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**“Wherever the Hog Comes, the Rattlesnake Disappears,” or  
“*Sic Transit Gloria Ruris*:” Fuller and Thoreau on Civilization  
and/as Extinction**

***Abstract***

In her *Summer on the Lakes in 1843* Margaret Fuller regretfully foresaw the the settlers’ “mode of civilization will, in the course of twenty, perhaps ten, years, obliterate the natural expression of the country.” Such will be Henry Thoreau’s concern ever since (if not before) he set off to Walden Pond in 1845; year after year this concern will only intensify with Thoreau witnessing how “the wild fruit of the earth disappear before civilization” and “the whole country becomes a town or beaten common,” as noted in the 1858 Journal. This paper focuses on the proto-environmental thinkin/awareness indicated by Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes* (her only work of the kind) and tries to envision such a d irection of discourse as suggesting (and itself providing) a certain immediate intellectual/literary context in which Thoreau’s own environmental imagination will very shortly thrive and triumph.

“Although I have little to tell, - Margaret Fuller writes by the end of her *Summer on the Lakes in 1843*, - I feel that I have learnt a great deal of the Indians.” She had certainly learnt a great deal of the Indians during her jouney to edge of the American West and she certainly did not have “little” to tell. What she knew, however, was that much more was to be told about the Indians precisely because the greatness of their race “*was*” – everywhere she was seeing it fading away in figures already “defaced.” In bringing together the cause of the American Indians’ glory and that of America’s wild

nature's beauty and discussing them in the respective terms of irrevocable *pastness* and relentless *present destruction*, *Summer on the Lakes* lends itself to also be read as Fuller's intellectual and emotional response to the problem of loss. In other words, as early as 1843 Margaret Fuller can be thought of as already opening a discourse about extinction: in fact, nothing less than a proto-environmentalist discourse.

To be sure, her position was not yet – and could not possibly have been – that of a proponent of nature for nature's own sake; her commitment to wild nature's interest was not yet taking her as far as to put it over the human interest. Margaret Fuller's categories of thinking about nature and nature's future remain predominantly **aesthetical**: throughout her book about the American West she expresses her sheer admiration for wild nature's beauty (not yet entirely gone) and for the physical and inner beauty of its rightful lords “who chose the most beautiful sites for their dwellings” (all of that already gone). Her aesthetic considerations are so intense that sometimes – as, for instance, when following Black Hawk's trail in Illinois – she can't help exclaiming: “How fair the scene through which it led! How could they let themselves be conquered, with such a country to fight for!” (39-41) Yet, as Aldo Leopold was later to observe [in his essay “The Conservation Esthetic” (SCA 165-177/EI 121)], the

cultivation of a mindful attachment to nature at the aesthetic level is one of the paths to developing a mature environmental concern. The way I see it, therefore, *Summer on the Lakes* shows Margaret Fuller on this very path already; as early as 1843 she was already following her own intellectual and emotional “Black Hawk’s trail” to the developing of an environmental consciousness, such as, presumably, might have expanded over the years further and beyond the aesthetic level.

*Summer on the Lakes* clearly problematizes its discourse on extinction at the ethical level as well, or rather demonstrates such a noncomplacent bonding to nature which makes the aesthetical indispensably include the ethical. The idea that natural phenomena have both material and spiritual significance underlies the book’s entire treatment of natural beauty in the quintessential terms of Emerson’s correspondences – wild nature’s material and symbolic splendor, her sons’, or the Indians’ physical and inner glory, etc. The logic of such correspondences implies that any blow on the visible side will inevitably be a double blow, or a blow also on the side beyond the visible. At the time of Margaret Fuller’s journey to the West the blows to physical nature were already striking the sight and the mind; the environment was rapidly changing and Margaret Fuller would be among the very first to respond to these changes. In 1843 it was still early for anyone to come up with

specifically biocentric concerns; what *Summer on the Lakes* declares, however, is its author's determined homocentric, or aesthetico-ethical concern about the ongoing process of environmental depredation. The book plays such overtones throughout and ends with a crystal clear message to its readers: "Another year, you cannot go yourself, / To win the berries from the thickets wild." (169)

As Megan Marshall rightfully observes with respect to *Summer on the Lakes*, Fuller's "delight in the landscape deepened her understanding of their [the Indians'] loss" (*Margaret Fuller. A New American Life*, 207). I would observe in addition that, approached from a different perspective, this same delight in the landscape did also deepen Fuller's understanding of the overall human loss caused by what she called "the rudeness of the conquest" (SOL, 18) into nature's realms; the white man was depriving the Indian of his beautiful landscape, but, by devastating it, he was depriving himself of this beauty as well. To be sure, "most of these settlers do not see it at all" and "it breathes, it speaks in vain to those who are rushing into its sphere," Margaret Fuller sadly remarks; however, such remarks seem to imply that Fuller's thinking was already moving from the contrastive terms of the red man's against the white man's attitude to nature towards the *large-scale terms of the human relation to the environment*. In

other words, Fuller was foregrounding the problem of extinction as a problem of aesthetical, moral, and, consequently, *environmental* relevance already. This was a problem caused by the white man only; it was his “civilizational” rush into the wilderness which was bringing into focus the issue of the disturbed harmony between man and nature. So, as early as 1843, Margaret Fuller was already voicing nature’s call (although a call “in vain”) and was regretfully foreseeing that the settlers’ “mode of civilization will, in the course of twenty, perhaps ten, years, obliterate the natural expression of the country” (39).

Such would be Henry Thoreau’s concern ever since (if not before) he set off to Walden Pond in 1845; year after year this concern would only intensify with Thoreau witnessing how “the wild fruit of the earth disappear before civilization” and “the whole country becomes a town or beaten common,” as noted in the 1858 *Journal*. I am far from drawing parallels between Thoreau’s mature ecocentrism of the last decade of his life and certain assertions made in *Summer on the Lakes in 1843*; rather, I would suggest that the proto-environmental awareness indicated by Margaret Fuller’s only work of the kind points to – and itself provides – a certain immediate intellectual and literary context in which Thoreau’s own environmental imagination would very shortly begin to unfold.

On her way back to New England, in September 1843, Margaret Fuller stopped in New York and visited Henry Thoreau on Staten Island; she was filled with memories of her summer trip to the Great Lakes and plans for turning that trip into a book; *Summer on the Lakes in 1843* was published just a year later, in summer 1844, and, as Laura Walls affirms, when “Thoreau read it, he saw how to pull together his own book” (*Thoreau*, 255). The book in question was *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*; Margaret Fuller’s book showed Thoreau how to enrich a travel narrative with reflection, literature, and history, or how to make a living book, somewhat in the manner, like her own, of Goethe’s *Italienische Reise*. It seems, however, that *Summer on the Lakes* suggested more than merely ways of organizing a narrative; it seems it might have also suggested certain modes of reflection which Thoreau’s own mind was already embracing. It is *Walden*, the other book Thoreau drafted while living at the pond, which implies that Thoreau’s reading of *Summer on the Lakes* just a year before he set off to Walden Pond might have also corresponded to his own deepening commitment to nature and concerns about civilization’s harms to it. As Lawrence Buell observes, *Walden* “imbeds much of the history of his [Thoreau’s] thinking about the natural environment as it unfolded from his apprentice years to his maturity,” so “we should think of *Walden* both as product and as

process,” or as the record of Thoreau’s transition from homocentrism to ecocentrism (*The Environmental Imagination*, 118-121). Although Thoreau was well aware of the abuses suffered by the Concord landscape [(the Concord and Fitchburg Railroad, for instance, were laid along the west coast of Walden Pond the year before Thoreau moved there)], “*Walden* does not contain Thoreau’s most self-consciously environmentalist statements, nor his most close-grained nature observations,” Buell notes (*Ibid.*, 125). This was yet to come; *Walden* was, after all, a different project.

Still, the major culprit for the denuding of Walden – the railroad – is very much present in *Walden* and the way Thoreau deals with it suggests certain parallels with Margaret Fuller’s treatment of deforestation in *Summer on the Lakes*. In a letter she sent him to Staten Island in this same September 1843 Margaret Fuller had warned Thoreau that the “railroad looks foreign to Concord” (quoted in *Thoreau*, 164); although the railroad’s “foreignness” was not yet to be seen in the West at the time of her travel, the “warlike” human invasion she witnessed there had already alerted her about the threats of civilization to the natural world. Soon in her book she would tell the sad story of “the old monarch trees” of Manitou Islands chopped down to feed the fires of the steamboat and leaving behind only blackened, barren land

which “centuries cannot again adorn with such” (28). A few years later Thoreau would famously observe in *Walden*: “But since I left these shores the woodchoppers have still further laid them waste and now for many a year there will be no more rambling through the aisles of the wood.” [That machine, that “devilish Iron Horse” was the intruder, that had “muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot” and had “browsed off all the woods on Walden shore” (*W*, 146).] Thoreau was well aware that was “a fate” we have “constructed,” “an *Atropos*, that never turns aside. (Let that be the name of your engine.)” (88). But in *Walden* he had his strategy of overcoming the inevitable; usually, the “Thoreauvian Nevertheless,” as H. Daniel Peck called that (“The Constructions of *Walden*’s Pastoral,” 90), would serve the task. So, “nevertheless” no country champion, no Moore of Moore Hall, will come to meet and slaughter the “bloated pest,” Walden remains that “character” which “wears best and best preserves its purity,” the “perennially young” woodland lake Thoreau had “discovered so many years ago,” “the same liquid joy and happiness to itself and its Maker, ay, and [...] to me.” Rhetorical gesture, literary allusion, series of metaphors – all of that is engaged to protect Walden. However, in Thoreau’s effort to keep his Walden safe there is more than imagery in *Walden* and the inserted literal statement in this same paragraph from “The Ponds”



chapter seems to be one of the many such indications in the book, namely: “where a forest was cut down last winter, another is springing up by its shore as lustily as ever” (146-7). Thoreau’s thinking was clearly taking on environmentalist nuances already and the writing of *Walden* was encapsulating the shift.

In *Summer on the Lakes* Margaret Fuller also has her ways to neutralize the hideous sights of the reckless deforestation she had witnessed in the West. “I trust by reverent faith to woo the mighty meaning of the scene, perhaps to foresee the law by which [...] a new poetry is to be evoked from this chaos,” she writes and concludes that she “will not grieve that all the noble trees are gone already from this island to feed this caldron,” but will “believe it will have Medea’s virtue, and reproduce them in the forms of new intellectual growths” (28). Fuller’s rhetorical gesture involves as much as possible – Transcendentalist positiveness, “imported” cultural reference, powerful metaphor – in order to counterbalance the effects of that progress of civilization which to her is “Gothic, not Roman,” i.e. essentially uncivilized. Just as Thoreau would a couple of years later, she accepts that as “inevitable, fatal” and makes a deliberate effort “not to grieve” for the noble trees, but to “look forward to a good result” (39). Such wishful thinking could have remained entirely on the level of the imaginary; in *Summer*

*on the Lakes*, however, it also takes some rational and even “practical” directions.

Thus, observing “that the white settlers, who live in the woods, soon become sallow, lanky, and dejected,” Margaret Fuller comments that “the atmosphere of the trees does not agree with Caucasian lungs” and sees there an explanation for “the hatred of the new settlers towards trees.” In contrast, “the Indian breathed the atmosphere of the forests freely,” she goes on in order to conclude: “As they are effaced from the land, he fleets too” (132-3). To realize that one extinction leads to another – or that the deleterious effects of the white man’s intrusion into nature are interconnected – is *environmental logic* already. This logic may not be fundamental in *Summer on the Lakes*, but its passage through the book seems unquestionable. Margaret Fuller believed that “we must not complain” of the inevitable, i.e the extinction of trees, animals, and Indians. “**Still**,” in travelling through the country, she “could not but be struck with the force of a *symbol*,” namely that “*Wherever the hog comes, the rattlesnake disappears.*” Fuller’s “still” reminds of the Thoreauvian “nevertheless,” but in this case, instead of taking *to* the symbolic (Walden as a “character”), it takes *away* from it when Fuller explains how “the omnivorous traveler [...] makes a meal of the most dangerous of reptiles,” “whom the Indians look on with a mystic awe,” and

concludes that “Even so the white settler pursues the Indian, and is victor in the chase” (39). The symbol is restored to its literal meaning: possible here, as, unlike Thoreau in *Walden*, in *Summer on the Lakes* Fuller does not use the figurative to counterbalance the literal, but rather to emphasize her point on both levels.

Her point is clear: she had “not wished to write sentimentally about the Indians, however moved by the thought of their [...] speedy extinction” and she knew there had been “a chance of seeing what might have been done, now lost forever” (155-6). **Still** – and this is how the “Fullerene Still” was beginning to work in *Summer on the Lakes* – she wanted to *do* something about the problem of extinction, something more visible than the compensatory “new poetry” or “intellectual growth” she had envisioned. So she wished for “some masterly attempt to reproduce, in art or literature, what is proper” to the Indians, even for a “*collection of genuine fragments*, that will indicate as clearly their life, as a horse’s head from the Parthenon the genius of Greece;” she even hoped “there will be a *national institute*, containing all the remains of the Indians, – all that has been preserved [...] at Washington, Catlin’s collection, and a picture gallery as complete as can be made, with a collection of skulls from all parts of the country. To this should be joined the scanty library that exists on the subject” (154).

All of this may be considered part of the wide-spread salvage ethnography of the day. And to a certain extent it is; though not entirely, if only for the reason that in *Summer on the Lakes* Margaret Fuller often discusses the extinction of Native American culture *in relation* to the extinction of the American forests, that is, her salvage ethnographical project has also a distinctive proto-environmentalist tinge.

“Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness” (W 239), Thoreau would famously write by the end of *Walden*. Four years after the publication of *Walden* he would plainly assert that “stagnation” in his Journal: “The wild fruits of the earth disappear before civilization, or are only to be found in large markets” (J, 197). *Summer on the Lakes in 1843* ends on a similar note: “another year” and instead of berry-picking in the “thickets wild,” we’ll only be left with “blackberry jam,” although “the best pleasure such a fruit can yield, / is to be gathered in the open field.” Just like Henry Thoreau, Margaret Fuller was concerned about the huge and irreversible transition that was happening around her; and I think there can be no doubt she would have liked Thoreau’s late Journal version of “*Sic transit gloria mundi*” – namely, “*Sic transit Gloria **uris**.*”

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