

Poetics of Water in the Works of Henry Thoreau and Edouard Glissant

Henry Thoreau in *Walden* invites the reader into his self-isolation from society. During his two year seclusion in Walden - invariably designated as a pond or a forest (“*Walden woods*”) and located in the outskirts of the little town of Concord, Massachusetts – Thoreau contemplates the meaning of life, the true virtues of wilderness, and, among other things, water. The water, the pond quickly becomes the center, both geographically and socially, of his life. Although he intended to seclude himself and lives in a dark area, usually known for being the home of the outcasts, his fluttering feeling of solitude finds answers through the encounters he makes at the pond. This place thus becomes a symbol of both isolation and openness. This conjugation of such opposite feelings leads Thoreau to meticulously describe his day-to-day life in Walden. Even though most of the descriptions Thoreau provides in his autobiography tend to bring nature to life, to highlight the details of leaves, fish, animals of all genres, and the composition of the natural elements, water is the one entity which triggers at times feelings of happiness and completion, and at other times feelings of lack and idleness.

On a similar note, Edouard Glissant provides in his collection of poems *Les Indes*, a description or rather a complaint putting into motion the *conquistadors*, these bold men, privateers, adventurers, slave-owners, explorers who departed from multiple locations in Europe to amass fortunes in the New World, the Americas. In Glissant's collection of poems *Les Indes*, these men depart from Genoa, Italy, to invade the Indies (*Les Indes*) where they hope to find gold. Only one thing separates them from their goal: the sea. We will look closely at two poems of this collection, *L'appel* (I) and *La conquête* (III) which depict two stages of the invasion process. In both stages, water is an important element of Glissant's poetry since it constitutes the only tangible obstacle in the journey of these men. What becomes clear, when reading these poems, is the same ambivalence we found in Thoreau's poetics: water is a source of both suffering and hope, happiness ; it is at the same time what removes men from their homeland, their hometown, and what brings them to a better future, destiny. Like Thoreau, Glissant draws from water important elements of poetics which bring forth circumvoluting emotions.

How can water bring about such rich poetry though? How can water constitute a source of poetic suffering and greatness in the works of Thoreau and Glissant?

It should first be noted that, according to Dominique Lecourt, water has always been a vivid and endless, unfailing source of myths and poetry. Specifically, water was considered in Asia a source of « chaos » from which positive (fresh water) and negative (salt water) elements would emerge. Such ambivalence echoes the double representation of water in Thoreau and Glissant's works. As part of the landscape, water is not just described by these authors, poets, but put in motion through encounters and personal feelings in Thoreau's work, and through a lament in Glissant's work.

Avant d'être objet d'investigations scientifiques ou, comme aujourd'hui, enjeu de conflits internationaux, l'eau se présente un élément de l'imagination humaine. Matière spiritualisée, son irrépressible attrait sur la pensée s'exprime sous forme religieuse ou poétique. « Tout était eau », disent les écrits de la tradition védique. Bien des textes taoïstes leur font écho. L'Asie tient l'eau pour le « chaos » originaire, « la source de toute Matière encore indifférenciée, elle recèle toutes les possibilités de manifestation de l'être. En naîtront toutes les formes réelles. Comme Océan des origines, les peuples polynésiens l'identifient à la puissance cosmique elle-même. La cosmologie babylonienne accorde une place primordiale au chaos aquatique. L'eau s'y présente sous deux espèces : l'océan d'eau douce sur lequel, plus tard, flottera la terre (iapsû) et la mer salée peuplée de monstres (tiamat). (Lecourt 114)

Before being the subject of scientific investigations or, as today, the issue of international conflicts, water presents itself as an element of the human imagination. Spiritualized matter, its irrepressible attraction on thought is expressed in religious or poetic form. "Everything was water," say the writings of the Vedic tradition. Many Taoist texts echo them. Asia holds water for the original "chaos", "the source of all matter still undifferentiated, it harbors all the possibilities of manifestation of being. All real forms will be born from it. Like Ocean of origins, the Polynesian people identify it with the cosmic power itself. Babylonian cosmology places a premium on aquatic chaos. There are two species of water: the freshwater ocean on which the land (iapsû) will float later, and the salty sea populated by monsters (tiamat). (Lecourt 114) [Translation]

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in his book, *L'eau et les rêves: essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, has thoroughly examined the role of water as a source of imagination necessary for the deployment of poetics. He offers an interesting classification of the different types of water : « *Les eaux claires, les eaux printanières et les eaux courantes. Les conditions objectives du narcissisme. Les eaux amoureuses* », (« *Clear waters, spring waters and running waters. The objective conditions of narcissism. The amorous waters* », Translation) (title of Chapter 1), « *Les eaux profondes, les eaux dormantes, les eaux mortes. « L'eau lourde » dans la rêverie d'Edgar Poe* », (« *Deep waters, still waters, dead waters. "Heavy water" in the reverie of Edgar Poe* », Translation) (title of Chapter 2). Such classification highlights the powers of water: more than a

natural element of landscape, the poet structures, shapes its form and orders, describes it as a moment, a life experience. The representation of water as life experience is not obvious in novels though. However, in the works of Thoreau and Glissant, water becomes, in many instances, a shape, a form that produces meaning. Such production drawn from water is not new, as Lecourt recalls that water is an integral part of the myth and the creation of poetics since Antiquity. The constant attention given by people to water is mainly due to its ability to create fantasy and explain the origin of things. In Thoreau's work, the pond and its environment shape his own identity and will give birth to his environmental consciousness. In Glissant's work, water of the sea expresses the passage, the obstacle which, once passed, will give birth to numerous abuses and the creation of a New World, recognized and colonized by the Europeans. Water therefore inherently contains a double element, a double signification which, invariably, tends to project either the fear, the death of humans, or the spiritual, physical transformation of man.

Sexualisée, l'eau paraît à Bachelard porteuse d'ambivalences profondes et durables. Elle accompagne ainsi la mort autant que la vie. Heraclite disait : « C'est mort pour les âmes que de devenir eau. » Edgar Poe lui fait écho lorsqu'il présente l'eau comme une invitation à mourir. Et Bachelard évoquant ce qu'il appelle le « complexe d'Ophélie » écrit superbement : « L'eau est l'élément de la mort jeune et belle, de la mort fleurie et, dans les drames de la vie et de la littérature, elle est l'élément de la mort sans orgueil ni vengeance... » L'eau mènera ainsi pendant des siècles une double vie d'« élément » dans la culture de l'humanité. Notion clé de pratiques religieuses, elle renvoie à des récits de création et façonne l'imaginaire des peuples en modulant sur des fantasmes originaires, mais elle se veut aussi principe ultime d'explication de l'univers pour la conscience savante. Qu'il ait pu se produire entre ces deux acceptations des recouvrements partiels ou des identifications complètes n'étonnera pas, s'agissant d'un monde où la science fut longtemps soumise à la tutelle sourcilleuse d'autorités spirituelles instituées. Thaïes (625-547 ay. J.-C.) veut faire œuvre de physicien lorsqu'il s'interroge sur l'origine des choses et tient l'eau pour la substance première. Il suppose que la Terre flotta sur elle et explique les tremblements de terre par l'agitation de cet océan souterrain. (Dominique Lecourt 116)

Sexualized, water seems to Bachelard carrying deep and lasting ambivalences. It thus accompanies death as much as life. Heraclitus said: "It is dead for souls to become water. Edgar Poe echoes it when he presents water as an invitation to die. And Bachelard evoking what he calls the "complex of Ophelia" wrote superbly: "Water is the element of young and beautiful death, of flowering death and, in the dramas of life and literature, it is the element of death without pride or revenge ... "Water will thus lead for centuries a double life of "element" in the culture of humanity. Key concept of religious practices, it refers to stories of creation and shapes the imagination of people by modulating on original fantasies, but it also wants to be the ultimate principle of explanation of the universe for the learned conscience. It will come as no surprise that there may have been partial recoveries or complete identifications between these two acceptances, in the case of a world where science was for a long time subject to the careful supervision of instituted spiritual authorities. Thaïes (625-547 AD) wants to be a physicist when he wonders about the origin of things and holds water for the first substance. It assumes that the Earth floated on it and explains the earthquakes by the agitation of this underground ocean. (Dominique Lecourt 116) [Translation]

In both works, the writers bring this element of landscape and the wilderness, to life. In Lecourt's account, water is a « *spiritual materiel* » and it is true that water should not only be understood as a mere material but also to connect with the holiness. In Glissant's *Les indes* and Thoreau's *Walden*, this spirituality is depicted in different manners. This holy perspective brought by water has also been noted by Lecourt:

Le christianisme a hérité de ces rituels. Mais il a voulu leur attribuer une nouvelle signification. Le baptême de saint Jean produit non pas la guérison d'infirmités corporelles, mais la rémission des péchés. L'immersion dans l'eau baptismale équivaut, selon saint Paul (Ép. Rom, VI, 3), à l'ensevelissement du Christ. Par l'immersion, l'homme se dépouille de son ancienne vie, il meurt et renaît purifié. (Dominique Lecourt 116)

Christianity has inherited these rituals. But he wanted to give them a new meaning. The baptism of Saint John produces not the healing of bodily infirmities, but the forgiveness of sins. Immersion in baptismal water is equivalent, according to Saint Paul (Ep. Rom, VI, 3), to the burial of Christ. By immersion, man strips himself of his old life, he dies and is reborn purified. (Dominique Lecourt 116) [Translation]

In Glissant's work, we will see that the departure from Europe and the conquest of "*Les Indes*" is synonymous of harsh criticism of the so-called civilizing mission of the Indies, and multiple references to Christianity and the mission of baptism emphasize the spiritual role of water in his poetry beyond the sea. In Thoreau's work, the water of the pond becomes a spiritual place where the poet, as a monk, can build a special connection with wilderness and the true meaning of life: far from society, the man can explore his true self, without any superfluous items or garments.

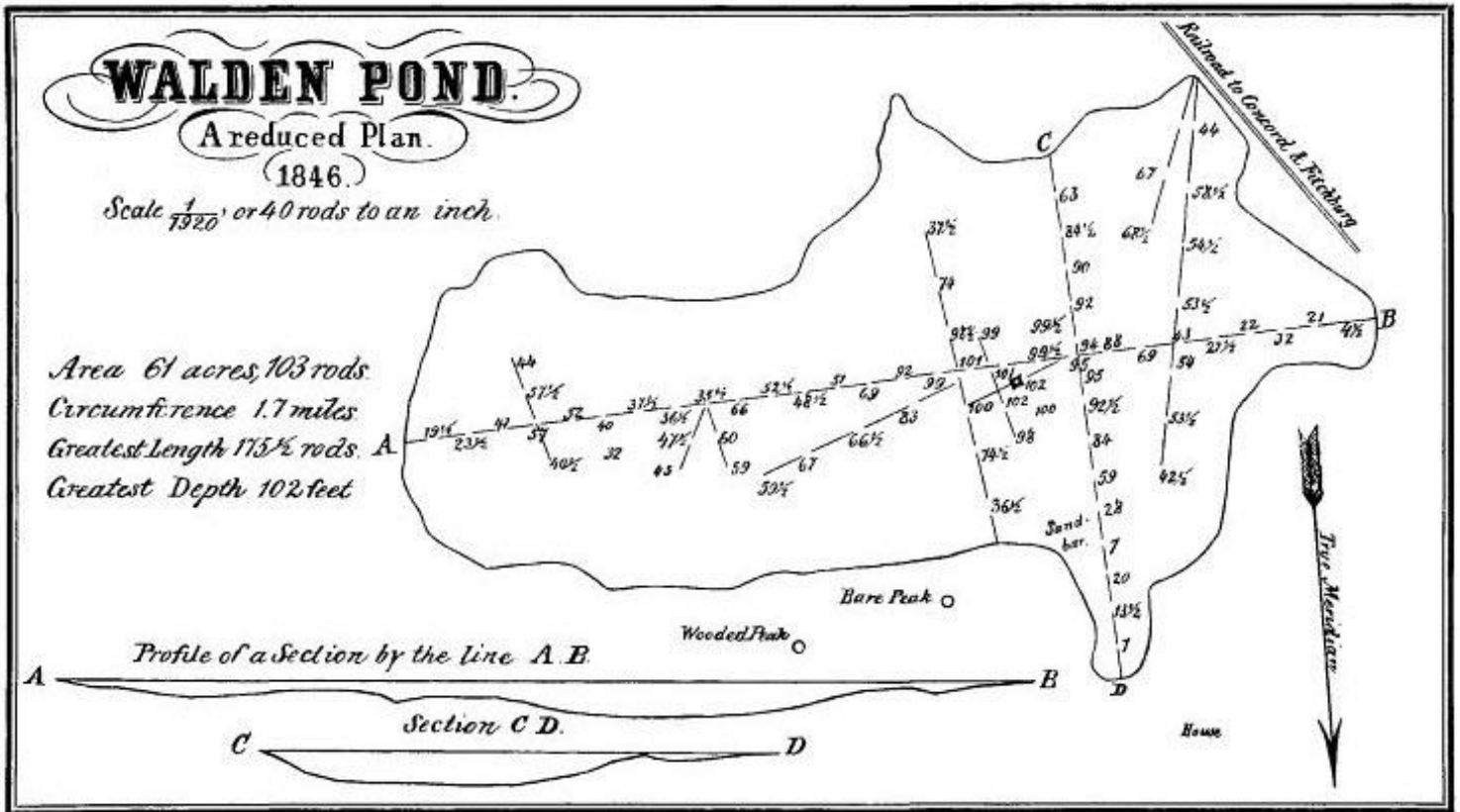
I. Thoreau and Glissant: water as poetics of solitude

In the following passage, Thoreau highlights the contrast between what townsmen would see as sheer idleness and what he understands as a way to live a truly meaningful and happy life without the materialistic enjoyments of consumer society. Such a rebuttal of fellow countrymen and his poetic comparison of himself with the "*Puri Indians*" indicates that such a way of life enriches him and makes him the character of a "novel". His poetic tend to personify the simple elements of nature: "*but if the birds and flowers had tried me by their standard, I should not have been found wanting [...] The natural day is very calm, and will hardly reprove his indolence*". Such a poetic description of what is, after all, a day in the country, proves that isolation feeds the poet and that living by himself near a pond makes his life substantially more exciting than "*society and the theatre*".

My days were not days of the week, bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of a clock; for I lived like the Puri Indians, of whom it is said that "for yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow they have only one word, and they express the variety of meaning by pointing backward for yesterday, forward for to-morrow, and overhead for the passing day." This was sheer idleness to my fellow-townsmen, no doubt; but if the birds and flowers had tried me by their standard, I should not have been found wanting. A man must find his occasions in himself, it is true. The natural day is very calm, and will hardly reprove his indolence. I had this advantage, at least, in my mode of life, over those who were obliged to look

abroad for amusement, to society and the theatre, that my life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel. (Thoreau 61)

Arguing that a simple and lonely life by a pond provides much for him, Thoreau thus offers a poetic account of his life by the water. He even provides a map, as though he felt the need to make a point to the reader that such a life is not only possible but very much enjoyable.



Furthermore, Thoreau’s poetic account is – although *Walden* is presented as an autobiography – still a work of imagination. His prose only lets the reader see certain details, a certain vertical transcendence, put into motion by his fluttering impressions of the pond. Thoreau’s “poetic reverie”, making “Walden pond” a refuge, affirms “a radical verticality of depth.” According to Kearney, in his book *Poetics of Imagining*:

Imagination's deepest leaning is towards a vertical transcendence which strives to 'return to a liberty of the possible' It is because the poetic image always operates under the vertical sign of ever newer possibilities of being that we rediscover ourselves as beings always ahead of ourselves (*des êtres en avant*) This affirmation of a radical verticality of depth and height is the ultimate conclusion reached by Bachelard's reflections on the origin of poetic reverie:

Is to meditate on an origin not to dream? And to dream of an origin not to surpass it? Where the deep image rises, it endures. It rediscovers a profundity or intimates an elevation. It rises or descends between sky and earth. It is polyphonic because it is polysemantic.

It is at such moments of vertical correspondence that the voice of the poet responds to the Voice of the world. (Kearney 111-112)

His account shows that the ambivalence inherent to the pond helps the poet to feed his poetics. In other words, the poet becomes the architect of an imaginary landscape: make no mistakes, the poet picks up what he wants the reader to imagine and let aside numerous details that he does not deem relevant for his poetics. Below, Thoreau notices that even though the pond does not bear any special features, the fact that the pond itself exists suffices to trigger joy and "*congenial*" feelings. His poetics of water is not only about meticulous descriptions of parts of the ponds but about the values and higher state of life that it brings forth ("*strange liberty in Nature*"), in opposition to the restricting power of the state, that he abhors.

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. (Thoreau 70, *Solitude* chapter)

Such a solitude empowers the poet. Away from the “*surfeit of human society and gossip*”, he decides to leave for the country or, in his own words, “*ramble westward*” into “*fresh woods and pastures new*”.

Sometimes, having had a surfeit of human society and gossip, and worn out all my village friends, I rambled still farther westward than I habitually dwell, into yet more unfrequented parts of the town, “to fresh woods and pastures new,” (Thoreau 94)

The mention of the words “pastures” is intriguing. The definition of pasture is indeed a “*land covered with grass or similar plants suitable for animals, such as cows and sheep, to eat*” (Cambridge dictionary). The poet here refers to a land, a place, where wilderness gives birth to poetics. He is fed by the pond as he is the one who sees in Walden a suitable life. The reader is therefore invited to imagine a pastoral landscape, where Thoreau, contemplating water, experience a new life and writes his prose.



Alvan Fisher, Pastoral Landscape, 1854

The painting above by Alvan Fisher reflects the following passage in which the poetic of Thoreau attains a peak: water is described in a marvellous way, similar to a Fountain of Youth, echoing the writings of Herodotus, and represented in these terms: “*the body of the bather appears of an alabaster whiteness, still more unnatural, which, as the limbs are magnified and distorted withal, produces a monstrous effect, making fit studies for a Michael Angelo.*”

The water of our river is black or a very dark brown to one looking directly down on it, and, like that of most ponds, imparts to the body of one bathing in it a yellowish tinge; but this water is of such crystalline purity that the body of the bather appears of an alabaster whiteness, still more unnatural, which, as the limbs are magnified and distorted withal, produces a monstrous effect, making fit studies for a Michael Angelo. [...] The water is so transparent that the bottom can easily be discerned at the depth of twenty-five or thirty feet. Paddling over it, you may see, many feet beneath the surface the schools of perch and shiners, perhaps only an inch long, yet the former easily distinguished by their transverse bars, and you think that they must be ascetic fish that find a subsistence there. (Thoreau 96)

The bucolic description of the pond does not stop here. Thoreau goes further as he stands on a bark:

But, as I was looking over the surface, I saw here and there at a distance a faint glimmer, as if some skater insects which had escaped the frosts might be collected there, or, perchance, the surface, being so smooth, betrayed where a spring welled up from the bottom. Paddling gently to one of these places, I was surprised to find myself surrounded by myriads of small perch, about five inches long, of a rich bronze color in the green water, sporting there, and constantly rising to the surface and dimpling it, sometimes leaving bubbles on it. In such transparent and seemingly bottomless water, reflecting the clouds, I seemed to be floating through the air as in a balloon, and their swimming impressed me as a kind of flight or hovering, as if they were a compact flock of birds passing just beneath my level on the right or left, their fins, like sails, set all around them. (Thoreau 103)

His solitude is complete and, nonetheless, he pretends to be, joyfully, completed by the extraordinary nature that surrounds him: “*surrounded by myriads of small perch*”, “*rich bronze*

color in the green water”, “*I seemed to be floating through the air as in a balloon*”. Thoreau uses a semantic field pertaining to surrealism. He thus invites the reader to see in water a source of joy, conducive to poetic creation.

His poetics of solitude attains another peak when he personifies the pond. He makes *her* equal to other human beings. He is not only inspired as a poet by water, he makes *her* an equal, a person, a woman who accompanies him through his journey: he talks to her, lives with her, contemplates her.

Nevertheless, of all the characters I have known, 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. It has not acquired one permanent wrinkle after all its ripples. It is perennially young, and I may stand and see a swallow dip apparently to pick an insect from its surface as of yore. (Thoreau 104)

In the same vein, Granger, in *Le paysage intermédiaire de Henry D. Thoreau*, has also observed the personification of the pond made by Thoreau in the following terms:

Thoreau décrit la configuration du lac comme celle d'un corps, le plus souvent féminin et peut-être même maternel: sur les rives, aucune barbe ne pousse (W. 181) et le narrateur interprète la surface calme comme « the gentle pulsing of its life, the heaving of its breast » (W. 188). L'investigation du « corps » de la Mère-Nature le préoccupe, particulièrement celle de son « ventre » qu'il sonde pour établir la carte du lac, mais alors qu'il tourne en dérision ceux qui croient Walden Pond sans fond, il se réjouit de ce que sa profondeur lui donne l'image de l'infini (W. 285-89). Fasciné par le « mystère » du fond du lac, il en inventorie le contenu depuis sa barque ou par un trou percé dans la surface gelée : la hache dressée qui se balance (W. 178), le coffre (« chest ») ou les troncs (« trunks », W. 191), ainsi que les pierres, les algues et les poissons. S'agirait-il de s'assurer que le ventre maternel ne contient pas d'enfants ? (Granger 366)

Thoreau describes the configuration of the lake as that of a body, most often feminine and perhaps even maternal: on the banks, no beard grows (W. 181) and the narrator interprets the calm surface as "the gentle pulsing of its life, the heaving of its breast" (W. 188). The investigation of Mother Nature's "body" preoccupies him, particularly that of his "belly" which he probes to establish the map of the lake, but while he mocks those who believe bottomless Walden Pond, he rejoices that its depth gives it the image of infinity (W. 285-89). Fascinated by the "mystery" of the bottom of the lake, he inventories its content from his boat or by a hole drilled in the frozen surface: the upright ax that swings (W. 178), the chest ("chest") or the trunks ("trunks", W. 191), as well as stones, algae and fish. Is it to ensure that the mother's womb does not contain children? (Granger 366) [Translation]

Thoreau even concludes by an ode to the "Walden pond" alike a lover who would write a letter to his companion.

Walden, is it you?

It is no dream of mine,
To ornament a line;
I cannot come nearer to God and Heaven
Than I live to Walden even.
I am its stony shore,
And the breeze that passes o'er;
In the hollow of my hand
Are its water and its sand,
And its deepest resort
Lies high in my thought. (Thoreau 105)

Such a short poem allows us to see definitively in Thoreau a true poet of water, comparable to Glissant, whose poetry bears the same interest about solitude.

We will use here excerpts of the poem *L'Appel (The call)* and the introduction that we paste here:

1492. Les Grands Découvreurs s'élancent sur l'Atlantique, à la recherche des Indes. Avec eux le poème commence. Tous ceux aussi, avant et après ce Jour Nouveau, qui ont connu leur rêve, en ont vécu ou en sont morts. L'imagination crée à l'homme des Indes toujours suscitées, que l'homme dispute au monde. Ceux qui partirent d'Espagne et du Portugal, convoitant l'or et les épices ; mais soldats et mystiques aussi. Le Chant nomme le père

Labat, jacobin et corsaire ; puis ce nègre prophète qu'il fit fouetter à sang, lequel avait vu grandir sur la mer, avant qu'ils eussent paru, les bateaux ; et nomme Toussaint-Louverture, esclave et libérateur d'Haïti... Mais il ne faut anticiper sur l'histoire : voici le port en fête, l'aventure qui se noue ; le rêve s'épuise dans son projet. L'homme a peur de son désir, au moment de le satisfaire. (Glissant 2)

1492. The Great Discoverers set off for the Atlantic, in search of the Indies. With them the poem begins. All those also, before and after this New Day, who knew their dream, lived it or died from it. Imagination creates for the man of India always aroused, that the man disputes with the world. Those who left Spain and Portugal, coveting gold and spices; but soldiers and mystics too. Le Chant names Father Labat, Jacobin and privateer; then this negro prophet whom he had whipped to blood, who had seen growing on the sea, before they had appeared, the boats; and names Toussaint-Louverture, slave and liberator of Haiti ... But one must not anticipate history: here is the port in celebration, the adventure that is tied; the dream runs out in his project. Man is afraid of his desire when it comes to satisfying it. (Glissant 2) [Translation]

In this poem, Glissant stresses the solitude in a similar way compared to Thoreau. The major difference though in Thoreau's account compared to Glissant's account when it comes to solitude is the type of water inspiring them. As aforementioned in our introduction, the pond is pure water while Glissant's water is salt water, sea. This distinction echoes what Dominique Lecourt stated in his article, *L'eau et les mythes: « l'océan d'eau douce sur lequel, plus tard, flottera la terre (iapsû) et la mer salée peuplée de monstres (tiamat) »*, ("The freshwater ocean on which, later, will float the land (iapsû) and the salt sea populated by monsters (tiamat)" [Translation]). At the end of the journey, explorers will find the Indies but, while on sea, they will experience hardships and difficulties.

Here, Glissant mentions in his poem *L'appel* that sea is preferred by the adventurers to the holy water of the bishop. He draws such a comparison to showcase the freedom that comes with the embarkment at sea for the New World. One should note that most of these people had little to lose when embarking for an unknown world. Contrary to Thoreau who voluntarily retreats himself from

society, the solitude that these bold men will experience at sea is forced, compelled, blinded by potential diamonds (“(Aveuglé de vents ou de diamants ?)”), with all the risks pertaining to the Atlantic sea at this time.

I

Sur Gênes va s’ouvrir le pré des cloches d’aventures.
Ô lyre d’airain et de vent, dans l’air lyrique de départs,
Ô le sel de la mer est plus propice ici que l’eau bénite de l’évêque,

III

De quelles Indes voici l’approche et la louange, ou quel ce capitaine
(Aveuglé de vents ou de diamants ?)
Que la voix sur la plage somme encore de partir, libérant la boucle d’amarre ?

VI

Indes ! ce fut ainsi, par votre nom cloué sur la folie, que commença la mer.
(Glissant, *L’appel*, extraits)

I

*On Genoa will open the meadow of adventure bells.
O lyre of brass and wind, in the lyric air of departures,
O the sea salt is more auspicious here than the holy water of the bishop,*

III

*From which India here is the approach and praise, or what this captain
(Blinded by winds or diamonds?)
That the voice on the beach is still leaving, freeing the mooring loop?*

VI

*India! it was thus, by your name nailed to madness, that the sea began.
(Glissant, *L’appel*, extraits) [Translation]*

Glissant continues and showcases the negativity of salt water, of the sea, on which the voice of the man gets lost. These men endure a journey in the hope of becoming rich. It is such a powerful move that the reader grasps when reading Glissant’s poetics of the sea. In Glissant’s poem, the sea

even engulfs, immerses sailors. Such words resonate in Glissant's life as he is himself the descendant of slaves brought later by Europeans. These men, whose journey he narrates in his poem, are the ones who colonized the West Indies. He finally gives us a terrible event to imagine: the shipwreck and death of such sailors, when "*l'océan [...] se nourrit de sa chair même*", ("*And feeds on its very flesh!*"). The words are bold and stress the inherent dangers pertaining to this journey. Glissant's account of the isolation of "*la voix de l'homme*", ("*Man's voice*") who "*se perdit*" ("*was lost*") is therefore significantly different from Thoreau's description. If water indeed allows both writers to create their own poetics, Thoreau's positive solitude should be noted compared to Glissant's raging, threatening, dangerous solitude.

VII

Qu'était la mer, et son écume ? Savait-on si sa parole ne se mourait
En quelque gouffre, au loin des routes révélées ?
Longtemps ainsi la voix de l'homme se perdit aux temples

VIII

Et chacun s'écria que l'océan est force dure, qui s'éprouve, impure,
Et se nourrit de sa chair même !

(Glissant, *L'appel*, extraits)

VII

*Who was the sea and its foam? Did we know if its word was not dying
In some abyss, far from the revealed roads?
Man's voice was lost in the temples*

VIII

*And everyone claimed that the ocean is a hard force, which is tested, impure,
And feeds on its very flesh!*

(Glissant, *L'appel*, excerpts)

[Translation]

Kearney, in his book *Poetics of Imagining*, confirms the necessity for the poet to directly, personally relates to the narration, the story. This is the case for both Thoreau whose book is an autobiography and Glissant who, alike Thoreau, imagines, poetizes an experience brought forth by water. Kearney quotes Bachelard and states that “the being of certain materials corresponds with the being of the human subject”.

For Bachelard, images are much more than occasions of frustration or sublimation. They are free expressions - created not from pressure but from play, not from necessity but from inventiveness.

Bachelard believes these primary material elements to be connected in some way with internal make-up. The being of certain materials corresponds with the being of the human subject. Matter supplies the ‘images which are necessary for the virtualities of the soul to be distinguished and developed’. Through the objects’ intentional otherness, a reciprocal energy is produced by consciousness’ encounter with matter:

Matter is our energetic mirror; it is a mirror which focuses our powers in illumining them with imaginative joys . . . In other words, in the realm of the imagination the dualism of subject and object is presented at its truest equilibrium. . . Matter contains beauty as an affective space hidden in the interior of things

(Kearney 104)

II. Water, a source of interaction and human experiences beyond solitude

One of the first encounters of Thoreau with his fellow townsmen is with Irish workers who work in the Winter on the pond to cut ice. It is a truly interesting moment of Thoreau's journey in Walden as the pond, iced, and thus unwelcoming, actually reveals to Thoreau the nature of the poor Irish workers: they are not so poor. In this example, the pond offers an opportunity for the writer to reflect on a population surrounding and working temporarily on the pond - and its identity. It is also surprising that such encounter leads Thoreau to conclude that the poor do not actually need much help, when considering their numerous garments. This highlights the role of the pond in the transgression of his solitude: while he expects himself to be barred from any social interactions, these Irishmen remind him that an outer world exist and that the pond is not just a magical, poetic source of imaginary, but also a place where hard work takes place.

Be sure that you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be your example which leaves them far behind. If you give money, spend yourself with it, and do not merely abandon it to them. We make curious mistakes sometimes. Often the poor man is not so cold and hungry as he is dirty and ragged and gross. It is partly his taste, and not merely his misfortune. If you give him money, he will perhaps buy more rags with it. I was wont to pity the clumsy Irish laborers who cut ice on the pond, in such mean and ragged clothes, while I shivered in my more tidy and somewhat more fashionable garments, till, one bitter cold day, one who had slipped into the water came to my house to warm him, and I saw him strip off three pairs of pants and two pairs of stockings ere he got down to the skin, though they were dirty and ragged enough, it is true, and that he could afford to refuse the extra garments which I offered him, he had so many intra ones. (Thoreau 41)

The mention of Irish laborers is coupled with other mentions of people that Thoreau encountered at the pond. These people break him from his seclusion and helps him to realize that, far from being only a retreat, the pond, water, is also a place of interactions that he progressively welcomes. Therefore, water is still responsible for an ambivalent experience, *in and out-of-the world*, where

the deployment of one's subjectivity in his exteriority faces the Other. Fellow townsmen who come to the pond thus provide multiple opportunities for Thoreau to develop his poetic approach of water and his own relationship to society.

Something should be noticed is the temporary relationships which take place in Thoreau's life: people come and go but they obviously do not stay by the pond to either sleep or do business. The pond is therefore not to consider as a place where friendships can occur but rather a place where short-terms, casual encounters happen. Such relationships immensely impact Thoreau and his ability to produce his poetics, his imaginary architecture of the nearby landscape: he indeed takes full advantage of the few people he meets (they are rare) as he puts them in perspective ; they are always described with the pond, the landscape in the background. He paints them in a bucolic way, recalls their discontent for instance when it comes to fishing. Such portrayals add considerable value to Thoreau's poetry in my opinion as his account of Walden becomes more vivid and colorful for the reader. Although nature and the pertaining solitude gives moment of joy, one could argue that interactions between Thoreau and Others bring forth a more lifelike and vibrant poetry – in spite of the fact he argues isolation still makes him joyful and creative. In the following passage, he emphasizes how inhospitable is Walden pond, as though he seemed to appear as *the last man standing*. He uses the semantic field of disillusion and this, in my opinion, reinforces greatly his poetics of the water: “darkness”, “retreated”, “light baskets”, “left the world”, “black kernel of the night”. Besides, the words “profaned” denotes a religious connotation, as though the pond and its water were a sacred place:

At night there was never a traveller passed my house, or knocked at my door, more than if I were the first or last man; unless it were in the spring, when at long intervals some came from the village to fish for pouts,—they plainly fished much more in the Walden Pond of their own natures, and baited their hooks with darkness,—but they soon retreated, usually

with light baskets, and left “the world to darkness and to me,” and the black kernel of the night was never profaned by any human neighborhood. (Thoreau 71)

The religious connotation is even more prevalent in the following passage, as Thoreau mentions that he “*occasionally*” - that is, on multiple times - teamed up with an “*impatient companion*” who “*hummed a psalm*”. This impression of sacred water brought by another character is reinforced by the mention of an “*ancient sect of Cœnobites*”. Indeed, Cenobitic monasticism was a monastic tradition that stressed community life. Even though Thoreau is mocking him, the fact that he “*occasionally*”, repeatedly, goes to fish with him shows that he does not reject some company. Water provides for him both a safe space of seclusion and a platform to commune in an “*unbroken harmony*”. This kind of encounter allows Thoreau to put again in perspective a character who highlights the importance of the pond, of water, when it comes to perpetuate, repeat, temporary relationships. Thoreau’s poetics of water is thus nourished by the human experience Thoreau gains through his interactions. This benefits the reader who can better appreciate the role of water, the joy it brings into Thoreau’s poetic life.

Occasionally, after my hoeing was done for the day, I joined some impatient companion who had been fishing on the pond since morning, as silent and motionless as a duck or a floating leaf, and, after practising various kinds of philosophy, had concluded commonly, by the time I arrived, that he belonged to the ancient sect of Cœnobites. There was one older man, an excellent fisher and skilled in all kinds of woodcraft, who was pleased to look upon my house as a building erected for the convenience of fishermen; and I was equally pleased when he sat in my doorway to arrange his lines. Once in a while we sat together on the pond, he at one end of the boat, and I at the other; but not many words passed between us, for he had grown deaf in his later years, but he occasionally hummed a psalm, which harmonized well enough with my philosophy. Our intercourse was thus altogether one of unbroken harmony, far more pleasing to remember than if it had been carried on by speech. (Thoreau 94)

The way Thoreau describes his relationship with his fellow-townsmen takes in my opinion a ridiculous turn though when he attempts to castigate them regarding their project to bring water into their home instead of coming to the pond to bathe! Nevertheless, such a poetic and vivid opposition to the project brings great pleasure to the reader (“*that Trojan horse, with a thousand men in his belly, introduced by mercenary Greeks!*”) who is the main beneficiary of such a diverting prose.

Now the trunks of trees on the bottom, and the old log canoe, and the dark surrounding woods, are gone, and the villagers, who scarcely know where it lies, instead of going to the pond to bathe or drink, are thinking to bring its water, which should be as sacred as the Ganges at least, to the village in a pipe, to wash their dishes with!—to earn their Walden by the turning of a cock or drawing of a plug! That devilish Iron Horse, whose ear-rending neigh is heard throughout the town, has muddied the Boiling Spring with his foot, and he it is that has browsed off all the woods on Walden shore, that Trojan horse, with a thousand men in his belly, introduced by mercenary Greeks! Where is the country’s champion, the Moore of Moore Hill, to meet him at the Deep Cut and thrust an avenging lance between the ribs of the bloated pest? (Thoreau 104)

The ambivalence of water as a source of both solitude and human interactions also prevails in Glissant’s works. Like Thoreau, he is an architect of the imaginary landscape. We will use the song III of his poem *Les Indes* to showcase Glissant’s work on conquistadores, brought to the Americas by the sea.

Nous publions ici le troisième Chant d'un poème épique de Edouard Glissant : Les Indes, poème qui a pour sujet l'aventure du Nouveau Monde, depuis sa découverte en 1492. Les Chants I et II sont consacrés au Départ des aventuriers et à leur Voyage. Le Chant III est celui de la Conquête. C'est un Chant d'amour entre le Conquistador (cupide et mystique à la fois, il saccage tout, à la recherche de l'or, de l'argent, des pierres précieuses) et la Terre nouvelle, terre rouge qui refuse de dévoiler le secret de ses mines. Le Chant s'achève lorsque le Conquérant s'apprête à repeupler la terre qu'il a dévastée. Il en résultera la Traite des Nègres, qui est le thème du Chant Quatrième. (Préface, Glissant 970)

We publish here the third Song of an epic poem by Edouard Glissant: The Indies, a poem which has as its subject the adventure of the New World, since its discovery in 1492. Songs I and II are devoted to the Departure of the adventurers and their Trip. Song III is that of the Conquest. It is a song of love between the Conquistador (greedy and mystical at the same time, he ransacks everything, in search of gold, silver, precious stones) and the New Earth, red earth which refuses to reveal the secret of its mines. The Song ends when the Conqueror prepares to repopulate the land he has devastated. This will result in the Trafficking of Negroes, which is the theme of the Fourth Song. (Preface, Glissant 970)
[Translation]

This poem precedes the slavery which occurs in the song IV. It is thus a poetic representation of the conquest by the conquistadores of the New World. It is interesting to see that Glissant, contrary to Thoreau, gives very few details of the movements which take place. Glissant keeps the action blurry, and therefore gives us more to imagine. Everything starts with the landing of the conquistadores and the bloody massacres which follow.

Chaque vaisseau séduit sa baie silencieuse ; mystère de sable... « Battez la charge ! Frappez l'eau ! Clameurs, débroussaillez la solitude vierge ! (Glissant 971)

Each vessel seduces its silent bay; sand mystery ... "Beat the load!" Hit the water! Clamor, clear the virgin solitude! (Glissant 971) [Translation]

Immediately, Glissant indicates that the sea, the water, bring no solitude but an avid crowd of settlers and killers: “*débroussaillez la solitude vierge !*”. They arrived to take the resources of the natives (“*Et tendez vos trésors à vos conquistadores !*”) and there is no doubt that Glissant provides here again a harsh criticism of religion brought to the New World by the sea: “*Et s’il refuse l’eau qui nous blanchit de ce péché, là sur son front, Alors [...] qu’on le brûle !*”, (“*And if he refuses the water that whitens us from this sin[...] let’s burn him!*”). Such depiction of the men brought from Europe by the Atlantic sea echoes Thoreau’s account of religion. The tone is of course very different. When Thoreau gently mocks an « *ancient sect of Cœnobites* », Glissant warns of the dangers, the authoritarian aspect of Catholicism, brought forth with “*harquebuses*”.

Venez sur le rivage de votre âme ! Et tendez vos trésors à vos conquistadores ! » Mais le rivage sommeillait dans son éternité. (Glissant 972)

Moi, dont le sang fut lavé!... Et s'il refuse l'eau qui nous blanchit de ce péché, là sur son front, Alors qu'on dresse, parmi l'or, la flamme juste d'un bûcher, et qu'on le brûle ! (Glissant 974)

Plus une feuille qui ne soit marquée du sceau des arquebuses !

Plus une pierre, que n'ait pesée notre balance ! C'est justice. Et si les Indes ne sont pas de ce côté où tu te couches, que m'importe !

Inde je te dirai. Inde de l'Ouest : afin que je regagne mon rêve.

Afin que rien ici ne soit perdu, de ce songe effaré! L'image est bonne, et je la garde.

Maintenant, lève-toi, nous chargerons les lourds vaisseaux. »

La femme se taisait, si belle, en son éternité. (Glissant 975)

A boire l'air des profondeurs, à manger l'eau du ciel, et ses poissons !...

L'homme est ce dieu, quand il tue l'homme, ou l'humilie d'eau sainte ; quand il pèse. (Glissant 976)

Come to the shore of your soul! And offer your treasures to your conquistadors! But the shore was dormant in its eternity. (Glissant 972)

Me, whose blood was washed! ... And if he refuses the water that whitens us from sins, there on his forehead, Then we set up, among the gold, the just flame of a pyre, and let's burn him! (Glissant 974)

No more a leaf that is not marked with the seal of the harquebuses!

No more a stone, than our scales weighed! It's justice. And if the Indies are not on this side where you lie, it does not matter to me!

India I will tell you. West India: so that I can regain my dream.

So that nothing here is lost, of this frightened dream! The image is good, and I keep it.

Now get up, we'll load the heavy ships. "

The woman was silent, so beautiful, in her eternity. (Glissant 975)

To drink the air from the depths, to eat the water from the sky, and its fish! ...

Man is this god, when he kills man, or humiliates him with holy water ; when it weighs. (Glissant 976) [Translation]

Once again, Glissant differs from Thoreau by showcasing the negativity brought by salt water, the sea, into human lives. Once again, the analysis of these authors confirms the duality of water (pond vs. sea, positive vs negative) as well as its ambivalence (solitude vs. human interactions). This duality, this ambivalence enriches the poetics of water in the works of Thoreau and Glissant, which, in turn, certainly benefit the reader. Indeed, the latter follows an imaginary architecture of the landscape created by the poet, and put in motion by water.

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