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Toward the end of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth, *Walden* attracted the attention of a few major French writers who expressed their impassioned admiration for this masterpiece when they first read it: Marcel Proust (who even thought of translating it), André Gide... (see Maurice Gonnaud & Micheline Flak, "Thoreau in France," in *Thoreau Abroad*, ed. Eugene F. Timpe, 1971). For quite a while, only a handful of French men of letters appreciated Thoreau. Moreover, even when his fame extended beyond this literary elite, his unclassifiable book never obtained the recognition announced by these writers' enthusiastic praise. In the twentieth century, three translations into French were published (1922, re-issued 1990; 1967; 1985) and most major bookstores now have in stock a copy or two of these French editions for a limited circle of readers.

A surge of interest occurred in the late 1960s when *Walden* seemed to speak to the dissenting mood of the 1968-generation, but that spark of interest soon faded, leaving the book to academic criticism. Approximately every ten years, *Walden* appears on the reading list for the national competitive exam of teachers of English, which mercifully keeps the book from slipping into oblivion, but its reputation is restricted to university circles, resulting in only a few articles, theses and dissertations. It is revealing that a major anthology of critical essays on Thoreau by a dozen professors, together with the translation of a few of his essays and poems (Cahier de l'Herne, 1994) hardly attracted any notice from literary journals. Today, Thoreau may occasionally be referred to by a journalist mentioning the notion of civil disobedience or be remembered by fringe groups of libertarians and advocates of non-violence.

Why is Thoreau absent from the French cultural scene? Why did his multifaceted masterpiece fail to enjoy the reputation some of the works by Poe, Melville, Hemingway, Fitzgerald or Faulkner have achieved in France? Answering these questions tentatively requires taking into account the probable expectations of French readers and pointing out a few relevant aspects of the cultural context that determine the reception of a book in France. Obviously, the following remarks are based on bold and sketchy generalizations that deserve qualification. They were often derived from the reactions of classes of students in the past three decades.

Walden was conceived as a provocative dissenting book meant to wake up the Johns and Jonathans of New England who were slumbering in tradition; it offered them a new art of life based on the appreciation and contemplation of nature rather than on the acquisition of worldly goods. Thoreau's eccentric model of regeneration was imagined in reaction to predominant conformity, to the tyranny of public opinion described by A. de Tocqueville in the late 1830s; it was predicated on the absolute freedom of the individual and the right to ignore the goals of society.

It seems to me that French society hardly places as much emphasis on individualism; it gives the priority to what it considers the general interest and is therefore concerned about equity. Solving societal problems is considered to require a political approach, which involves the predominant role of the State. By and large, there is little systematic opposition to the government, but rather a firm reliance on its capacity to solve part of the diverse problems of society. Thus probably the skeptical distrust toward this arrogant sermonizer who hopefully believes that individual regeneration will carry sufficient weight to improve society. To the French, his antagonistic secessionist attitude does not make political sense.

Similarly, his exaggerated disparagement of work, the reversal of the usual proportion of work and leisure, must be viewed as an aggressive answer to the prevailing protestant work ethic which did not tolerate idlers: out of this ideological context, Thoreau's attitude sounds strange and not meaningful.

His persona gives the impression of being too intolerant, too sure of the value of his rejections; there is too great a state of tension in his uncompromising search for the absolute. Undoubtedly, it alienates those readers who are not aware of the cultural context to which he reacted and which is so unlike the one that they know today. They are, therefore, less willing to listen to his wisdom and to his advice to remain forever on the alert, so as to see through illusions. It is unfortunate that few French readers are able to overcome this negative first impression, for they would benefit from his discordant voice which would help them, a century and a half later, to perceive the world differently and escape the dull conformity of modern society.

With regard to his relation to nature, taking to the woods and building a cheap cabin sounds like an impracticable childish dream to French ears: one cannot imagine "a proliferation of homesteading experiments . . . that claim Thoreau as inspiration, directly or obliquely" (Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*) in France. At the very most, in the 1960s and 70s some dissenters left urban life to become farmers or shepherds, but there is no similar intense belief in the regenerative qualities of

nature and little desire for the wildness Thoreau speaks highly of. Nature is only thought of as a pleasant recreational leisure for weekends and vacations, without any relevance to the improvement of society or even the bettering of one's conduct of life. The French are less concerned about the preservation of wild nature, though by and large they accept the idea of not damaging the environment. A different attitude toward nature, which is obviously more often rural countryside than uninhabited wilderness, an awareness of nature without much idealization, account for the fact that Thoreau's temporary settling in the woods is not taken seriously: French identity makes apparently little use of nature, except perhaps for a regional identity which relies on a sense of place, the *terroir*, a word that has much to do with rural life.

The absence in French literature of anything like the genre of nature writing—with its blend of detailed factual information, scientific knowledge, sensual observations, and militant defense of nature—is indicative of the lesser relevance of French natural environment: in the United States where it is essential, this literary tradition superbly represented by Thoreau but going back to Bartram, Jefferson, or Audubon, is viewed as a "cultural type" (Peter Fritzell, *Nature Writing and America: Essays upon a Cultural Type*), and related to "the formation of American culture" (Buell). One must realize that literary taste is shaped by the cultural context. It is a question of the extent of one's exposure to literature, the result of numerous comparisons and confrontations.

For French readers, *Walden*, with its description of New England nature and of Thoreau's moments of sensuous ecstasy, remains an unidentified literary object that can only be vaguely related to Rousseau. Leaving aside the chapters devoted to his art of life, one may suppose that French readers are not prepared to read the nature chapters because they cannot relate them to previous literary experiences. An additional prosaic obstacle to the enjoyment of some passages of *Walden* comes from the French readers' lack of knowledge of New England nature, making it difficult to visualize what Thoreau refers to: what do hickories, life-everlastings, johnsworts, sand-cherries or ground-nuts look like? How can one find any interest in such descriptions when one has no idea what Thoreau is talking about?

It seems today that the majority of French readers mostly prefer contemporary novels which are well advertised by literary journals or the book review section of national dailies like *Le Monde*: there is less interest in non-fiction, unless it is topical, and no desire to return to "unknown" nineteenth-century foreign classics. To this should be added the fact that, until recently when *Cape Cod* and *The Maine Woods* were translated, there were no other works that had been translated which would help him acquire the stature of a great author: a literary reputation requires the support of more than just one book.

The last major obstacle to *Walden's* fame in France undoubtedly lies in what constitutes its greatest literary asset—its finely wrought language, its tense, knotty, aphoristic style, its essential wordplay that breaks stereotypes and crosses over usual borders, the "extra-vagance" that acts out Thoreau's desire for emancipation from societal constraints and inherited traditional ways of thinking. Most of these precious qualities unfortunately do not survive translation: much is lost of the cultural parodic allusions and of the dense connotations, of the meaningful idiosyncracies and of the subtle distortions or puns, of the conciseness and of the musicality. All three attempts to translate *Walden* are unsatisfactory at some point and fail to convey Thoreau's superb mastery of language: the weaknesses of translations leave out too much of the artistic achievement, thus reducing the pleasure of reading *Walden*.

In spite of Thoreau's non-conformity, together with his loud opposition to the government and his many criticisms of mid-nineteenth-century society, *Walden* may well also be paradoxically—puzzlingly—too American to obtain a wide readership in France beyond the small circle of aficionados who highly value it: to understand this blend of optimistic idealism, of stubborn individualistic resistance, of romantic secession from society, of puritanical rejections would require too great an effort to overcome one's cultural moorings. Thoreau's persona in *Walden* remains disconcerting: the odd mixture of a well-read man of letters with a parochial outlook meant to have a universal significance and a backwoodsman who is a sensual lover of nature. That this dissenter, this eccentric patriot, finally became a "cultural icon" (Buell), a saint who attracts pilgrim-readers, reveals the extent to which Thoreau is indissolubly linked to American culture.