REBECCA SOLNIT

The conversation that Thoreau began continues unabated. Here, Rebecca Solnit (b. 1961) reflects on the ways that environmentalism has often gone astray by concentrating only on part of his message. Solnit is a good example of the re-integration—her sharp essays, most recently collected in Storming the Gates of Paradise (2007), combine a love for the American West with a devotion to justice that takes her from the street battles in Seattle during the WTO protests to the barrios of the border towns. Her work appears in places that would seem familiar to Thoreau (this comes from Orion magazine, the most prominent forum for environmental writing in the country) and those that have arisen only in this century (she’s a prominent voice at tomdispatch.org, a popular website). But her message—that environmentalism is about who we are and how we’re going to live—comes full circle from that Concord cabin. With luck, Solnit and the other recent voices in this collection will provide as sturdy a foundation for future thinking.

The Thoreau Problem

Thoreau was emphatic about the huckleberries. In one of his two most famous pieces of writing, “Civil Disobedience,” he concluded his account of a night in Concord’s jail with, “I was put in jail as I was going to the shoemaker’s to get a shoe which was mended. When I was let out the next morning, I proceeded to finish my errand, and having put on my mended shoe, joined a huckleberry party.” He told the same story again in Walden, this time saying that he “returned to the woods in season to get my dinner of huckleberries on Fair-Haven Hill.” That he told it twice suggests that he considered the conjunction of prisons and berry parties, of the landscape of incarceration and of pastoral pleasure, significant. But why?
The famous night in jail took place about halfway through his stay on Emerson's woodlot at Walden Pond. His two-year stint in the small cabin he built himself is often portrayed as a monastic retreat from the world of human affairs into the world of nature, though he went back to town to eat and talk with friends and family and to pick up money doing odd jobs that didn't fit into Walden's narrative. He went to jail not only because he felt passionately enough about national affairs—slavery and the war on Mexico—to refuse to pay his tax, but also because the town jailer ran into him while he was getting his shoe mended.

Says the introduction to my paperback edition of Walden and "Civil Disobedience": "As much as Thoreau wanted to disentangle himself from other people's problems so he could get on with his own life, he sometimes found that the issue of black slavery spoiled his country walks. His social conscience impinged on his consciousness, even though he believed that his duty was not to eradicate social evils but to live his life independently. To believe this is to believe that the woods were far from Concord jail not merely by foot but by thought. To believe that conscience is an imposition upon consciousness is to regard engagement as a hijacker rather than a rudder, interference with one's true purpose rather than perhaps at least part of that purpose.

Thoreau did not believe so or wish that it were so, and he contradicted this isolationist statement explicitly in "Civil Disobedience" (completed, unlike Walden, shortly after those years in the woods), but many who have charge of his reputation do. These scholars and critics permit no conversation, let alone any unity, between Thoreau the rebel, intransigent muse to Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and that other Thoreau who wrote about autumnal tints, ice, light, color, grasses, woodchucks, and other natural histories, essays easily and often defanged and diced up into inspiring extracts. But for Thoreau, any subject was a good enough starting point to travel any distance, toward any destination.

This compartmentalizing of Thoreau is a microcosm of a larger partition in American thought, a fence built in the belief that places in the imagination can be contained. Those who deny that nature and culture,
The Thoreau Problem

landscape and politics, the city and the country are inextricably inter-
sewed and have undermined the connections for all of us (so few have been
able to find Thoreau's short, direct route between them since). This
makes politics dreary and landscape trivial, a vacation site. It banishes
certain thoughts, including the thought that much of what the environ-
mental movement dubbed wilderness was or is indigenous homeland—
a very social and political space indeed, then and now—and especially
the thought that Thoreau in jail must have contemplated the following
day's huckleberry party, and Thoreau among the huckleberries must
have ruminated on his stay in jail.

If "black slavery spoiled his country walks," it spoiled the slaves.'

country walks even more. Thus the unresisting walk to jail. "Eastward, I
go only by force but westward I go free," Thoreau wrote. His thoughts on
the matter might be summed up this way: You head for the hills to enjoy
the best of what the world is at this moment; you head for confrontation,
for resistance, for picket lines to protect it, to liberate it. Thus it is that the
road to paradise often runs through prison, thus it is that Thoreau went
to jail to enjoy a better country, and thus it is that one of his greatest stu-
dents, Martin Luther King Jr., found himself in jail and eventually in the
way of a bullet on what got called the long road to freedom, whose goal
he spoke of as the mountaintop.

Conventional environmental writing has often maintained a strict
silence on or even an animosity toward the city, despite its importance
as a lower-impact place for the majority to live, its intricate relations to
the rural, and the direct routes between the two. Imagining the woods
or any untrammeled landscape as an unsocial place, an outside, also
depends on erasing those who dwelt and sometimes still dwell there,
the original Americans—and one more thing that can be said in favor
of Thoreau is that he spent a lot of time imaginatively repopulating
with Indians the woods around Concord, and even prepared quantities
of notes for a never-attempted history of Native America.

Not that those woods were unsocial even after the aboriginal popu-
lation was driven out. "Visitors" was one of the chapters of Walden, and
in it he describes meeting in the woods and guiding farther on the road
to freedom runaway slaves. Rather than ruining his country walks,
Rebecca Solnit

some slaves joined him on them, or perhaps he joined them in the act of becoming free. Some of those he guided were on the Underground Railroad, in which his mother and sisters in Concord were deeply involved, and a few months after that famous night in jail Thoreau hosted a meeting of Concord's most important abolitionist group, the Concord Female Anti-Slavery Society, at his Walden Pond hut. What kind of a forest was this, with slaves, rebels, and the ghosts of the original inhabitants all moving through the trees?

If he went to jail to demonstrate his commitment to the freedom of others, he went to the berries to exercise his own recovered freedom, the liberty to do whatever he wished, and the evidence in all his writing is that he very often wished to pick berries. There's a widespread belief, among both activists and those who chuck disapprovingly over insufficiently austere activists, that idealists should not enjoy any pleasure denied to others, that beauty, sensuality, delight all ought to be stalled behind some dam that only the imagined revolution will break. This schism creates, as the alternative to a life of selfless devotion, a life of flight from engagement, which seems to be one way those years at Walden Pond are sometimes portrayed. But change is not always by revolution, the deprived don't generally wish that the rest of us would join them in deprivation, and a passion for justice and pleasure in small things are not incompatible. That's part of what the short jaunt from jail to hill says.

Perhaps prison is anything that severs and alienates, paradise is the reclaimed commons with the fences thrown down, and so any step toward connection and communion is a step toward paradise, even if the route detours through jail. Thoreau was demonstrating on that one day in Concord in June of 1847 both what dedication to freedom was and what enjoyment of freedom might look like—free association, free roaming, the picking of the fruits of the Earth for free, free choice of commitments. That is the direct route to paradise, the one road worth traveling.

Orion, May/June 2007