge and Emerson, thus: "Organicism defines itself against mechanism, but produces itself as, finally, mechanism under a sweeter name—a mechanism rendered politically correct" (Walls 1995, 73). In Mumford's paradigm, Thoreau occupies a central place, at the intersection between technology (megamachine) and domesticity (habitat), an intersection which can be observed in a variety of later American texts.

Among numerous examples, one could mention, perhaps surprisingly, representations of Strategic Air Command from the moment of its inception during the Cold War. Various visions of American response to the threat of nuclear war were rooted in the dialectic of the natural and the artificial, as the mechanics of nuclear war were often seen as magnifications of the supposedly natural struggle for survival, including the supposedly natural sources of individual and national "will." Much of the debate on nuclear defense consisted of questions about which portions of this struggle and will could safely be mechanized, whether or not decision-making could be mechanized (Kahn 2010, 143), or whether or not it would be actually safer to mechanize decision-making (Hong 2004). Consequently, bombers, air bases, electronic systems of communications and early warning, were routinely represented as beehives, forests, gardens, herds of buffalo, nests, and the assorted arsenal of birds and other animals; correspondingly and perhaps obviously, crews and other personnel were represented as frontiersmen or as hermits, buried in small chambers under protective earth, next to the missile silos comfortably dwelling in hidden corners of Omaha farmland (Frank 1960), burrowing and protecting freedom like Thoreau's woodchucks and moles.

The representation of missile silos, bombing drills, and command bunkers in Fred M. Frank's promotional film, *Tall Man Five-Five* (1960), openly refers to Thoreau and New England history, presenting the SAC as part of peaceful, quiet, and harmonious American nature. The film shows missile bases as small cabins (since silos are hidden underground) surrounded by quiet farmland, and a bombing drill performed by a supersonic bomber, producing the booming "sounds of freedom," which protect the land. The film discusses the supersonic boom, heard by inhabitants of a New England town, as a new American sound that the nation must learn to live with; the boom is presented as the sound of American will to survive, one of the "comforting" "sounds necessary for freedom" (Frank 1960). Notwithstanding the striking similarities between the supersonic boom in the film, and the various sounds in Walden (the train in "Sounds" and the booms of cracking ice in

“The Spring”), the film consists of several surreal images of domesticity and angles: the crew of the bomber, while preparing for their training mission, “fly every mile on paper” and gradually “insert” the three thousand miles of flight into their heads, which can be interpreted as an example of Bachelard’s miniature. When they are actually flying their mission, the coning shock waves are presented as a protective angle (cone) reaching the ground a sound of freedom. Other examples of Cold War imagery, from a surprising variety of authors, include the same rhetorical devices as images of domesticity in Thoreau, including decontextualization of domestic angles and corners, or magnification and miniatures of homes; in other words, nuclear defense, and nuclear deterrent, were represented in terms of a slightly surreal domesticity. Thus, Mary McCarthy’s essay on nature in American culture (1970) presents missile silos as an example of the “back-to-nature impulse,” as “desire to burrow in the ground, below the contamination level, is seen in the vocabulary of radical youth, with their so-called underground press, and in the stockpile shelters of the Minute Men” (McCarthy 1970, 203). Similarly, Edmund Wilson, in his review of Karl von Frish’s book on bee dance (Wilson 1965, 333–339), compares the Strategic Air Command, and the United States in general, to a beehive that sends out foraging bees to their targets identified by angles of belly-wagging of a recruiting bee. The efficiency of these “bees, wasps, and bombers” seems to impress Wilson as a natural phenomenon (334). A similar metaphorical blurring of the distinction between machines and nature was presented in an official SAC history, with reference to development of the B-17 bomber: “By the frayed thread of a loophole purchase, the dream machine stayed alive” (Meilinger 2012, 34). The overall meaning suggested by these images is that nuclear deterrent was different from traditional warfare, in that it was a settled habitat, harmoniously blended with the landscape and nature in America, as opposed to mobility and direct use of violence in traditional military operations overseas (which might be an example of Mumford’s megamachine).

These examples demonstrate that Thoreau’s surreal image of domesticity was not only a setting of his individual rejection of contemporary national life, but could be, and was, used as a pattern for images of alternative national, social, and military organizations. The general mythic patterns for such organizations, as proposed by Mumford, are similar to the spatial imagery in Thoreau’s work, and in descriptions of shelters, air bases, and missile silos built as American nuclear deterrent. The idea of deterrent, thus, might be seen as an alternative to conventional war, represented much in the same manner as Thoreau’s domesticity was an alternative to contemporary conventional domesticity.

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