

**“This is My Lake Country”:  
Wordsworth, Thoreau, and the Making of  
Modern Watershed Consciousness**

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## INTRODUCTION

Ever since geologist John Wesley Powell defined a watershed as “a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course” (U.S. EPA),<sup>1</sup> watersheds have become a standard unit of resource management and a familiar topic among writers and artists.<sup>2</sup> Serving as “go-betweens, translating and transferring technical information to the community in ways that can mobilize action” (France and Fletcher 103), many contemporary writers exhibit what environmentalists refer to as “modern watershed consciousness” (Buell, *Writing* 252). This is a form of awareness that acknowledges interdependencies between humans and nonhumans within and among watersheds – “interdependencies that finally reach out to include the whole planet” (Buell, *Writing* 264). Although watershed consciousness did not emerge as a cohesive environmental paradigm until the late twentieth century (Parsons 2), its origins can be traced back centuries. In this thesis, I argue that William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau – two nineteenth-century Romantic writers from

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<sup>1</sup> Powell offered this definition during the late nineteenth century while advocating for the creation of Western territories based on hydrographic zones. It should be noted, though, that definitions of “watershed” vary, the term being “an Americanism for what in England and Europe denotes the borders between drainage systems rather than the drainage basin itself” (Buell, *Writing* 247).

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of watershed writers and artists, see Lawrence Buell’s chapter on “Watershed Aesthetics” in *Writing for an Endangered World* (243-265) and Robert L. France and David Fletcher’s chapter on “Watermarks: Imprinting Water(shed) Awareness through Environmental Literature and Art” in *Facilitating Watershed Management* (103-121).

opposite sides of the Atlantic – anticipated, were actively engaged in, and continue to be instrumental to the making of modern watershed consciousness.

In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Lawrence Buell names Wordsworth and Thoreau as writers who helped inspire the current “renaissance of environmentally conscious watershed writing” (252). Mentioning Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes* (1835), Buell claims that “Wordsworth’s late work presciently anticipates later bioregionalist thinking” (246); and he references Thoreau’s *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) as a “transitional” example of modern watershed writing – one that pays attention to human impacts on aquatic habitats but “only fleetingly” (252). Buell contends that not until Mary Austin’s *The Ford* (1917) did “the first approach to anything like modern watershed consciousness” truly appear (252). However, modern watershed writers appear more in line with Wordsworth and Thoreau than Buell seems prepared to concede. Texts like Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It* (1976), which Buell finds representative of modern watershed consciousness (*Writing* 252), show strong Romantic underpinnings. Maclean’s perception that once-flowing rivers can be “enliven[ed]. . .with the waters of memory” and repopulated with fish through “the mind” (*A River* 62-63) – combined with his understanding that “eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it” (*A River* 104) – resonate with a Romantic understanding of how human consciousness and the natural environment interact and interpenetrate.

Wordsworth and Thoreau celebrated the unity of all things, and they both strived to communicate with the living spirit, voice, and body of nature. As revealed in his “Preface” to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth’s “high argument” (129) as a writer was to show “how exquisitely the individual Mind” (121) and “external World” (123) are

“fitted” (124) to each other; in poems such as “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth extols the mind’s ability to half “create” (107) and half “perceive” (108) its experience of “this green earth” (106). Aspiring to be a kind of American Wordsworth, Thoreau similarly felt “that the outward and the inward life correspond” (“Letters” 42), and he sought to interact with nature in spiritually meaningful ways. Like Norman Maclean, Wordsworth and Thoreau were particularly fascinated by the relationship between humans and waterways: Wordsworth often spoke of “the river of my mind” (1805 *Prelude* 2.214), and Thoreau was wont to contemplate “the lapse of the river and of human life” (*A Week* 100). Within their native watersheds – the English Lake District and Concord, Massachusetts – Wordsworth and Thoreau lived out these beliefs by defending the natural environment from exploitation.

Today, Wordsworth’s and Thoreau’s formulations of watershed consciousness manifest not just in literature and art but in practices like Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). “A process [that] promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources,” IWRM seeks “to maximise economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems and the environment” (Global Water Partnership). Founded on the “three E’s” of sustainable development – economics, the environment, and equity (United Nations) – IWRM and related initiatives value social and ecological well-being as inseparable considerations. For having envisioned humans and the natural world as fully intertwined, Wordsworth and Thoreau provided the necessary mindset for holistic environmental frameworks like IWRM, and they helped lay the philosophical groundwork for modern conceptions of sustainability.

In reexamining Wordsworth and Thoreau as writers who formulated modern watershed consciousness, I hope to show their continued relevance to environmental studies and environmental literary criticism, or “ecocriticism.” When ecocriticism first emerged as a distinct field during the 1990s, many scholars hailed Wordsworth’s and Thoreau’s examples of regional environmentalism.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, however, public discussion of environmental issues has “made obvious the need for ecocritical discourse to develop new ways of addressing global interconnectedness and less obvious the idea that local place or region [is] the only way to do this” (Buell, Heise, and Thornber 421). Consequently, Wordsworth’s and Thoreau’s writings have increasingly been interpreted as too locally-minded to help forward ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell suggests something to this effect when he writes that new modes of literary “place-attachment” are now replacing the “comparatively self-contained ecocultural localism of Wordsworth’s Grasmere and Thoreau’s Walden” (“Ecocriticism” 100; 101). Citing Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2005), a postcolonial novel about efforts to protect endangered species in the Bay of Bengal, Buell lauds literature that exhibits a “multilayered, internally fractured model of conceiving the global within the local” (“Ecocriticism” 100).

Although Buell merits praise for welcoming geographically and culturally diverse literature to the field of ecocriticism, his analysis relies heavily on the caveat of how Wordsworth and Thoreau “have generally been read” (Buell, “Ecocriticism 101) – that is, as the Poet of Grasmere and the Hermit of Walden Pond. However true these portraits might be, there are other ways of reading Wordsworth and Thoreau – ways that involve recognizing them as globally-minded individuals, concerned about the planet at large.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Jonathan Bate’s *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991), Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995), and James McKusick’s *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (2000).

Evaluating Wordsworth and Thoreau as writers who developed modern watershed consciousness allows for a broader interpretation of their legacies and reminds us of the benefit of reading these authors in the present era. Wordsworth and Thoreau may not have faced the kinds of complexities we face today, and they certainly did not leave behind a step-by-step handbook for solving modern issues like global warming, but they *did* provide an environmental consciousness that can help get us there. Their appreciation for how all things are connected, humans and nonhumans alike, is a sensibility that can be felt in all places, at all times. It is a vision powerfully evoked through literature and art, and it is a necessary understanding for protecting watersheds worldwide.

In the first chapter of this thesis, “The One Life of Watersheds,” I challenge Scott Hess’s recent claim that Wordsworth and Thoreau promoted their native regions to the exclusion of other places. Although Wordsworth and Thoreau strongly identified with their local environs, they occupied a wide “terrain of consciousness” and encouraged environmental stewardship at a global scale (Berg and Dasmann 232). Wordsworth’s watershed consciousness emerged alongside his belief that the entire planet is alive, sacred, and conversant with humans. In *Guide to the Lakes*, Wordsworth depicts his native watershed as a vital ecosystem and provides a model of living in harmony with nature. Inspired by Wordsworth, Thoreau designated Concord as his own “lake country” (*Walden* 480), and he emphasized the importance of re-inhabiting the natural world and the inner psyche. In turn, readers have embraced Wordsworth’s and Thoreau’s models of watershed stewardship in faraway places and the most urban locales.

In the second and third chapters, I evaluate how Wordsworth and Thoreau defended their native watersheds against the incursion of railways and related industrial

developments during the mid-1840s. In “Protest Against the Wrong,” I outline how Wordsworth campaigned against the Kendal and Windermere Railway in 1844-45 by corresponding with high-level officials and by publishing widely-circulated poetry and prose. In response to longstanding criticism of Wordsworth’s protest, I show that Wordsworth opposed this scheme in the interest of economics, the environment, and equity (i.e., the “three E’s” of sustainability) long before the development of frameworks like IWRM. Although Wordsworth did not succeed in preventing the Kendal and Windermere Railway, he nonetheless provided a rounded environmental defense that better prepared later advocates to protect the Lakes.

While Wordsworth was campaigning against the Kendal and Windermere Railway, the Boston-to-Fitchburg Railroad was constructed in Massachusetts. This railway enabled industrialists to harvest ice at Walden Pond during the final winter of Thoreau’s residence there. In chapter three, “Too Pure to Have a Market Value,” I contextualize Thoreau’s reaction to this scheme with respect to his overarching sentiments about water extraction projects. In *Walden*, Thoreau expresses anxiety about the ice industry’s social and ecological impacts, and he concludes his remarks with a discussion of global interconnectedness. Like Wordsworth, Thoreau comments on the economic, environmental, and equity impacts of industrial developments, and he displays a far-reaching watershed consciousness – the very kind of mentality needed to confront modern environmental issues.

## THE ONE LIFE OF WATERSHEDS

In “The Ponds” chapter of *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, Henry David Thoreau makes a clear reference to the British Isles. After listing Goose Pond, Flint’s Pond, Fair-Haven, and White Pond, he declares: “This is my lake country. These, with Concord River, are my water privileges; and night and day, year in year out, they grind such grist as I carry to them” (480). By referring to Walden Pond’s surrounding bodies of water as his “lake country,” Thoreau has in mind the Lake District, a region lying in the North West of England. Home to the Lake Poets – William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Robert Southey – this district was renowned during Thoreau’s day as the epicenter of British Romanticism (Thompson 10). As the *Walden* allusion suggests, Thoreau and his fellow transcendentalists often presented the town of Concord, Massachusetts as “an American analogue to England’s Lake District” (Maynard 29), with themselves as its Lake Poets.

Wordsworth and Thoreau have since emerged as the primary spokesmen of the Lake District and Concord, and they continue to inspire preservation efforts at these sites.<sup>4</sup> For having identified so closely with their respective “lake countries,” though,

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<sup>4</sup> These areas have even come to be known as “Wordsworth Country” and “Thoreau Country,” respectively (Hess 70; Maynard 212). W. Barksdale Maynard offers a thorough overview of Thoreau’s impact on

Wordsworth and Thoreau have often been accused of celebrating their local haunts to the exclusion of other places. In *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship* (2012), Scott Hess maintains that Wordsworth and Thoreau have reigned as the “presiding geniuses” of their respective regions ever since the nineteenth century (2), and he argues that both writers actively encouraged this trend. Hess contends that Wordsworth “enshrine[ed] himself as the resident genius of the [Lake District] landscape” (108), and he cites Thoreau’s “lake country” allusion as evidence that Thoreau imitated Wordsworth by “offer[ing]Walden as an American landscape of genius” (111). Hess alleges that, largely due to these writers, the Lake District and Walden Pond have been preserved as “museums of nature” – that is, “autonomous aesthetic sphere[s], set apart like a museum as an imaginative refuge from the everyday social and economic world” (165).

Understandably, Hess finds this all very problematic. He makes the compelling claim that “while it remains important to preserve natural landscapes of special aesthetic beauty, we also need to cultivate an everyday version of nature that integrates environmental aesthetics throughout our daily existence” (186). In his attempt to develop more inclusive environmental paradigms, however, Hess misrepresents Wordsworth’s and Thoreau’s philosophies. Although Wordsworth and Thoreau certainly honored their native watersheds, they did so not in the interest of spawning “landscapes of genius” but out of an understanding that all places are sacred. Wordsworth and Thoreau not only held this view but helped advance it: they encouraged readers to appreciate the “everyday” places of their own lives. In texts such as *Guide to the Lakes* (1835) and *Walden* (1854), Wordsworth and Thoreau stress the importance of living in harmony with nature, and

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conservation efforts in Concord in *Walden Pond: A History* (2004), while John Gaze outlines Wordsworth’s influence on the British conservation movement in *Figures in a Landscape: A History of the National Trust* (1988).

they offer their models of watershed stewardship to all people and all “lake countries.” The fact that these writers succeeded in inspiring others owes to the breadth of their environmental imaginations: although Wordsworth and Thoreau mostly confined themselves to regional geographies, they inhabited a wide “terrain of consciousness” and imparted their visions of living-in-place to readers (Berg and Dasmann 232).

### **Wordsworth and the Lake District**

Contemporary watershed artists like Andy Goldsworthy – whose work strives to capture a sense of “the energy and life that is running through, flowing through the landscape” (*River and Tides*) – follow in a tradition that was strongly advanced by the British Romantics, and in particular by William Wordsworth. Wordsworth regarded the entire universe as a “living unity, knowable through the imagination” (Koelb 115), and his watershed consciousness emerged as a general consequence of this worldview.

Inspired by the work of contemporary scientists and French philosophes, Wordsworth adhered to the cosmology of an “active universe” – a philosophy that perceives all matter as animated and alive (Koelb 115).<sup>5</sup> In “There is an Active Principle Alive,”<sup>6</sup> Wordsworth articulates his belief in an active universe while describing how a vital spirit courses through “all things” (2) – through flowers, trees, and rocks; through “the moving waters, and the invisible air” (5). Wordsworth conceives the active principle as a force connecting the entire biosphere:

All beings have their properties which spread

Beyond themselves, a power by which they make

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<sup>5</sup> Wordsworth explicitly references this philosophy in Book 2 of the 1805 *Prelude* when he relates how “the infant babe” (237) – along whose “veins are interfused / The gravitation and the filial bond / Of nature” (262-64) – lives “an inmate of this *active* universe” (266, Wordsworth’s italics).

<sup>6</sup> A poem incorporated at the beginning of Book 9 in the *The Excursion*

Some other being conscious of their life;  
Spirit that knows no insulated spot,  
No chasm, no solitude, – from link to link  
It circulates, the soul of all the worlds. (6-11)

Wordsworth's notion of an "active principle" may not stand as hard fact, but his words speak to a truth of conscious experience: the "power" by which all things make themselves known is a power comprehended through the imagination. It is an awareness that "circulates" throughout the universe, connecting everything "link to link" in much the same way that water nourishes all life.

Wordsworth frequently alludes to water while depicting visions of cosmic unity, which should not surprise us in the least. Often regarded as a primordial element, water binds all living things on a chemical basis and has long been an emblem of unification (France and Fletcher 109). For Wordsworth as for many modern environmentalists, water symbolizes the correspondences between humans and nature – a theme entertained in Wordsworth's 1805 *Prelude*. In Book 13 of this text, Wordsworth recalls having stood atop Mount Snowdon during a 1791 tour of Wales and been completely enveloped by fog. Barely able to discern where the "sea of mist" (43) ended and "the real sea" (49) began, Wordsworth looked out across the expanse and discovered "a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapour, / . . . through which / Mounted the roar of waters, torrents, streams / Innumerable, roaring with one voice!" (56-59). Wordsworth remembers having felt that

in that breach  
Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,  
That dark deep thoroughfare, had nature lodged

The soul, the imagination of the whole. (62-65)

These lines indicate Wordsworth's conviction that "humanly significant communication is possible between human beings and the other forms of nature" (Koelb 115), in so far as the "voice of waters" converses with Wordsworth in meaningful ways by rendering intelligible "the soul, the imagination of the whole." Wordsworth describes this voice as "homeless" in the sense that it is everywhere at once, all-surrounding and all-sustaining: the waters "blend into a single voice," symbolizing "a welling up of the unconsciousness" and the vastness of human imagination (J. Wordsworth 657).

Similar to Wordsworth's notion of "the soul, the imagination of the whole" is his expression of the "one life" of all things – a vision also articulated in the 1805 *Prelude*. Beginning at age seventeen, Wordsworth remembers having "conversed / With things as they really are" (2.412-13) and having felt "the sentiment of being, spread / O'er all that moves, and all that seemeth still" (2.420-21) –

o'er all that glides

Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself

And mighty depth of waters. Wonder not

If such my transports were, for in all things

I saw one life, and felt that it was joy.

One song they sang, and it was audible

Most audible then when the fleshly ear,

O'ercome by grosser prelude of that strain

Forgot its functions and slept undisturbed. (2.426-34)

A number of critics follow Jonathan Bate's lead in interpreting the Romantic "one life" philosophy as proto-ecological, since it suggests that "the earth is a single vast ecosystem which we destabilize at our peril" (Bate 40). Scott Hess disagrees: contending that Wordsworth's "one life" concept hinges on a high-aesthetic and sensually-detached mode of relating to nature, Hess cites this passage as indicating Wordsworth's "vast egotism," spread above the natural world as Wordsworth "transcend[s] his own flesh and blood into a kind of *disembodied* aesthetic consciousness" (8, my italics). In his critique, however, Hess excludes the crucial lines wherein Wordsworth perceives the "sentiment of being" manifested in the waves and "mighty depth of waters." By recovering the entire passage, we can appreciate how Wordsworth's "one life" vision depends not upon a "disembodied aesthetic consciousness" but upon a highly *embodied* experience of elemental forces, which sing to him of simple, earthly "joy" – a feeling in which all people can share.

At a time when other poets continued to commemorate classical scenes and places sacred in antiquity, Wordsworth exalted the ordinary delights of the here-and-now. Wordsworth's Prospectus to the intended *Recluse*, printed as the first 107 lines of his "Preface" to *The Excursion*, distinguishes this as one of Wordsworth's chief poetic concerns. The Prospectus "stands as the manifesto of a central Romantic enterprise," as it announces the potential for humans to become reconciled to common experiences of the natural world (Abrams 14). In his Prospectus, Wordsworth proclaims that "Beauty [is] a living Presence of the earth" (100) discoverable everywhere:

Paradise, and groves

Elysian, Fortunate Fields – like those of old

Sought in the Atlantic Main – why should they be

A history only of departed things,  
Or a mere fiction of what never was?  
For the discerning intellect of Man,  
When wedded to this goodly universe  
In love and holy passion, shall find these  
A simple produce of the common day. (105-113)<sup>7</sup>

These lines show that, rather than promote “landscapes of genius” or “museums of nature” (Hess 111; 165), Wordsworth counseled readers to appreciate the “common day” as an accessible experience of paradise. He knew, though, that it would take a revolution of consciousness – a union between “the discerning intellect of Man” and “this goodly universe” – for humans to realize and partake in earth’s tangible glory.

Assured that the entire universe is alive, connected, and sacred, Wordsworth experienced his own slice of heaven in the English Lake District. Living-in-place enabled Wordsworth to closely examine changes in the environment and better understand the interdependencies between humans and nature. Many of Wordsworth’s writings speak to this point, but the best illustration comes from his *Guide to the Lakes*. As Wordsworth revised and reprinted this text from 1810 to 1835, he “consciously crafted his *Guide* as an environmental text and wished to inculcate an ecological reading of it” (Hazucha 62-63). Wordsworth was well aware, though, that the ecological includes the human, and he took a “more rounded” approach than previous Lake Districts writers had done by “connecting [the landscape] to the region’s geology, history and human culture” (Ousby 179).

Arranged in three sections – “Description of the Scenery of the Lakes,” “Aspect of the

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<sup>7</sup> These line numbers correspond to a version of the Prospectus whose line count starts at the beginning of the “Preface’s” prose text.

Country as Affected by its Inhabitants,” and “Changes, and Rules of Taste for Preventing their Bad Effects” – Wordsworth’s *Guide* appears not so much a travel book as a treatise on the inseparability of human culture and the natural environment.

As an early example of watershed writing, Wordsworth’s *Guide* was one of the first texts to define the Lake District as a distinct region (Hess 85). The image that “must have done much to fix the idea of a [Lake] ‘district’ in people’s minds” comes from a section of the *Guide* in which Wordsworth delineates his native watershed’s main features (Thompson 10): “I know not how to give the reader a distinct image of these more readily,” Wordsworth writes, “than by requesting him to place himself with me, in imagination, upon some given point” – let this be a mountaintop, he suggests, or a cloud; from there can be seen “a number of vallies, not fewer than eight, diverging from the point. . . like spokes from the nave of the wheel” (*Guide* 171). This passage, rendered “with a geographer’s exactness” (Thompson 6), is a feat of artistic vision. Asking that they join him “in imagination,” Wordsworth invites readers to enter into the terrain of his watershed consciousness – the terrain of the human mind that corresponds to, but surpasses, the geographical bounds of the watershed. Wordsworth makes this entreaty throughout the *Guide*: he beckons readers to “pursue in imagination the [Lakes’] meandering shores” (182), and they accompany him on a journey in which “the mind moves through the watershed as the water moves” (Wendell Berry, “A Native Hill” 66).

Simultaneously, Wordsworth grounds his discourse with a remarkably sophisticated account of the district’s geology, which he studied throughout his life. As opposed to previous Lake District writers, Wordsworth portrays the region as a “dynamic landscape gradually being modified by fluvial activity” rather than a “static physical

landscape” (Whyte 103). In his *Guide*, Wordsworth skillfully describes how heavy rains have carved patterns into the mountains “like the letters W and Y” (175), and he pays considerable attention to the role that mountain tarns play in the “economy of nature” (185) – that is, the closest term to “ecology” that Wordsworth had at his disposal (Bate 37). Years before Charles Lyell propounded the theory of geological uniformitarianism in *Principles of Geology* (1830-33), Wordsworth explains how gradual geological processes (or “secondary agents of nature” as he calls them) have led “towards the production of beauty” in the district “by a multiplicity of symmetrical parts uniting in a consistent whole” (181). Serving as a microcosm of the active universe, the Lakes pulse with a vitality comparable to human blood flow: they are “truly living lakes, ‘*vivi lacus*,’” Wordsworth insists, fed by waterways that “circulate through them like veins” (185).

By emphasizing the Lakes’ organicism, Wordsworth challenged the dominant aesthetics of his day. During the eighteenth century, the discourses of the picturesque and the Burkean sublime popularized a style of landscape description that passes codified judgment on the natural world (Koelb 98-101). These aesthetic categories encouraged people to value waterscapes for their scale and visual appearance; consequently, “a notion of grandeur, as connected with magnitude” led tourists to prefer Sweden’s and Scotland’s expansive lakes over the Lake District’s smaller, humbler ones (*Guide* 180). In his *Guide*, Wordsworth defends his native region by contending that “it is much more desirable that lakes should be numerous, and small or middle-sized, than large” for the purpose of facilitating lakeside walks and rides (180). Moreover, Wordsworth questions the entire project of judging lakes by their outward appearances. Given that he conceived the universe as active and alive, Wordsworth considered natural scenes to be intrinsically

valuable and capable of affecting humans without the mediation of aesthetic philosophy. Accordingly, in his *Guide* Wordsworth celebrates most the opportunity to interact with the Lakes through the imagination. “To illustrate this by one instance,” he relates –

How pleasing it is to have a frequent and ready opportunity of watching, at the outlet of a lake, the stream pushing its way among the rocks in lively contrast with the stillness from which it has escaped; and how amusing to compare its noisy and turbulent motions with the gentle playfulness of the breezes. (180)

In these lines, Wordsworth does not promote a purely visual watershed aesthetics, nor does he simply personify nature; rather, Wordsworth emphasizes his deeply-felt *consciousness* of the Lake District as a vital entity, fully alive down to the smallest stream. Looking out across the Lakes, Wordsworth finds his human agency matched by nature’s: the “playful” breezes and the “noisy” stream “pushing its way among the rocks” have an intentionality about them that sympathizes with the human spirit.

In the *Guide*’s second section, Wordsworth suggests that only by acknowledging the underlying solicitude between humans and nonhumans can societies thrive in the long run. Describing how “the hand of man” and “the hand of nature” cooperatively shaped the Lake District in past centuries (194; 203), Wordsworth commends the district’s early settlers for having intuited this. He relates how previous inhabitants built dwellings, farms, and places of worship all the while “act[ing] upon the surface of the inner regions of this mountainous country, as incorporated with and subservient to the powers and processes of nature” (201). By living within the means of their environs, residents formed a truly *natural* republic – one “whose constitution had been imposed and regulated by the

mountains which protected it” (206). These people prospered because they recognized the essential interdependence between themselves and the natural environment.

Regretfully, such an understanding was losing currency among Wordsworth’s peers. During the nineteenth century, the Lake District was a place where “farming was being squeezed, established ways of life were being threatened and new people and new influences were pouring in” (Thompson 59). In his *Guide*, Wordsworth outlines some of these issues and makes recommendations for alleviating them. Reproving residents for planting nonnative tree species, altering lakes’ shorelines, and building obtrusive mansions, Wordsworth states: “The rule is simple: with respect to grounds – work, where you can, in the spirit of nature, with an invisible hand of art” (212). Fully aware that greater changes were to come, he concludes his *Guide* by expressing hope that

the author will be joined by persons of pure taste throughout the whole island, who, by their visits (often repeated) to the Lakes in the North of England, testify that they deem the district a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy. (225)

This statement has since served as a rallying cry for the British conservation movement, and it has even been recognized as “the foundation stone of the international concept of protected landscapes” (Lake District World Heritage Project 5). Today, preservationists appeal to Wordsworth’s example while declaring that the Lakes have “outstanding value for the whole of humanity” and “belong not just to England or Britain, but to the world” (Thompson 309; 310). Wordsworth’s “national property” statement thus proves to be something more like a “global property” statement, as it emphasizes the necessary attitude for watershed stewardship everywhere: “an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy.”

Wordsworth inspired others to approach their own environs with the same frame of mind. Accordingly, his readership is strongly international.<sup>8</sup> Having been drawn to his writings for various reasons, many readers are compelled by Wordsworth's vision of how nature and human consciousness interact (Abrams 137-38). John Stuart Mill's testimony speaks to this point: "What made Wordsworth's poems a medicine for my state of mind," Mill recalls, "was that they expressed, not mere outward beauty, but states of feeling and of thought coloured by feeling, under the excitement of beauty. . . . In them I seemed to draw from a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings" (*Autobiography* 104). Mill was one of many people to hear this message from Wordsworth; across the Pond, the transcendentalists heard it, too.

### **Thoreau's Lake Country**

While John Stuart Mill was reading Wordsworth for the first time, the Concord transcendentalists received Wordsworth as their "grand discovery" (William Henry Channing, qtd. in Packer 87). Thoreau joined this circle in 1837 after graduating from Harvard, and he learned much about Wordsworth from Ralph Waldo Emerson – who visited Wordsworth in the Lake District in 1833 and 1848 (Maynard 29). Even though Thoreau critiqued Wordsworth's writings at times, "Wordsworth's poetry remained an important point of reference throughout Thoreau's career" (McKusick 149), reinforcing his ideas about literature, nature, and humankind.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wordsworth's writings have impacted people like the Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths (Trapnell 39-40) and the nineteenth-century Japanese poet/clergyman Yaokichi Myazaki, who "was so passionately attached to Wordsworth that Koshoshi, his pseudonym for Yaokichi, was taken from the Japanese words for the Lake District" (Okada 29).

<sup>9</sup> For more on the relationship between Wordsworth and Thoreau, see: Lance Newman, "Patron of the World': Henry Thoreau as Wordsworthian Poet" (2007); Greg Garrard, "Wordsworth and Thoreau: Two Versions of Pastoral" (2000); Laraine Fergenson, "Wordsworth and Thoreau: The Relationship between Man and Nature" (1979); and Joseph Moldenhauer, "*Walden* and Wordsworth's *Guide to the English Lake District*" (1990).

Wordsworth's model of watershed stewardship especially appealed to Thoreau, who recorded on October 3, 1859: "Why are distant valleys, why lakes, why mountains in the horizon, ever fair to us? Because we realize for a moment that they may be the home of man, and that man's life may be in harmony with them" (*Journal* 12: 367). Having read Wordsworth's 1820 *Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes*, Thoreau frequently described his own region using terms borrowed from Wordsworth and the British Lake Poets (Moldenhauer 262).<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth's example even seems to have inspired Thoreau's back-to-nature experiment: "To live to a good old age such as the ancients reached, serene and contented, dignifying the life of man, leading a simple, epic country life in these days of confusion and turmoil, – that is what Wordsworth has done," Thoreau wrote in his *Journal* during 1845-47 (1: 407) – a time when he, too, was trying to lead "a simple, epic country life" at Walden Pond.

Thoreau's two-year-long residence at Walden offers just a small testament of his lifelong commitment to the larger Concord watershed. Walden was always "just one destination among many" for Thoreau, "experienced as a component part in a continuous progression through the landscape. It never existed in isolation but was tied to other ponds, hills, swamps, hollows, woods, brooks, and rivers" (Maynard 99). Thoreau could therefore no more sustain a vision of Walden Pond as an isolated body of water – "reserved and austere, like a hermit in the woods" (*Walden* 477) – than he could sustain a vision of himself as completely detached from society. Accordingly, in "The Ponds" chapter of *Walden* Thoreau "turns away from defining Walden as a thing unto itself, and

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<sup>10</sup> Thoreau imagined, for instance, that Mount Wachusett "may one day be a Helvellyn" ("A Walk to Wachusett" 144), and he employed the British term "tarn" to describes American bodies of water – Walden Pond included (see *Journal* 2: 187; *Walden* 391).

turns instead to defining Walden in its relations. The chapter, we should remember, is titled ‘The Ponds,’ not ‘The Pond’” (Peck 37).

One of the ways Thoreau came to know his lake country was by meticulously surveying its features, recreationally and professionally. Like Wordsworth, Thoreau was committed to the geological thought of his day, and he appears to have “assume[d] Wordsworth’s place – advancing poetry to keep pace with the ‘advancement of science’” (Rossi 290). Fearing, though, that scientific writings were “in danger of losing the freshness and vigor and readiness to appreciate the real laws of Nature” (*A Week* 296), Thoreau habitually framed his findings in terms that would best convey eternal truths and capture readers’ attentions: “This is a remarkable depth for so small an area,” Thoreau writes in *Walden* after having measured the pond’s frozen depths; “yet not an inch of it can be spared by the imagination . . . I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol” (551). Discovering universal laws encoded in Walden’s depths, Thoreau entreats readers to sound themselves and probe their own inner vastness.

In much the same way that Walden came to symbolize all lakes for Thoreau, the Concord watershed served as a microcosm of the whole. If Thoreau celebrated Concord more than other locales, it was because he considered his native region to be the world in miniature. As Emerson explains:

I think [Thoreau’s] fancy for referring everything to the meridian of Concord did not grow out of any ignorance or depreciation of other longitudes or latitudes, but was rather a playful expression of his conviction of the indifferency of all places, and that the best place for each is where he stands. (“Thoreau” 402)

Convinced that “the only ‘provincialism’ is of the mind” (Christie 265), Thoreau travelled to other longitudes and latitudes in his imagination. In a letter to his future editor H.G.O. Blake on August 9, 1850, Thoreau expressed his fondness for faraway places and cultures: “I, too, love Concord best,” he acknowledged, “but I am glad when I discover, in oceans and wildernesses far away, the material of a million ConCORDS: indeed, I am lost, unless I discover them” (“Letters” 56). Thoreau discovered these distant ConCORDS by reading copious amounts of foreign literature, which lent his own writings “a startling global familiarity” (Christie 21). More than anything, learning about other regions only left Thoreau more assured than ever that “the other side of the globe is but the home of our correspondent” (*Walden* 577).

Like Wordsworth – who promoted experiences of “the common day” (“Preface” to *The Excursion* 113) – Thoreau celebrated the entire planet, including the most forsaken parts of the watershed. By paying tribute to even the lowliest bodies of water, Thoreau heralded the emphasis in modern watershed writing on reconceiving undesirable and/or polluted waterways as attention-worthy (Buell, *Writing* 259). Thoreau particularly cherished swamps: when he wanted to “recreate” himself, Thoreau sought out “the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp” and entered it as “a sacred place, — a *sanctum sanctorum*” (“Walking” 242). Even a “half-stagnant pond-hole” could serve as an encouraging sight for Thoreau, who believed that “they speak to our blood, even these stagnant, slimy pools” (*Journal* 4:102).

Echoing Wordsworth’s description of how tributaries “circulate” through the English Lakes like “veins” (*Guide* 185), Thoreau employs metaphors of blood flow to illustrate the shared vitality between humans and nature. In his 1851 *Journal*, Thoreau

records that the sound of a cataract seems “allied to the circulation in our veins” (2: 155), and he contemplates how the rippling noises of a brook “affects my circulations; methinks my arteries have sympathy with it” (2: 300). For Thoreau as for Wordsworth, this liquid flow symbolizes life’s essential oneness: “Comfortable with the co-existence of unity and difference that is embodied in steam, ice, oceans, raindrops, beer, and in our watery human bodies,” modern watershed consciousness as exemplified by Wordsworth and Thoreau “affirms an inclusive, compassionate politics grounded in the relationality of all identities” (Davidson and Mulligan 75).

Believing that humans should be regarded as “an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature” (“Walking” 225), Thoreau sought to remind his peers of their interdependence with the Concord watershed. Before the transcendentalists began to identify with Walden Pond, the woods around it “lurked in the popular imagination as a place of mystery, with a hint of disrepute and fearsomeness” (Maynard 27). In *Walden*, Thoreau attempts to restore this area’s image and correct decades of misuse by reconceiving himself as its original pioneer. Discussing Walden Woods’ past residents, Thoreau grieves: “Alas! little does the memory of these human inhabitants enhance the beauty of the landscape! Again, perhaps, Nature will try, with me for a first settler” (532).<sup>11</sup> In setting a new example, Thoreau practiced sustainable resource use – something that previous inhabitants had failed to do. As Thoreau describes, Walden Woods’ former occupants had fared poorly because they misused their “natural advantages”: “universally a thirsty race,” they had

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<sup>11</sup> Thoreau’s model of re-settling Walden has since inspired the twentieth-century concept of “watershed reinhabitation,” which challenges people “to become ‘reinhabitory’ – that is, to live and think ‘as if’ they were totally engaged with their place for the long future. This doesn’t mean some return to a primitive lifestyle or utopian provincialism; it simply implies an engagement with community and a search for the sustainable sophisticated mix of economic practices that would enable people to live regionally and yet learn from and contribute to a planetary society” (Snyder 247).

left their “water privileges. . . Ay, the deep Walden Pond and cool Brister’s Spring. . . all unimproved but to dilute their glass” (*Walden* 532).

The phrase “water privileges,” appearing here, is heavily implicated in Thoreau’s model of watershed stewardship and can be found scattered throughout his writings. When Thoreau describes Concord’s waterways as his “water privileges,” he emphasizes that humans and water form a reciprocal alliance: his local waters “grind such grist as I carry to them” (*Walden* 480). Unfortunately, many of Thoreau’s peers viewed their water privileges as exploitable resources. In a particularly striking passage of *Walden*, Thoreau laments that Flint’s Pond was much abused by but was still named after its owner, “some skin-flint, who loved better the reflecting surface of a dollar” than the reflecting surface of his pond (478). “So [Flint’s Pond] is not named for me,” Thoreau writes:

I go not there to see him nor to hear of him; who never *saw* it, who never bathed in it, who never loved it, who never protected it, who never spoke a good word for it, nor thanked God that he had made it. Rather let it be named from the fishes that swim in it, the wild fowl or quadrupeds which frequent it, the wild flowers which grow by its shores, or some wild man or child the thread of whose history is interwoven with its own; not from him who could show no title to it but the deed which a like-minded neighbor or legislature gave him, – him who thought only of its money value; whose presence perchance cursed all the shore; who exhausted the land around it, and would fain have exhausted the waters within it . . . and would have drained and sold it for the mud at its bottom. It did not turn his mill, and it was no *privilege* to him to behold it. (479, Thoreau’s italics)

In these lines, Thoreau asks the key question posed by watershed advocates today: “Simply, how can one protect what one does not love . . .?” (France and Fletcher 104). As a counterexample to Farmer Flint’s profit-driven style of ownership, Thoreau tacitly offers his own version of watershed stewardship – a model by which humans value the intrinsic worth of waterways and form intimate bonds with their biological communities. In this passage, Thoreau also points to the importance that bathing played in his formulation of watershed consciousness. Throughout his life, Thoreau bathed in countless waterways in the hopes that he might “inhabit the planet, and see how I may be naturalized at last” (*Journal 6*: 383). In *Walden*, Thoreau describes his daily dips in the pond as a “religious exercise” (393) – a way to physically reconnect with what Wordsworth would call the “one life” of all things (1805 *Prelude* 2.430). By recounting his own bathing rituals, Thoreau encourages readers to likewise seek bodily contact with waterways and thereby develop a stronger affinity with nature.

Like Wordsworth, Thoreau expressly invited others to share in his watershed consciousness. Recalling Wordsworth’s directive that readers “pursue in imagination the meandering shores” of the English Lakes (*Guide* 182), in *Walden* Thoreau locates Walden Pond’s “deepest resort” in his “thought” (477) and delineates its shorelines in the “mind’s eye” (471). In Thoreau’s writings, watershed consciousness pictures as a literal terrain “of land and water, where men go and come”: located “in the spaces of thought,” this terrain “lies far and fair within,” serving as an internal reflection of the outer landscape (“A Walk to Wachusett” 44). Believing that “reform of the world meant self-reform” (Christie 228), Thoreau maintains that this inner landscape is most in need of attention. Accordingly, he concludes *Walden* by stressing the importance of “home-

cosmography” (577), or symbolic re-immersion within the self: “Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clarke and Frobishers, of your own streams and oceans,” Thoreau directs his readers; “Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought” (578). In “Walking,” Thoreau further encourages people to explore their inner selves by declaring that “in Wildness is the preservation of the world” (239). With this statement, Thoreau calls for the preservation of wild places and their corresponding state of being: wildness of spirit. Thoreau’s sense of “wildness” remains compelling today: “More than anything else,” modern environmentalists assert, “it is the alienation from our own inner wildness that resides at the root of our current disharmonious relationship with our watersheds . . . By loving that which is wild within, we can then love that which is wild without” (France and Fletcher 104). Thoreau’s directive to preserve wildness can thus be followed anywhere, because wildness ultimately lies in human consciousness – “in the minds of all those who have read and understood [Thoreau’s] message” (Nichols 4).

Having internalized Thoreau’s philosophies, many readers have felt called to protect their local environs. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, people have enacted their own Walden experiments in places as varied as Long Island, the Pacific islands, and Amsterdam (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 325-27; L. Wilson 663; Maynard 211). Today, Thoreau’s model of watershed stewardship even reaches communities in China, Pakistan, and Uganda, where youth participate in “World Wide Waldens,” a program run by the Walden Woods Project that “empowers young people from around the world to become environmental stewards and find their ‘Waldens’ – the places in nature that inspire them and need their care and protection” (“World Wide Waldens”). The modern

watershed consciousness that Thoreau helped spawn is therefore decidedly international, making it no longer seem too far-fetched to say (as did Thoreau's fellow townspeople) that "Walden reached quite through to the other side of the globe" (*Walden* 549).

Thoreau's message has also reached people in the most urban locales. In 1907, Sinclair Lewis read *Walden* in New York City's Bryant Park and identified "my Walden 2 feet of bench, my pond a drinking fountain, my forest a few elms and maples" (qtd. in Maynard 222). Coupled with this is the example of W.B. Yeats, whose desire to "arise and go now, and go to Innisfree / And a small cabin build there" was inspired by none other than Thoreau ("The Lake Isle of Innisfree" 1-2). As Yeats records in his *Autobiography*, his father read *Walden* to him when he was young, and he nourished these memories while living in London from 1887-1891:

I had still the ambition, formed in Silgo in my teens, of living in imitation of Thoreau on Innisfree, a little island in Lough Gill, and when walking through Fleet Street very homesick I heard a little tinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem *Innisfree*. (103)

These lines speak to what might be called an urban watershed consciousness. The mere tinkle of a fountain, heard amidst London's crowded streets, is powerful enough to make Yeats "remember lake water" and long to go to Innisfree. The very act of remembering makes it inconsequential, though, whether or not Yeats actually goes there: the felt power of Yeats' Fleet Street experience derives not so much from its association with a pastoral landscape as with the kind of consciousness evoked by Thoreau's *Walden*. As Yeats relates in his "Innisfree" poem, what he really seeks is a sense of "peace" (5) associated

with the sounds of lake water, which can be heard “on the roadway, or on the pavements gray” (11), lapping “in the deep heart’s core” (12). The “homeless voice of the waters” (Wordsworth, 1805 *Prelude* 13.63), heard “in the deep heart’s core”: taken together, these phrases are beautifully descriptive of the watershed consciousness that Wordsworth, Yeats, and Thoreau all inhabited – a consciousness that is accessible anywhere and to anyone.

By serving as model stewards of their native watersheds, Wordsworth and Thoreau laid the groundwork for contemporary writers and artists like Bland Simpson – an English professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill who uses music and creative nonfiction to advocate for the Carolinas’ coasts and swamplands. An admirer of Thoreau, Simpson implores his fellow Carolinians:

Our coastal rivers and estuaries are the real treasures that Sir Walter Raleigh sent us here for, though he may have had other matters and metals in mind. One great test of our collective mettle is the strength of our resolve in the protection and restoration of these waters, to see if together we can make them living models to the world. (*The Inner Islands* 160)

“Living models to the world” – what an apt phrase. One cannot help but feel that it is a phrase worthy of Wordsworth and Thoreau, two Romantic writers who offered their examples in the Lake District and Concord not as “museums of nature” (Hess 165) but as “living models to the world.”

Turning now to examine how these writers protected their “living models” during their own day, in the following chapters I outline Wordsworth’s and Thoreau’s responses to railway incursions and related industrial developments during the 1840s.

## PROTEST AGAINST THE WRONG

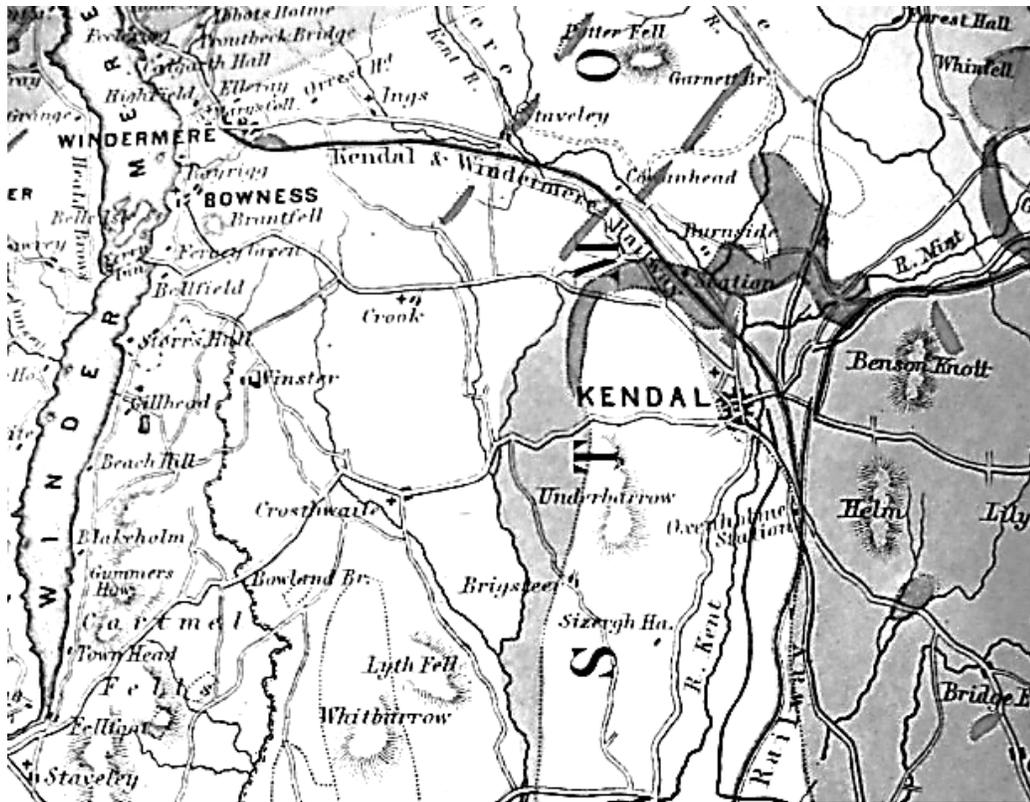


Figure 1. Map of the Kendal and Windermere Railway. Adapted from Garnett, John. *Map of the English Lakes and Adjoining Country Geologically Coloured by John Ruthven of Kendal*. Windermere; London: Ackermann & Co., 1855. (Martineau n.pag.)

In 1844, Wordsworth got wind of an imminent threat to his native watershed: the Kendal and Windermere Railway. One of many lines proposed at the height of “Railway Mania” – a period of rapid railway construction in Britain (Carter 91) – the Kendal and

Windermere Railway was designed to run through the towns of Oxenholme, Kendal, and Windermere as a branch line along the Lancaster and Carlisle Railway (see Fig. 1).

Compelled by his watershed consciousness, Wordsworth campaigned against this scheme through private correspondence and widely-circulated poetry and prose. Although he was unable to prevent the railway, Wordsworth nonetheless provided a rounded defense of his native watershed that better prepared others to protect the Lakes.

### **“Not Against Railways”**

Ironically, when reports of the Kendal and Windermere Railway were first released on August 24, 1844, local newspapers assumed Wordsworth would support it. The *Kendal Mercury* reported: “We have heard a solitary objection stated to the proposal, under the apprehension that the invasion of steam would depreciate the picturesque beauties of the various landscapes which the Railway would traverse.” Insisting that such fears were unfounded, the *Mercury* appealed to “Mr. Wordsworth, the greatest of our living poets, and peculiarly the poet of the Lakes” as someone who “has anticipated such objectors, and hailed the change they dread in the following noble sonnet” (“Railway from Kendal to Windermere”). The *Mercury* appended “Steamboats and Railways,” in which Wordsworth embraces steam and rail transportation as fit subjects of poetry: “Motions and Means, on sea & land at war / With old poetic feeling, not for this / Shall ye, by poets even, be judged amiss!” Wordsworth declares in the opening lines (1-3).

No enemy to technology, Wordsworth had long welcomed scientific advancements.<sup>12</sup> When railways were developed, he therefore gave them his general

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<sup>12</sup> “If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition,” Wordsworth asserts in his “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, “[the Poet] will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science. . . at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself” (292).

approval: in conversation with his friend Caroline Fox on October 6, 1844, Wordsworth admitted “that railroads and all the mechanical achievements of this day are doing wonders for the next generation; indeed, it is the appropriate work of this age and this country, and it is doing it gloriously” (Fox 242). The Kendal and Windermere Railway, though, was a different matter; upon hearing about plans for this line, Wordsworth immediately expressed opposition. Thomas Arnold, brother to the poet Matthew, relates having visited the Wordsworths “at the time when [the railway] plans and prospectuses were flying about” and having encountered the poet in vexation: “His face was flushed, and his waistcoat in disarray, as if he had been clutching at it under the stress of fervid thought. ‘I have been writing a sonnet,’ he said” (41-42). In front of his guests, Wordsworth recited his “Sonnet on the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway,” which he published in *The Morning Post* on October 16, 1844. From its opening lines – “Is then no nook of English ground secure / From rash assault?” (1-2) – to its conclusion, the sonnet is pervaded by a complete sense of indignation. In it, Wordsworth derides the proposed railway as a “blight” (5), a “ruthless change” (6) that threatens to destroy his “paternal fields” (8) and his hopes of peaceful “retirement” (2) in the Lake District.

In an effort “to reach a wider audience” and clarify his stance against the railway, Wordsworth followed up his “Sonnet” by writing two letters to the editor of *The Morning Post* in December 1844 (Wells 39). Over the next few months, Wordsworth edited these materials and circulated them in pamphlet form (Wells 41).<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, he participated in a local anti-railway committee and penned letters to high-level officials, urging them to give the matter due consideration (Thompson 187; Owen and Smyser

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<sup>13</sup> For a full analysis of the changes Wordsworth made to the *Post* letters, pamphlets, and later publications, see Wells 44-50. The *Morning Post* materials quoted here, from Owen and Smyser’s edition of Wordsworth’s *Prose Works*, are the final version of the text – an 1845 trade issue.

331-34). John Edwin Wells summarizes the remarkable energy with which Wordsworth dedicated himself to this task: “The Windermere sonnet and the [*Morning Post*] *Letters* are important in their revelations that the poet, even in his seventy-fifth year, was still a militant enthusiast steadfast in a public cause he felt sure would fail, an able debater presenting reasonable in an admirable constructed prose sentiments ardently felt” (35-36). For all his enthusiasm, though, Wordsworth elicited “a torrent of abuse through the Press” (*Letters* 647).<sup>14</sup> However much Wordsworth contended that he was opposed “not against Railways but against the abuse of them” (*Kendal* 355), many people questioned why someone who had previously lauded railways was now campaigning against one. In turn, a number of his peers accused Wordsworth of being hypocritical, selfish, and unprogressive for protesting the Kendal and Windermere Railway. The sentiments of Scottish writer Charles Mackay are representative: “Mr. Wordsworth has taken a very narrow, exclusive, and aristocratic view of the great civilizer of modern times” (32).

This line of condemnation persists today, validating the *Spectator*'s premonition that Wordsworth's anti-railway publications would form “unwelcome materials for the immortal bard's future biographer” (“Poetry and Railways” 11). Echoing earlier critics, current scholar Scott Hess accuses Wordsworth of having opposed the Kendal and Windermere Railway in order to protect “the poetic identity he had constructed [in the Lake District]” (119). Hess argues that Wordsworth's protest against the railway was “not ecological, but instead aesthetic, social, and cultural” (117), in so far as Wordsworth defended not “flora and fauna, but a high-cultural, aesthetic version of nature” (120). Ultimately, Hess thinks, Wordsworth's campaign set a detrimental precedent: by

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<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth expressed this in a letter to Isabella Fenwick in early January 1845. Fenwick, a close friend to Wordsworth's daughter Dora, lamented the incursion of railways in the Lake District, particularly the Furness line – which she felt was carried “*profanely*” close to Furness Abbey (H.C. Robinson 603).

portraying the Lake District as “a sphere of high culture, which would be violated by the infusion of ‘low’ or popular culture,” Wordsworth’s anti-railway protest “helped to establish the cultural politics and rhetoric of environmentalism” (116).

Certainly, Wordsworth’s campaign against the Kendal and Windermere Railway needs to be contextualized from a socio-historical perspective, as Hess suggests. But Hess misinterprets Wordsworth’s social motivations and wrongly accuses Wordsworth of having “demonize[d]” working-class people in his anti-railway protest (116). Moreover, Hess neglects to consider the possibility that Wordsworth’s campaign was both “ecological” and “social” – that is, “environmental” in the fullest sense. In this chapter, I argue that it was just that. By opposing the Kendal and Windermere Railway as a project that was economically ludicrous, ecologically damaging, and socially unethical, Wordsworth took into account considerations now encapsulated by the “three E’s,” or pillars, of modern-day sustainability: economics, the environment, and equity. In the following sections, I consider how well Wordsworth fares against this modern rubric.

### **Economics**

During the 1840s, the British rail industry was characterized by a high degree of speculation, and proprietors gave varying justifications for new lines (Carter 91-113). When the *Kendal Mercury* and *Westmorland Gazette* released plans for the Kendal and Windermere Railway on August 24, 1844, they informed residents – particularly those in Kendal – that the line would boost their manufacturing, agricultural, and tourist industries (“Railway from Kendal to Windermere”). The railway’s larger purpose, however, was to benefit Britain’s industrial tycoons: based on reports by the Board of Trade, the interests of urban manufacturers were of major consideration during the planning process (Great

Britain 201-2). Within the Lake District, “landowners carefully balanced their interests. Though many disliked the idea of tracks across their property, there was money to be made through preference shares and hikes in the value of land” (Thompson 187).

Rather than participate in the speculative frenzy, Wordsworth eschewed the Kendal and Windermere Railway as a project that he knew would alter the Lake District’s economy in harmful ways. From October–November 1844, Wordsworth questioned the project’s financial viability in letters to William Gladstone, the President of the Board of Trade, and Charles W. Pasley, the Inspector General of the Railways (*Letters* 615-18; 623-24).<sup>15</sup> Rightly predicting that reckless speculation would prove injurious to many investors (Owen and Smyser 362), Wordsworth wrote to Pasley that the scheme was “an absurd Project and cannot but be attended with great loss to [its] shareholders” (*Letters* 624). Wordsworth implored Gladstone, with whom he was well acquainted: “When the subject comes before you officially, as I suppose it will, pray give it more attention than its apparent importance may call for” (*Letters* 616). Gladstone appeared sympathetic but could do regretfully little to stop the nuisance: “It had been my hope,” Gladstone responded, “. . . that the expected traffic between Kendal and Winandermere, when compared with the natural obstacles to be overcome, would not have sustained the project of a Railway” (Hill 611); such, however, was not the case.

By this time, the railway was already backed by strong interest groups and proprietors were in the process of establishing deep economic and political ties in the district. The Kendal and Windermere Railway Corporation even elected a local

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<sup>15</sup> Gladstone had “an extensive personal concern with railways” and sponsored railway legislation, but he strived to keep his private interests separate from his political responsibilities (Simmons and Biddle 176). Pasley, meanwhile, was meticulous and diplomatic in his role as Inspector General, duties for which included inspecting the safety of new lines and investigating accidents. However, in 1846 Pasley lost this post and was not involved with the railway industry thenceforward (Simmons and Biddle 369-70).

businessman, Cornelius Nicholson, to their board “for the express purpose” of having him appointed as mayor of Kendal (C. Nicholson 43). Alongside his cohorts, Nicholson campaigned for the railway by warning residents “that unless they bestirred themselves their manufactures would be stranded” (C. Nicholson 16). Wordsworth, however, denied that the Lake District’s value lay in its manufacturing potential. In his first letter to the *Post*, Wordsworth confirms that the region has little to offer by way of industrial trade: its “manufactures are trifling; mines it has none. . . it has little to send out, and little has it also to receive” (*Kendal* 340-41). The real “staple” of the Lake District, Wordsworth argues, is “its beauty and its character of seclusion and retirement” (*Kendal* 341) – intrinsically valuable features that need to be protected at all costs.

In his materials to the *Post*, Wordsworth insists that the justifications proprietors gave for the line were operating as a “false utilitarian lure” for other, less honorable financial motives (“Sonnet” 7). Utilitarianism, an ethical philosophy propounded by Wordsworth’s contemporary Jeremy Bentham, had become deeply entrenched in early Victorian society; in economic spheres, it served as a guiding principle for determining the worth of goods, services, and natural resources based on “whatever would bring the greatest pleasure (or happiness) to the greatest number” (Greenblatt 1043). Although this philosophy paved the way for many progressive social reforms, it was also vulnerable to abuse: human “pleasure” was often misconstrued as synonymous with wealth, and railway proprietors frequently appropriated utilitarian arguments to advance their own interests (Winter 108). Convinced that utilitarianism was “serving as a mask for cupidity and gambling speculations” (*Kendal* 352), Wordsworth contended that the real incentives of the Kendal and Windermere Railway shareholders were to spawn money-making

ventures in the Lake District like “wrestling matches, horse and boat races without number, and pot-houses and beer-shops” (*Kendal* 346). These activities, Wordsworth knew, would harm not only the Lake District’s human economy but its “economy of nature” – that is, its living ecosystem. Accordingly, in his materials to the *Post* Wordsworth provides a strong environmental defense of the Lakes – one that in many ways anticipates the twentieth-century “antiutilitarian, environmental-protectionist aspect of watershed revaluation” (Buell, *Writing* 259).

### **Environment**

Although we currently live in a time of such environmental devastation that “the incursion of a railway appears to be only a mild threat” (McKusick 75), during the nineteenth century this development proved a critical issue of land and water management. Railways required the extensive consumption of natural resources and posed a risk of ecological fragmentation through construction efforts; they furthermore spurred on high-impact industries such as mining, manufacturing, and tourism, all of which took a cumulative toll on the natural environment (Simmons and Biddle 253-54). Wordsworth was therefore fully justified in claiming that the railway would impose a “rash assault” on the Lake District environs (“Sonnet” 2): he knew that the engineering work would leave “scarifications” on the land (*Kendal* 353), and he bemoaned that “the ravens and eagles should be disturbed in their meditations” (Fox 242).

Wordsworth was especially concerned about the railway’s impact on Windermere, particularly if its terminus was carried along this lake’s head (Wells 37).<sup>16</sup>

The Windermere valley was endeared to Wordsworth from youth and features

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<sup>16</sup> Originally, the line had been planned to terminate at the northmost edge of Lake Windermere. Due to engineering difficulties and opposition from landowners, however, the terminus was later settled at Bowness (Owen and Smyser 331; Nicholson 18. See Fig. 1 for the location of Bowness).

prominently in his 1850 *Prelude*. As schoolboys, Wordsworth and his friends used to “sweep along the plain of Windermere / With rival oars” (2.56-57), stopping along its islands to rest in the shade. While riding horses through the Windermere valley and playing games at local taverns, Wordsworth developed a deep sense of intimacy with this area and the entire natural world: as the sun rose above the valley and the moon hovered between the hills, Wordsworth felt fully alive and endeared to “the common range of visible things” (2.176). Gradually, his experiences in Windermere made him value nature “for her own sake” (2.203) rather than as a backdrop to human affairs.

By the time the Kendal and Windermere Railway was proposed, this valley was already threatened: residents had constructed artificial embankments at Windermere, erasing its original shoreline. “Believing, as he did, that nature was her own best designer” (Thompson 162), Wordsworth mourned: “Could not the margin of this noble island be given back to nature?” (*Guide* 209). In his second letter to the *Post*, Wordsworth makes an analogy to show how the railway will further damage this area. Recounting how a new military road completely altered the Simplon Pass in Italy, Wordsworth suggests that Windermere faces a similar fate. During Wordsworth’s first walking tour of Italy in 1790, he observed that along the Simplon Pass the brook and the original road – an old muleteer track – were “fellow-travellers”; the waterfalls, rocks, winds, and streams appeared to him “all like workings of one mind” (*Kendal* 353; 354). When Wordsworth crossed the Simplon Pass three decades later, however, the new road had put an end to this “fellowship,” and “the stream had dwindled into comparative insignificance, so much had Art interfered with and taken the lead of Nature” (*Kendal* 354). In making this analogy, Wordsworth emphasizes how construction efforts disturbed

not only the physical layout of the Simplon Pass but his consciousness of it as an organic and harmonious whole. The Kendal and Windermere Railway, Wordsworth knew, would impact the Lake District in a similar way by disturbing its delicate ecosystem – its living matrix of “symmetrical parts uniting in a consistent whole” (*Guide* 181).

Fearing that the beauty of the watershed would become its downfall, Wordsworth bemoans in his second letter to the *Post*: “Alas, alas, if the lakes are to pay this penalty for their own attractions!” (*Kendal* 351). Wordsworth here touches on a painful irony: that the most prized natural scenes are often also the most endangered. The kind of mass tourism being promoted by the Kendal and Windermere Railway proponents compounded this irony by threatening to completely exhaust the natural environment. In his first letter to the *Post*, Wordsworth calls it “absurd” to ferry people directly to the Lakes by rail “if the unavoidable consequence must be a great disturbance of the retirement, and in many places a destruction of the beauty of the country, which the parties are come in search of” (*Kendal* 346). With this comment Wordsworth characterizes the railway as a self-defeating project, one that endangers the very “[object] of its appreciation” (Mulvihill 320) – the Lake District landscape itself.

Moreover, Wordsworth viewed the mode of rail travel as, in itself, antithetical to developing genuine appreciation for the Lake District. As the “saving of time” became prioritized with the emergence of railways (Knight 18), Wordsworth feared that tourists were losing out on up-close and bodily experiences of the natural world. He criticized those who toured the Lakes by rail, “most of them thinking that they do not fly fast enough through the country which they have come to see” (*Kendal* 353). Such a rushed process would have been a kind of transgression to Wordsworth, who understood that

“the impatient eye, and travel as a kind of organized visual impatience, undermines the proper imaginative rapport with nature, a reciprocal and patiently developed communication with the land” (Koelb 112). As one of the first people to use the word “tourist” (Owen and Smyser 358), Wordsworth felt that the “very word precludes the notion of a railway” (*Kendal* 341): real touring was to be done on foot, a circuitous journey of venturing out and returning home. As someone used to walking “thirty and more miles a day, as poet, traveller, Stamp Distributor, or some combination of them,” Wordsworth was passionate about walking and had long promoted low-impact walking tours in the Lake District (McCracken 3).<sup>17</sup> Hence, in his letters to the *Post* Wordsworth questions why railway proprietors would want to “grudge” the tourist “a two hours’ walk across the skirts of the beautiful country that he was desirous of visiting” (*Kendal* 345), since this trek was the very experience Wordsworth found integral to enjoying nature.

Wordsworth further voices his environmental concerns in two sonnets against the Kendal and Windermere Railway: the aforementioned “Sonnet on the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway” and “Proud Were Ye, Mountains, When, in Times of Old,” included at the end of Wordsworth’s second letter to the *Post*. In both poems, Wordsworth identifies his native watershed as a co-campaigner, a dignified actor in its own right: he calls upon the Lakes to “Speak, passing winds; ye torrents, with your strong / And constant voice, protest against the wrong” (“Sonnet” 13-14), and he appeals for the “Mountains, and Vales, and Floods . . . / To share the passion of a just disdain” (“Proud Were Ye” 13-14). Conducting a conversation, as it were, with his environs, Wordsworth portrays the Lake District as a living entity – one whose complaints merit being heard.

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<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth’s model of the peripatetic, “the art of strolling for pleasure and instruction,” was enthusiastically emulated by Britons and foreigners alike, including Henry David Thoreau (Maynard 33).

Scott Hess, however, condemns Wordsworth's invocation of "the voice of nature" as a sort of faux-environmentalism. In reference to Wordsworth's "Sonnet on the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway," Hess argues: "Wordsworth here begins a long tradition of environmental protests that appropriate the voice of nature to advocate on their own behalf, in a way that disguises the specific social and cultural politics of those positions" (119). Wordsworth's real motivations for protesting the railway, Hess insists, were to safeguard the Lake District's status as a privileged landscape and keep it inviolate from working-class tourists' cultural "pollution" (127). Certainly, Hess is right to point out that Wordsworth had a personal stake in the matter, given that Wordsworth worried about how the railway would affect his "schemes of retirement" in the Lake District ("Sonnet" 2). But Wordsworth's private reasons for campaigning against the Kendal and Windermere Railway were neither disguised nor discriminatory, nor were they subsuming. Rather, Wordsworth opposed the railway on behalf of social motivations that were arguably just as progressive as his environmental attitudes.

### **Equity**

In his anti-railway campaign, Wordsworth confronted a number of equity issues that continue to characterize modern-day watershed initiatives (Kenney 499). "More clearly than many modern preservationists, Wordsworth [was] keenly aware of the class issues implicit in his stance of resistance to speculative commercial development" (McKusick 76), and he protested the railway on behalf of general public welfare.

At the outset, Wordsworth was concerned about how the railway would alter the Lake District's social fabric. He feared that "the very poor of this locality" would be adversely impacted (*Kendal* 352), since the railway would drive out some of the Lake

District's most charitable families – families who, like the Wordsworths, befriended unemployed and orphaned individuals (Owen and Smyser 364). Moreover, the railway would prove injurious by attracting an “incursion of *nouveau riche* exurbanites who care nothing about the local community” to the Lake District (McKusick 76). The main social issue that Wordsworth directed his attention to, though, was equitable access. As Wordsworth recounts in his letters to the *Post*, proponents asserted that the Kendal and Windermere Railway would make the Lakes more accessible for the poor (*Kendal* 341). Cornelius Nicholson claimed that the railway would be “signally useful to the working classes, in drawing them away from the haunts of vice and intemperance, and open out to them the beauties of nature” (C. Nicholson 31), and factory-owners in Yorkshire and Lancashire were even talking of “sending, at their own expense, large bodies of their workmen, by railway, to the banks of Windermere” (*Kendal* 349). During the 1830s and 1840s (known in Britain as “The Time of Troubles”), mass rail excursions had, indeed, become increasingly prevalent. As working-class residents in industrial cities confronted increasingly horrendous living and working conditions (Greenblatt 983), factory owners and charity groups began to ferry laborers “to the countryside, seashore, or special events such as temperance rallies or national exhibitions” in the hopes of exposing them to more wholesome and uplifting leisure activities (Hess 128). Seemingly benign, these working-class excursions were nonetheless greatly debated: many Britons wondered, “were [these excursions] desirable socially, or were they no more than an incentive to the poor to waste their money?” (Simmons and Biddle 150).

Convinced of the latter, Wordsworth refused to let the Lake District become another destination for mass working-class excursions. In his letters to the *Post*,

Wordsworth questions whether a railway is even necessary for this purpose: “Look at the facts,” he exhorts readers; “The Lakes are. . . at present of very easy access for all persons,” since other railways already brought tourists within four to nine miles of major lakes (*Kendal* 341). Furthermore, Wordsworth argues that *no one* can benefit from a rushed, one-time experience of the Lake District, since it takes “a vivid perception” to appreciate this area – a perception that can only be developed through “processes of culture and opportunities of observation in some degree habitual” (*Kendal* 343). Assured that “all the ordinary varieties of rural nature” can “find an easy way to the affections of all men” (*Kendal* 343), Wordsworth encourages working-class families to instead “make little excursions. . . among neighboring fields,” which will provide them a more intimate experience of the natural world (*Kendal* 344). To show that familiar scenes are often the most inspiring, Wordsworth appeals to the example of Robert Burns – a Scottish poet who, despite being well-travelled, writes best “when he is describing objects with which his position in life allowed him to be familiar” (*Kendal* 344). These arguments are exactly what we might have expected from Wordsworth, who devoted a lifetime to the Lakes and encouraged others to revere their own regions more deeply.

In his second letter to the *Post*, Wordsworth asserts that mass excursion trips are, moreover, degrading: “Packing off men after this fashion, is, in fact, treating them like children” (*Kendal* 350). Insisting that factory owners patronize workers by sending them on mass excursions, Wordsworth maintains that better wages and working conditions would provide a much greater service to urban laborers than a railway: these measures would make workers “more at liberty to make at [their] own cost excursions in any direction which might be most inviting to [them]” (*Kendal* 350). Wordsworth mentions

that urban laborers would especially benefit from a Ten Hours' Bill, which would reduce their working hours to ten hours a day (*Kendal* 350). This bill, supported within the factory reform movement, wasn't passed until 1847; by promoting it, Wordsworth aligned himself with humanitarian politics (Owen and Smyser 363; Greenblatt 1000).

Unfortunately, a number of Wordsworth's contemporaries failed to grasp his intentions. One of Wordsworth's most vocal critics was Richard Monckton Milnes, a literary patron and Conservative parliamentarian who published a mocking poem entitled "Projected Railways in Westmoreland, in Answer to Mr. Wordsworth's Late Sonnet" on November 30, 1844. Charging Wordsworth of hypocrisy for wanting to restrict access to a district he had helped popularize with his writings, Milnes vows that the railway *will* come, and when it does, Wordsworth "cans't hardly grudge that crowded streets send out / In Sabbath glee the sons of care and doubt, / To read these scenes by light of [his] own lays" (6-8).<sup>18</sup> These kinds of comments distressed Wordsworth: "They actually accuse me of desiring to interfere with the innocent enjoyments of the poor, by preventing [the Lake District] becoming accessible to them by a railway," he expressed in consternation to his friend Lady Richardson on November 15, 1844 (Grosart 448). In his *Post* materials, Wordsworth answers these accusations by insisting that he opposed the railway not for his own sake but "for the sake of every one, however humble his condition" who came to the Lakes with "an eye to perceive, and a heart to feel and worthily enjoy" (*Kendal* 355).

Arguably, Wordsworth's best defense came from Hartley Coleridge, who vindicated Wordsworth in a letter to the *Kendal Mercury* on November 23, 1844. A

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<sup>18</sup> In a letter to Henry Crabb Robinson on February 16, 1845, Barron Fields – an acquaintance of Wordsworth's – similarly interrogated: "How can [Wordsworth] complain that he has at last, by his Lake and Mountain poetry, created a desire for realizing some of those beautiful descriptions of scenery and elements, in the inhabitants of Liverpool & Manchester, which may possibly bring them in crowds by Railway to Windermere?" (H.C. Robinson 591-92).

proponent of free trade, Coleridge supported railways in general but questioned the necessity of a line in the Lake District. In his letter, Coleridge outlines Wordsworth's vested interest in the Lake District and stresses: "Mr. Wordsworth does not object to the railroad because it will bring a poorer class to see the Lakes"; rather, "he would have [the Lakes] remain what they were when they evoked and realised his young imagination." Coleridge concludes: "I do not subscribe to all Mr. Wordsworth's objections but I believe that he objects not for himself, but for nature and mankind" (Wells 38). A century and a half later, this statement remains the most succinct appraisal of Wordsworth's anti-railway protest, one that best captures Wordsworth's model of environmentalism.

This defense was not enough, however, to change legislators' opinions: in April 1845 the Board of Trade approved plans for the railway, and within two years the line from Kendal to Windermere was completed (Carter 104). In their report, the Board rebuked the terms of opposition by which Wordsworth was accused of rallying for the railway, finding "wholly untenable" any argument that "goes to deprive the artisan . . . . [the opportunity for] fresh air, and the healthful holiday which sends him back to work refreshed and invigorated" (Great Britain 221). In reality, it took decades before working-class tourists gained the socioeconomic means to travel to places like the Lake District (Hess 128). Nonetheless, the railway spurred tourism and "stimulated development in just the way its backers had hoped it would" by attracting new residents and upper-class tourists to the area (Thompson 194). As Wordsworth had foreseen, the railway ultimately benefited the rich rather than the poor, and it altered the Windermere valley forever. The railway even prompted the publication of new guidebooks to the Lake District such as Harriet Martineau's 1855 *Guide to the English Lakes*, which opens by stating that:

A few years ago there was only one meaning to the word WINDERMERE. It then meant a lake lying among mountains, and so secluded that it was some distinction even for the travelled man to have seen it. Now, there is a Windermere railway station, and a Windermere post-office and hotel; — a thriving village of Windermere and a populous locality . . . what used to be pointed out now requires a wholly new description. (3)

Wordsworth, who died in 1850, would have lamented these changes. Unlike Martineau, who had “no fear of injury, moral or economical, from the great recent change, — the introduction of railways” (*Guide* 49),<sup>19</sup> Wordsworth knew that one development left unchecked leads to another, until a place once familiar becomes unrecognizable.

Although Wordsworth was unable to prevent the Kendal and Windermere Railway, it is not true that “his efforts all proved vain” (Owen and Smyser 334), though. As it turns out, Wordsworth had known all along that he would not be able to stop the line from being constructed, but he continued his campaign in the hopes of discouraging future developments in the Lake District (H.C. Robinson 580; Wordsworth, *Letters* 658-59).<sup>20</sup> Wordsworth’s example ultimately inspired successful campaigns by later preservationists, verifying Henry Crabb Robinson’s prediction that Wordsworth’s anti-railway materials would take on “a permanent value” in the future (H.C. Robinson 583).

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<sup>19</sup> Martineau had long criticized Wordsworth for opposing the railway: “It was rather a serious matter to hear the poet’s denunciations of the railway, and to read his well-known sonnets on the desecration of the Lake region by the unhallowed presence of commonplace strangers” Martineau relates in her 1859 obituary on Mary Wordsworth; “and it was truly painful to observe how the scornful and grudging mood spread among the young, who thought they were agreeing with Wordsworth in claiming the vales and lakes as a natural property for their enlightened selves” (H.C. Robinson 829). As John Edwin Wells shows, Martineau’s claims merit reproach: “In estimating this report one must not ignore the essential antagonism between Miss Martineau and the Wordsworths. . . her misrepresentation of [Wordsworth’s] sonnets; [and] the exaggeration of the ill-influence – if any – on the attitudes of the young of the district” (39).

<sup>20</sup> Wordsworth was especially worried that the Kendal and Windermere Railway would be linked up with the Cockermouth to Keswick Railway. This latter railway had proven especially distressing for William and Mary Wordsworth, since its construction activities had destroyed their son John’s vicarage in Cockermouth (see Wordsworth, *Letters* 640-41; *Letters of Mary Wordsworth* 274; Wells 43).

## Wordsworth's Prophetic Understanding

The present-day state of the Lake District confirms many of Wordsworth's premonitions about what would happen as a result of industrial incursions. Out of all the Lakes, "the scenery surrounding Windermere clearly bears the stamp of man" (Taylor 17); and Windermere's water quality has seriously diminished following railway construction and residential growth (Barker et al. 260-77). The way tourists interact with this area has also changed for the worst: today, most visitors engage in consumerist and sedentary activities rather than explore the Lakes by walking (Sharpley 165). For having foreseen these changes, "Wordsworth was prophetic in his understanding that unlimited transportation access, recreational development, and suburban sprawl will ultimately ruin the rural landscape for everyone who inhabits it, both rich and poor" (McKusick 76).

Sharing this conviction, Wordsworth's successors have appealed to his example while campaigning against further developments. When plans to extend the Kendal and Windermere Railway were introduced in 1876, Lake District advocates faced similar arguments to those Wordsworth had confronted before (Hess 142). Robert Somervell, a Lake District native, protested against this scheme in Wordsworthian terms by professing that working-class tourists would benefit not by being given "occasional and hurried glimpses of strange beauty" but "by dignifying the labour, and adorning the surroundings of their daily life" (Somervell 22-23). Joining Somervell was John Ruskin, an art critic who had become known as "the new Sage of the Lakes" (N. Nicholson 185). In his "Preface" to Somervell's *Protest*, Ruskin "[takes] up Wordsworth's environmental protest against the 'false utilitarian lure' of accessibility and profit" (Crook 133): Ruskin argues that the Lake District has few mineral resources, is already accessible, and requires more

pressing projects like road maintenance (4-6). Like Wordsworth before him, Ruskin argues, moreover, that the “real object” of proprietors is not to benefit the poor but to “[make] a dividend out of [them]” by establishing lucrative businesses in the Lake District such as alehouses (9). Ruskin takes pains to clarify that he opposed the railway neither because he lived in the district “nor because I can find no other place to remember Wordsworth by,” but in the interest of everyone “[for] whom the sweet landscapes of England are yet precious” (2). Despite having made these claims, Ruskin was nonetheless parodied by the media in much the same way as Wordsworth had been – as a man of genius singlehandedly battling the oncoming tide of development (see Fig. 2).

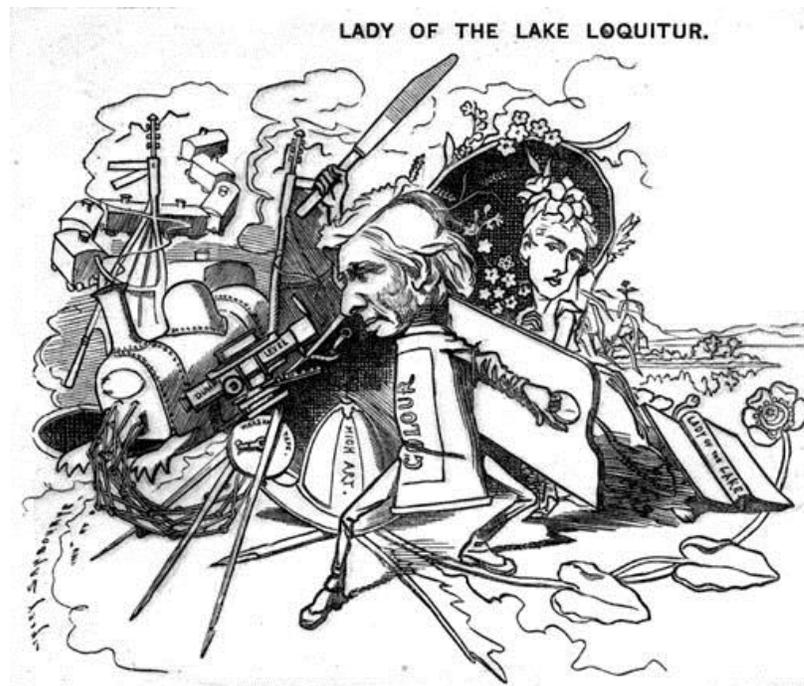


Figure 2. Punch cartoon “Lady of the Lake Loquitor,” showing John Ruskin battling railways in the Lake District with the tools of “High Art” and “Colour.”<sup>21</sup>  
*Punch*. 5 Feb. 1876. 34. *Open Library*. Web. 21. Jan. 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Accompanying the cartoon is a poem by the editor of *Punch* in which the representative voice of the Lake District (the “Lady of the Silver Lake”) insists: “Where Wordsworth roved let not the wheels of Trade, / Unresting as Ixion’s, made fresh raid” (46-47). There seems to be a sense of genuine concern underlying *Punch*’s satire, though. As James Winter suggests: “Deep in the culture of the time was [the] belief that nature’s sacred places must be preserved from desecration. Even Mr. Punch could be serious through his comic mask on such a subject” (179). The “Lady of the Lake” poem was taken seriously enough to be reprinted in Robert Somervell’s *Protest Against the Extension of Railways* (49-51).

Somervell's and Ruskin's efforts seem to have paid off, since the 1876 railway proposal was abandoned as "financially untenable" (Hess 143). Shortly thereafter, though, both of these men campaigned against yet another development scheme – one that posed a direct threat to waterways in the Lake District. In 1877, the Manchester Corporation petitioned to extract water from Thirlmere, a lake in Cumbria, to supply their city's growing needs. Requiring the construction of a large dam and a nearly 100-mile-long aqueduct, this project was mainly justified in the name of public health. Proponents also appropriated the aesthetic perspective, though, by arguing that construction efforts would enhance the surrounding landscape (Thompson 229-241). In a letter to *The Times* on October 20, 1877, the Manchester Waterworks' chairman, John Grave, proclaimed that "as the beauty of a lake consists, of course, in its water, it is clear that the beauty of Thirlmere will be doubled [from the damming]" (Harwood 226). These claims were simply misguided: while doubling Thirlmere's size (see Fig. 3), the Manchester Corporation drowned homes, footpaths, and roads; restricted access to the lake; planted neighboring hillsides with non-native trees; and erased the lake's natural shoreline, creating instead "an ugly rim. . . devoid of vegetation" (Thompson 237).



Figure 3. Thirlmere before and after being converted into a reservoir. The image on the left is dated from the late 1880s, while the image on the right (dated from around 1925) shows Thirlmere at maximum design capacity. Images courtesy of United Utilities.

Wordsworth – who, as we recall, felt that “it is much more desirable. . . that lakes should be numerous, and small or middle-sized, than large” (*Guide* 180) – would have scoffed at the Manchester officials’ arguments. Taking a cue from the former Poet Laureate, Lake District enthusiasts campaigned against the Thirlmere scheme in anti-utilitarian terms, and they frequently invoked Wordsworth’s legacy while doing so. In a January 1878 article expressing opposition against the Thirlmere scheme, *The Gentleman’s Magazine* presciently remarked: “There was a certain sonnet written once, which has a very direct reference to this utilitarian invasion,” referring to Wordsworth’s “Sonnet on the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway” (Harwood 264). By making such appeals, preservationists temporarily stalled construction plans; nonetheless, the Thirlmere Water Bill was finally approved in 1879. Five years later, Manchester enjoyed access to 50 million gallons of water extracted daily from Thirlmere (Beard and Berry 6).

Although Lake District advocates did not win this battle, the lessons they learned while campaigning against the Thirlmere scheme helped them achieve concrete victories in the future. Preservationists realized that areas of the Lake District need to be defended not in isolation but as part of “a much larger landscape” and that successful campaigns require “a more established national approach to landscape protection” (Ritvo 24; Brodie 81). Consequently, in 1883 advocates formed the Lake District Defense Society (LDDS), conceived as “a permanent watch-dog organisation with ample funds for fighting undesirable developments” (Gaze 30). Fittingly, Hardwick Canon Rawnsley proposed the LDDS’ formation to none other than the Wordsworth Society, convinced as Rawnsley was “that anything that pertains to the English Lake District has an interest for members

of a Wordsworth Society” (Rawnsley 45).<sup>22</sup> Twelve years later, Rawnsley and his associates formed the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest of Natural Beauty, and in 1904 this group appealed for the Lake District to be designated a national park. This plea was finally answered by the 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act, an act that reflects many of the core values expressed in Wordsworth’s *Guide to the Lakes* (Bate 48). For having defended the Lake District as an integrated unit and declared it “a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy” (*Guide* 225), Wordsworth thus inspired not only the campaigns led by Somervell, Ruskin, and Rawnsley but Britain’s entire system of national parks.

Wordsworth’s calls for preserving the Lake District also resemble and may have directly influenced Henry David Thoreau’s appeals for conservation. Scholars note strong similarities, for instance, between Wordsworth’s “national property” statement and Thoreau’s claim in *The Maine Woods* (1864) that America should have its own “national preserves” (Moldenhauer 276; Garrard 195). Thoreau’s conservation ethos emerged, like Wordsworth’s, as a response to modern industrial developments, which were fast altering New England’s physical and cultural landscapes. For Thoreau as for Wordsworth, “it was the railroad more than anything else that threatened to change the character of [his native watershed]” (Maynard 55), and it was against the railway and its sister developments that Thoreau voiced his resistance in Wordsworthian fashion.

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<sup>22</sup> Rawnsley was an especially avid fan of Wordsworth, and he frequently appealed to Wordsworth’s example while campaigning against development schemes in the Lake District (Bate 50).

## TOO PURE TO HAVE A MARKET VALUE

While Wordsworth campaigned against the Kendal and Windermere Railway, the Boston-to-Fitchburg Railroad was constructed between Concord and the capital (Cummings 46). During 1845-47, Thoreau watched the trains' daily comings and goings as they rolled past his pond-side cabin "about a hundred rods south" (*Walden* 414). Their operations simultaneously exhilarated and alarmed him: though Thoreau felt "more like a citizen of the world" at the sight of locomotives rushing by with goods bound for faraway locales (*Walden* 417), he remained ever skeptical about railways' impacts on human beings and the natural environment.

One of Thoreau's most heated objections to the railway – delivered with an anger that "paralleled that of Wordsworth . . . on hearing of the projected Kendal and Windermere Railway" (Maynard 55) – came in response to the extraction of water sources brought about by railway interests. During the late 1840s, Fitchburg Railroad proprietors not only purchased a local spring "to feed the locomotives' steam engines" (Maynard 54); they also sold land and water rights to commercial ice harvesters, who brought Walden's ice to the Boston harbor via the locomotives' beds. At a time of rapid industrial expansion and intense environmental destruction, these schemes – particularly

the ice-harvesting episode – tested Thoreau’s belief that his native waters were “too pure to have a market value” (*Walden* 481). In *Walden*, Thoreau objects to the social and ecological impacts of water extraction projects, and he extrapolates these concerns to a discussion of how all life is deeply enmeshed at the global scale.

### **New England’s Waters: A Tank for the Iron Horse to Drink At**

With memories of the Exxon Valdez and BP oil spills fresh on people’s minds in the twenty-first century, no one can deny just how devastating industrialization has proven to the world’s waterways. Records verify that America’s aquatic communities were already threatened two hundred years ago, due in large part to the budding rail industry. In New England, improvements in rail transportation enabled sectors such as the textile industry to likewise expand and increase production. These industrial operations “spawned water- and airborne diseases, fouled the air with smoke, and devastated fish runs,” polluting waterways “with runoff from eroded forests, pasture manure, textile refuse, dyes, and sewage” (Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions* xx).

At Walden Pond, a relatively contained body of water, industrial activities left a clear hydrological imprint. The Fitchburg Railroad and subsequent developments altered shoreline erosion and sedimentation patterns, thereby diminishing the pond’s water quality (Winkler 210). The railway’s environmental impacts deeply upset Thoreau, who lamented in his *Journal* on June 17, 1853: “That devilish Iron Horse. . . [has] browsed off all the wood around the pond” and “with the breath of his nostrils pollut[ed] the air” (5: 266; see *Walden* 476 for a corresponding version). In the same journal entry, Thoreau grieved that Fitchburg Railroad proprietors had extracted water from Concord’s Boiling Spring, a body of water that Thoreau often visited for spiritual and physical refreshment.

Writing that it had been “defiled” and turned into “a tank for the Iron Horse to drink at” (*Journal 5*: 266), Thoreau registered Boiling Spring’s extraction as an irreverent act.

Thoreau responded in similarly vehement terms to the proposed extraction of Walden Pond, rumors about which were circulating during June 1853. “The villagers, who scarcely know how [Walden Pond] lies, instead of going to the pond to bathe or drink, are thinking to bring its water to the village in a pipe,” Thoreau recorded – “to form a reservoir as high as the roofs of the houses, to wash their dishes and be their scullion. . . to earn their Walden by the turning of a cock or drawing of a plug, as they draw cider from a cask” (*Journal 5*: 266). With these comments, Thoreau objects to the lack of reciprocity implicit in water extraction projects: instead of *going to* the pond and immersing themselves in its depths, as Thoreau did habitually, his fellow townspeople planned to make the water *come to them* and “be their scullion.” Fortunately for Thoreau, the proposal to convert Walden Pond into a reservoir never came to fruition; nonetheless, Thoreau *did* witness the extraction of Walden’s waters – albeit in frozen form.

### **Walden Pond and the Global Ice Trade**

In *Walden*, Thoreau recounts how during his second winter at the pond “a hundred Irishmen, with Yankee overseers, came from Cambridge every day to get out the ice” (557). Arriving in stark contrast to preceding pages – in which Thoreau portrays himself pleasantly conversing with fishermen, surveying Walden’s depths, and examining its ice formations (*Walden* 547-56) – Thoreau’s account of the ice-harvesting episode has been variously interpreted. Walter Harding contends that Thoreau welcomed the ice-harvesting operations enthusiastically, since “here was one commercial venture that could do no harm to [Thoreau’s] ponds or his woods” (189). Certainly, Thoreau was

fascinated by the technical procedures of ice cutting, as Harding observes (189); but by no means did Thoreau wholeheartedly approve of the ice harvesters' work. As Lauriat Lane helpfully explains: "Of course, Thoreau got what pleasure he could from the unusual spectacle, as he always did, but Walter Harding is surely unjustified in assuming from this that Thoreau was 'delighted' at the invasion" (187).

To appreciate the truth of Lane's words, Thoreau's account must be examined with respect to the nineteenth-century global ice trade. During the early 1800s, Frederic Tudor – an upper-class Bostonian – created a market for natural ice in places where none had existed before, against all odds, and under considerable financial risk (Cummings 7-16; Weightman 1-12). By the century's end, millions of tons of ice were being harvested from America, conveyed along railways, and shipped to places as far away as Cuba, Martinique, England, and India (L. Simpson 59-66). Thoreau was familiar with many of the sites where Tudor and his competitors harvested ice,<sup>23</sup> but only after railways were developed during the 1840s did Thoreau witness this industry at home. On February 5, 1847, Fitchburg Railroad proprietors sold Frederic Tudor rights to Walden Pond,<sup>24</sup> which until then had "not been exploited for Boston's ice trade, as it was too far from the port to be commercially useful" (Weightman 124). According a contemporary report in the *Concord Freeman*, Tudor then unleashed a team of 50-60 workers at Walden and directed them to harvest 800-1000 tons of ice a day ("Ice"). It was an in-and-out job, so ill-conducted that it completely unnerved Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had sold Tudor his

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<sup>23</sup> Ice from Wenham Lake – a lake referenced in Thoreau's *Journals* (7: 483; 7: 484) – was especially popular during the nineteenth-century ice trade (Cummings 47-48). Whether or not Thoreau was aware of the harvests at Wenham, he was certainly familiar with those at Fresh Pond, considering that he conversed with Tudor's workers about their operations there (*Walden* 559).

<sup>24</sup> In exchange for permission to convey ice on their trains, Tudor released the rail company of liability for damage they had caused to his holdings at Fresh Pond (Rowlands 2).

shore rights at Walden. In a letter to his father, Emerson reported that this area was quickly so overrun by Tudor's workers that he feared "[Tudor] will spoil my lot for purposes for which I chiefly value it" (*Letters* 383).

Meanwhile, Thoreau witnessed the operations up close from his pond-side cabin. Every morning after the workers arrived from Cambridge "with a peculiar shriek from the locomotive" (*Walden* 557), Thoreau watched them cut large slabs of ice, haul these cakes on shore, and stack them at a spot he dubbed "Ice Fort Cove" (see Fig. 4). After sixteen days the workers departed for good, leaving behind a ten-thousand-ton, thirty-five-foot-high pile of ice that did not fully melt until a year and a half later (*Walden* 558). Speculating as to why this heap "never got to market," Thoreau surmised that "the ice was found not to keep so well as was expected" (*Walden* 558); in reality, the Tudor Company let this pile go to waste after it deemed Walden's ice to be mere surplus stock (Cummins 52).

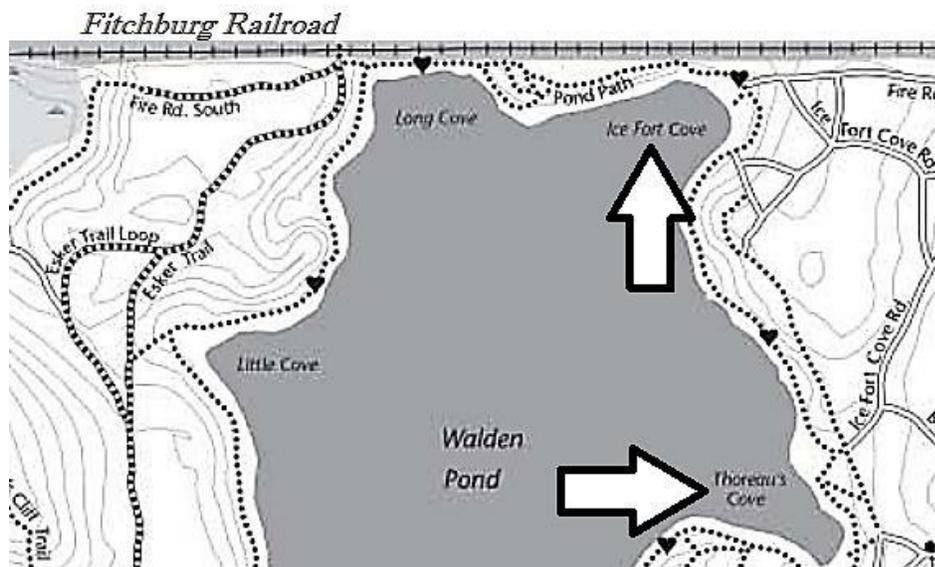


Figure 4. Map of Walden Pond, showing Thoreau's Cove about a fifth of a mile away from Ice Fort Cove. Adapted from Walden Pond State Reservation Trail Map. Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation. 2012. Web. 23 Nov. 2013.

Although Thoreau dedicates only a few pages of *Walden* to this episode, his narrative has remained one of the most compelling accounts of the nineteenth-century ice trade (L. Simpson 75). This passage also offers a strong demonstration of modern watershed consciousness, as it details Thoreau's reaction to a "rash assault" of sorts in his native district (Wordsworth, "Sonnet" 2). Like Wordsworth's protest against the Kendal and Windermere Railway, Thoreau's response to the ice industry incorporates the "three E's" of sustainability: economics, the environment, and equity.

### **Economics**

In response to the economic considerations of extraction schemes, Thoreau promoted a non-instrumentalist view of watersheds – one that "extends intrinsic value to the nonhuman natural world" (Snyder 241). In America as in England, such a viewpoint was becomingly increasingly rare, particularly with respect to water resources. During the nineteenth century, industrialists championed an increasingly domineering attitude towards America's waterways, and water law evolved "in a way that reduced water, more and more, to an abstract commodity" (Steinberg 16). Water's commodification, coupled with the rising incidence of extraction schemes, indicated to Thoreau a deeply problematic rapport between humans and the natural world. During a boat trip through the Concord watershed in April 1856, Thoreau grieved: "How much would be subtracted from the day if the water was taken away! This liquid transparency, of melted snows partially warmed, spread over the russet surface of the earth! It is certainly important that there be some priests, some worshippers of Nature" (*Journal* 8: 264).

Unlike Thoreau, who revered water with quasi-religious devotion, industrial harvesters appreciated ice for purely commercial reasons. Frederic Tudor, for instance,

once rationalized his business ventures by remarking that “ice is so beautiful a thing in countries where it has never been seen before that even penny-saving Martinique creoles cannot help buying [it]” (qtd. in Cummings 141). In New England, Tudor and his fellow industrialists set new legal precedents that helped turn water into a commodity: with “the apportioning of ownership of ponds, the building of the railroad and the enormous storage capacity of the ice-houses,” property values at harvesting sites rose, forcing industrialists to purchase water rights from riparian owners for the first time ever (Weightman 122). In 1859, Tudor reported that “water on the shores of ponds is now *leased*, and is nearly as valuable, in convenient localities, as the land itself” (Tudor 56).

Having valued water resources for contrasting reasons, Frederic Tudor and Thoreau benefited from Walden Pond in vastly different ways. Although Walden served as a “place for business . . . a good port and a good foundation” for both (*Walden* 339), the insights Thoreau gained at his pond-side cabin ultimately proved much more valuable than the \$300 it cost Tudor to purchase Walden’s rights (Rowlands 2). Whereas Tudor never really gained back his investment since most of Walden’s ice was left behind, Thoreau profited from Walden Pond for life. As Thoreau intimates in his “Conclusion” to *Walden*, the pond’s ice even provided a model for his literary vocation:

I do not suppose that I have attained to obscurity, but I should be proud if no more fatal fault were found with my pages on this score than was found with the Walden ice. Southern customers objected to its blue color, which is the evidence of its purity, as if it were muddy, and preferred the Cambridge ice, which is white, but tastes of weeds. The purity which men love is like the mists which envelop the earth, and not like the azure ether beyond. (581)

In these lines, Thoreau suggests that ice should be valued not for commercial reasons but for its intrinsic ability to reflect the heavens. Thoreau – who examined “the currents of life in the crystal” and appreciated ice as an especially meaningful “poetic model” (E. Wilson 184; 183) – held his writings to the same standards, “proud if no more fatal fault were found with [his] pages” than with pure, natural ice.

### **Environment**

From an environmental standpoint, the scale of the Tudor Company’s operations must have completely baffled Thoreau. Previously, local villagers had extracted Walden’s ice in minimal amounts, but even these small-scale harvests troubled Thoreau. In *Walden*, Thoreau describes this rural tradition when he relates how “the prudent landlord comes from the village to get ice to cool his summer drink . . . cuts and saws the solid pond, unroofs the house of fishes, and carts off their very element and air” (556; see *Journal 1*: 423-24 for a corresponding version).<sup>25</sup> By removing the layer of ice that harbors aquatic life from winter winds and maintains stable temperature, light, and water circulation patterns, Concord’s “prudent landlords” threatened to destroy fish’s winter habitats. By portraying this activity as a scene of displacement for Walden’s pickerel, Thoreau registers concern for aquatic life and demonstrates an ecologically-minded watershed consciousness. At a time when industrial activities increasingly endangered fish populations (Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions* 240), Thoreau often voiced concern for Concord’s “finny contemporaries”; famously, he grieved: “Who hears the fishes when they cry?” (*A Week* 28; 32).

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<sup>25</sup> Given that Thoreau would also “take an axe and pail and go in search of water” every morning, cut into the ice, and “look down into the quiet parlor of the fishes” (*Walden* 547), this is perhaps one of the ways Thoreau thinks he, too, has “profaned Walden” (*Walden* 480).

When the Tudor Company workers descended on Walden *en masse*, their large-scale operations threatened to completely overrun the pond's threshold of endurance. Thoreau conveys the ecological trauma of this event while describing how the workers "took off the only coat, ay, the skin itself, of Walden Pond in the midst of a hard winter" (*Walden* 557). By representing Walden as an embodied being, clothed in a "skin" of ice, Thoreau renders the pond's abuse as comparable to that of a fellow human. Drawing from ancient ideas about the earth as a gendered being not to be violated, Thoreau depicts the pond as a "virgin mould" who suffers a figurative rape at the hands of the ice harvesters, as they dismember her body piece-by-piece (*Walden* 557). In Thoreau's narrative the Tudor Company workers appear just as aggressive as New World colonists, and they subject "Squaw Walden"<sup>26</sup> to a kind of second wave conquest that leaves her physically and emotionally wrecked.

However much this episode threatened Walden Pond, it ultimately failed to destroy its integrity, though. Celebrating the pond's ability to heal from the ice-harvesting ordeal, Thoreau appears especially pleased that Walden "recovered the greater part" of its water as most of the ice was left behind and melted back into the pond (*Walden* 558). Thoreau finds additional consolation in the fact that Walden regrew its ice cover that very winter and acquired "a thick new garment to take the place of the old . . . on account both of its greater depth and its having no stream passing through it to melt or wear away the ice" (*Walden* 561). This hydrological fact serves as a testament of Walden's symbolic resilience: as the pond recuperates from the event, its spirit revives and it recovers not only its stolen water but its former dignity. Inspired by Walden's transformation, Thoreau

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<sup>26</sup> This epithet derives from a tale about how Native Americans were celebrating a festival nearby when suddenly the land shook and drowned all but "one old squaw, named Walden," who "escaped, and from her the pond was named" (*Walden* 468).

peers outside of his cabin and feels hopeful that “in thirty days more, probably, I shall look from the same window on the pure sea-green Walden water . . . and no traces will appear that a man has ever stood there” (*Walden* 559).

Having lived at the pond for two years and witnessed its daily ebb and flow, its seasonal changes, Thoreau marveled at Walden’s ability to remain “perennially young” (*Walden* 476). Thoreau viewed the pond’s restorative capacities as an example of self-renewal for humans to follow. “Of all the characters I have known,” Thoreau writes,

perhaps Walden wears best, and best preserves its purity. Many men have been likened to it, but few deserve that honor. Though the woodchoppers have laid bare first this shore and then that, and the Irish have built their sties by it, and the railroad has infringed on its border, and the ice-men have skimmed it once, it is itself unchanged, the same water which my youthful eyes fell on; all the change is in me. (*Walden* 476)

In this passage, Thoreau demonstrates full awareness of environmental impacts and lists them sequentially to emphasize their cumulative toll. Walden’s yearly recovery suggests to Thoreau that the real “change” – the less visible, but more problematic change – lies within human hearts, his own included. Only after acknowledging that responsibility for “all the change” of watersheds lies *in* human consciousness, Thoreau implies, will we realize that the responsibility for positive change lies *with* us.

In commenting on this latter passage, Lawrence Buell questions, however, the haste with which Thoreau imaginatively transforms Walden Pond “back into a pristine sanctuary” after recounting the environmental damage it has suffered (“Thoreau” 173). While discussing how Thoreau’s ecological-mindedness developed over the years, Buell

suggests that in passages like this one Thoreau does not “sound the preservationist note” as loudly as he could have (“Thoreau” 174). Deliberating Thoreau’s rationale for doing this, Buell suggests that “[Thoreau’s] desire to imagine Walden as an unspoiled place overrode his fears about its vulnerability. . . It was emotionally important to him to believe in Walden as a sanctuary, and it was all the easier for him to do so in the face of contrary evidence given that the myth of nature’s exhaustlessness continued to hold over many of the astutest minds of his day” (“Thoreau” 174).

Certainly, Thoreau shared in common with many of his peers a high degree of confidence in the self-healing powers of the natural world. Thoreau followed the lead of Wordsworth, who believed: “Such is the benignity of Nature, that, take away from her beauty after beauty, and ornament after ornament, her appearance cannot be marred – the scars, if any be left, will gradually disappear before a healing spirit” (*Guide* 222-23). In making these kinds of claims, neither Wordsworth nor Thoreau denied the reality of environmental damage, though; nor did they seek to substantiate “the myth of nature’s exhaustlessness” in order to maintain visions of their native watersheds as “pristine sanctuaries.” Rather, both writers emphasized the planet’s recuperative powers as a lesson in humility for humans. Like Wordsworth, Thoreau grasped “the vastness of nature’s cycles” (D. Robinson 8), and he knew that – from a geological time frame – the natural world will always have the last word. “In the lapse of ages,” Thoreau maintained, “Nature will recover and indemnify herself” (*A Week* 51), long outliving railways, dams, canals, and factories.

In advance of current environmentalists, Wordsworth and Thoreau understood that if humans want to remain in the picture, though, our attitudes towards nature must

change: in order to truly “sound the preservationist note” (Buell, “Thoreau” 174), one must restore not only the damaged watershed but the damaged human psyche – a psyche that has become increasingly alienated from nature through modern social systems.

### **Equity**

Similar to Wordsworth, who argued that mass rail excursions dishonor the natural environment and urban laborers alike, in *Walden* Thoreau shows how the ice industry undermines both the pond’s dignity and that of its human workers. Initially, Thoreau describes the Tudor Company workers as “a hundred men of Hyperborean extraction”<sup>27</sup> who “swoop down on to our pond one morning, with many car-loads of ungainly-looking farming tools, sleds, ploughs, drill-barrows, turf-knives, spades, saws, rakes, and each man was armed with a double-pointed pike-staff” (556). In this depiction, Thoreau makes the ice harvesters out to be supernatural aggressors, as cold-hearted as the winter conditions in which they labor. Implicitly, though, Thoreau suggests that these men have been degraded by their work. Thoreau’s use of thermal imagery is especially significant: believing that “the grand necessity. . . for our bodies, is to keep warm” (*Walden* 333), Thoreau felt that “the only work we can be perfectly certain is justifiable is the work we devote to maintaining the heat of our bodies” (Bromell 218). By portraying the ice harvesters as a cold-bodied “flock of arctic snow-birds” who seem descended from “some point of the polar regions” (*Walden* 557), Thoreau suggests that the Tudor Company workers have become acclimatized to their work conditions and have consequently been deprived of that “vital heat” he found so crucial to human well-being (*Walden* 333).

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<sup>27</sup> The fabled Hyperboreans were “an ethnological group of Arctic races”; as such, the word “Hyperborean” connotes polar conditions and northerly climes (“Hyperborean, adj., and n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web. 12 March 2014).



Figure 5. Ice harvesting at Spy Pond in Massachusetts, with train in background. 1852. *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*. Web. 6 Jan. 2014.

Feigning ignorance about the Tudor Company's real intentions, Thoreau draws a sustained metaphor between ice harvesting and farming. Querying whether the workers have come to "sow a crop of winter rye" (556), Thoreau alludes to Frederic Tudor as a "gentleman farmer" looking to "double his money" (557), and he relates how the harvesters "[go] to work at once, ploughing, harrowing, rolling, furrowing, in admirable order, as if" (Thoreau ruminates ironically) "they were bent on making this a model farm" (557). Nineteenth-century ice-harvesting practices indeed resembled those of large-scale agriculture (see Fig. 5), but Thoreau's analogy serves a much greater end than visual representation: by comparing the ice harvesters to commercial farmers, Thoreau registers anxiety about both forms of labor. Thoreau long opposed market agriculture, a system of farming that emphasizes efficiency and profit rather than subsistence and sustainability; he felt that through this form of production "from unfettered, free individuals, [farmers] became slaves to their profits and property" (Merchant, *Ecological*

*Revolutions* 258). Like market farmers, the ice harvesters had become incorporated into “an impersonal and seemingly autonomous system” of labor to which Thoreau firmly objected (Marx 248).

The conditions under which the Tudor Company employees labored were also comparable to those of the Fitchburg Railroad workers. Similar to how early American railroad workers confronted a social hierarchy that privileged native-born white males (Licht 222), the majority of ice harvesters were Irish emigrants who enjoyed little social mobility and were subordinate to “Yankee overseers” (*Walden* 557). In *Walden*, Thoreau identifies the Fitchburg Railroad workers as his “brothers” (365), and he likewise empathizes with the ice harvesters. Thoreau relates that whenever the Tudor Company workers accidentally fell into the pond, he let them “take refuge” in his cabin, where they discovered “there was some virtue in a stove” (557). By engaging in a form of labor typically reserved for females – that of tending to the “busy husbandmen” at the hearth (*Walden* 549) – Thoreau challenges gender stereotypes and engages in a social critique of the gender roles traditionally associated with manual labor. Such a project was distinctive of Thoreau, who resisted a number of modern social institutions that he felt had “tended increasingly and regrettably to conscript the male worker not as a being but as a sexual being, not as a person but as a man, or a male” (Bromell 81).

In expressing concern for the ice industry’s impact on human laborers and the natural world alike, Thoreau modeled a comprehensive approach to environmentalism. He demonstrated special foresight by recognizing large-scale ice harvesting as neither a single-issue problem nor an exclusively local concern; rather, Thoreau knew, developments in one place carry a ripple effect, calling for a more far-reaching response.

## A Global Watershed Consciousness

Following the ice harvesters' departure, Thoreau takes comfort in contemplating how Walden's ice will be consumed abroad. Naming the ice industry's top export cities, Thoreau writes:

Thus it appears the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta . . . I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Bramin . . . I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. (*Walden* 559)

These lines speak to Thoreau's "ecoglobalism" – defined as "a whole-earth way of thinking and feeling about environmentality" – in so far as Thoreau "betray[s] consciousness of the fact that Concord's environment [is] indissolubly connected with the rest of the world" (Buell, "Ecoglobalist Affects" 227; 239). Demonstrating a global-mindedness remarkable for someone of his time, Thoreau reconceives cultural difference and geopolitical boundaries as permeable barriers: envisioning how Walden's ice will traverse oceans and be "landed in ports of which Alexander only heard the names" (*Walden* 560), Thoreau proves his imagination to be as transboundary as water itself – able to "cross, and even dissolve, boundaries that separate and exclude" (Davidson and Mulligan 75). Upholding his conviction that all people and all places, however different, are essentially connected and operate under the same universal truths, Thoreau takes solace in the thought that his native waters will benefit people faraway.

By emphasizing Indian locales in this passage, Thoreau highlights historical fact as well as his own interest in Hindu thought. The most profitable markets of the nineteenth-century ice trade were, indeed, in Indian cities like Calcutta (Cummings 30); however, ice in India “was not procured mainly for Brahmins or their servants, but rather for the Indo-Anglican elites” (Dickason 54). By envisioning that devout Hindus will consume Walden’s water, though, Thoreau strives to make “the coming of the ice-cutters spiritually meaningful” (Lane 187).<sup>28</sup> Appealing to Hindu notions of holy water, Thoreau conceives Walden’s water as just as sacred and just as capable of nourishing the human spirit as the Ganges’. His vision of meeting the Bramin’s servant at “the same well” functions as a way for Thoreau to imagine that others will appreciate Walden’s ice for its spiritual, rather than its commercial, value.

Simultaneously, Thoreau represents the Indo-American exchange as bi-directional: to India goes the ice, from India comes the Bhagavad Gita. Thoreau even appears expectant that Hindus will one day “bathe” their “intellect[s] in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy” of *his* text. Considering his impact on Mahatma Gandhi, Thoreau seems to have been prophetic in this respect. From 1906-8, Gandhi read *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience,” and he drew inspiration from Thoreau while developing his own theories about nonviolent resistance (Chadha 138).<sup>29</sup> From Thoreau, “Gandhi captured more than a tactic,” though; “he absorbed a mood of indomitable determination to actualize peaceful idealism in daily life” (Fleischman 121). Given that Thoreau’s ideas

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<sup>28</sup> Thoreau’s allusion to the “Brahmin” might also be an ironic reference to Frederic Tudor’s status as a “Boston Brahmin,” an epithet for Boston’s traditional upper class. As Lawrence Buell observes: “An inveterate punster, Thoreau may even intend a wry double entendre here. This may be the first usage of ‘Brahmin’ to connote New England blue blood or grandee” (“Ecoglobalist Affects” 239).

<sup>29</sup> Gandhi especially treasured a passage of “Civil Disobedience” in which Thoreau describes his experience of imprisonment: “I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great stone and mortar” (“Civil Disobedience” 375).

about “peaceful idealism” were strongly influenced by Hindu philosophy, Gandhi benefited from a cultural exchange gone full circle: he “received back from America what was fundamentally the philosophy of India after it had been crystallized in the mind of Thoreau” (Webb Miller qtd. in Chadha 138). Seen in this light, it appears fair to say that whereas Frederic Tudor engaged in global commerce, Thoreau engaged in global *consciousness*: Thoreau “borrowed from distant India and repaid the debt by throwing ideas into the world pool of thought” (Fischer 88), following his own advice of “opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought” (*Walden* 578).

Thoreau’s ice-to-India fantasy remains inspirational today as it provides a vivid sense of global connectedness – a vision of how faraway creatures, cultures, and waterways are all interlinked. This is a vision that creative writers, especially, can convey, and it is a much-needed understanding for modern activists as they confront global environmental issues.

### **Looking Ahead**

Across the world, increasing temperatures are now reducing the winter “skins” of waterways year by year, putting aquatic habitats under ever-greater risk. While scientists track this phenomenon in Concord using Thoreau’s records,<sup>30</sup> people everywhere are beginning to worry about the impact of climate change on their local watersheds.<sup>31</sup> Confronted by such possibilities, looking to Romantic poets for solutions to current environmental problems might not seem like an obvious approach. But what Wordsworth

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<sup>30</sup> Using Thoreau’s records of ice-out dates at Walden Pond, Dr. Rickard Primack and his team of biologists from Boston University now show that, over the past century and a half since the ice-harvesting episode, the depletion of Walden’s ice cover has continued unabated (Primack).

<sup>31</sup> In England, environmentalists note that “if climate change occurs as quickly as many scientists fear it will, water could become a precious commodity and the pressure to tap the Lake District might return” (Thompson 241).

and Thoreau offered is a timeless lesson: both of these writers demonstrated the importance of paying attention to changes in nature, and they articulated a vision of how all things and all people are interconnected by common interests. Well in advance of modern environmentalists, Wordsworth and Thoreau recognized that watersheds can only be protected by reconciling economic, environmental, and equity issues, known today as the “three E’s” of sustainability. These writers did much more than outline an effective response to industrial developments, though: during their lifetimes, Wordsworth and Thoreau called for a whole-scale rethinking of the way humans relate to the natural world. Having intuited that “the problems of the environment are problems of the consciousness of our self and its role rather than problems of nature” (Finke 89), Wordsworth and Thoreau offered modern watershed consciousness as a mindset that can help humans reconceive our basic posture towards life on earth.

Wordsworth, Thoreau, and the many writers and artists who carry on their tradition demonstrate that we need *cultural* as well as ecological solutions to environmental problems. Just as efforts to protect watersheds are ongoing, “the literary imagination of watersheds remains very much a work in progress” (Buell, *Writing* 249), and environmental writers continue to seek effective modes of advocacy. Gary Snyder, a poet-activist who follows in Wordsworth’s and Thoreau’s footsteps, suggests that our responsibility to future generations necessitates a forward-looking watershed consciousness: affirming that “we who live in terms of centuries rather than millions of years must hold the watershed and its communities together, so our children might enjoy the clear water and fresh life of this landscape we have chosen” (22), Snyder calls us to

imagine, Thoreau-style, what will happen “in the lapse of ages” so that we can respond accordingly (*A Week* 51).

My own hope that generations to come will be able to enjoy watersheds is bolstered by a recent experience I had while working as a summer camp counselor. Upon telling a six-year-old about how people dye the Chicago River green every year for St. Patrick’s Day, I was shocked by her response: she looked at me, her eyebrows furrowed, and said in a small voice – “That’s not nice. It hurts the river.” Her response was beautiful; it was full of empathy. It gives me hope that watershed stewards will continue to bless this earth, equipped with “an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy” (Wordsworth, *Guide* 225).

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