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# The emergence and evolution of trans-corporeality in Charles Darwin's *On The Origin of Species* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and "Walking"

Adam Frederick Haenlein  
*Iowa State University*

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**The emergence and evolution of trans-corporeality in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and "Walking"**

by

**Adam Haenlein**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Program of Study Committee:  
Sean Grass, Major Professor  
Constance Post  
Robin Veldman

Iowa State University

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF FIGURES .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER I AN INTRODUCTION TO DARWIN AND THOREAU’S WORLD OF TRANS-CORPOREALITY.....	1
CHAPTER II THE MILTONIC “TREE OF LIFE” AND TRANS-CORPOREALITY IN CHARLES DARWIN’S <i>ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES</i> .....	10
1. Darwin and His Origin .....	10
2. Malthus and Milton .....	12
3. Dennett, Thoreau, and the Tree of Life .....	18
4. The Grotesque .....	28
5. Nothing to Fear from Extinction .....	31
CHAPTER III GROTESQUE TRANS-CORPOREALITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN HENRY DAVID THOREAU’S <i>WALDEN</i> AND “WALKING”.....	37
1. Trans-Atlantic Connections .....	37
2. Early American Gothic .....	39
3. The Grotesque in Nature .....	42
4. Thoreau Faces the Darkness .....	46
5. Posthumous Sentiments on the Wilderness .....	55
CHAPTER IV CONCLUSION .....	61
WORKS CITED .....	65
WORKS CONSULTED .....	68

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1 Tree of Life – Dendrogram .....	22
Figure 2 Tree of Life – Zoomed .....	22

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## ABSTRACT

“The Emergence and Evolution of Trans-Corporeality in Charles Darwin’s *On The Origin of Species* and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and ‘Walking’” attempts to establish a nineteenth-century, trans-Atlantic connection between English naturalist Charles Darwin and American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau by considering the manner in which each author’s seminal work considers the relationship between human beings and the natural world. By considering the lens of twenty-first century scholar Stacy Alaimo, whose concept of trans-corporeality suggests that all organic beings are inseparably linked to their environments, readers will discover that such interconnected sentiments have existed in our society even before Darwin and Thoreau’s time, but their seminal texts specifically stress that humanity has nothing to fear from such connections. To address these fears, I argue that Darwin uses his concept of a metaphorical “Tree of Life” to challenge the Malthusian fear that human beings will inevitably go extinct by depleting their natural resources and instead argues that humanity has a vested interest in living harmoniously with all manner of flora and fauna. Across the Atlantic, Thoreau uses Transcendentalist sentiments to challenge American Gothic writers who fear humanity’s interconnected link with the wilderness, a phenomenon I refer to as “grotesque trans-corporeality.” Overall, I argue that it is concerning how both Darwin and Thoreau’s sentiments about humanity’s close, trans-corporeal connections to the natural world occasionally go unnoticed in important environmental scholarship.

## CHAPTER I: AN INTRODUCTION TO DARWIN AND THOREAU'S WORLD OF TRANS-CORPOREALITY

At first glance, Charles Darwin and Henry David Thoreau – both giants of nineteenth-century intellectual life – may not seem to have had much in common. Darwin was an English naturalist and geologist who studied to be a clergyman, attempted a career in medicine, and eventually became the progenitor of modern evolutionary biology. His studies culminated in him taking part in the voyage of the *Beagle*, which led to the inception of his theory of evolution and natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Thoreau, on the other hand, was an American author and philosopher whose role as one of the leading members of the Transcendentalist movement influenced him to abandon society for nearly two years to seek the spiritual comforts and occasional isolation of the natural world, which he carefully reflected upon in *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). Despite their obvious differences, they wrote their seminal works roughly five years apart, and they used those works in part to ponder a common question: if “civilized man” really is just as much of a rooted, corporeal agent as other organisms in the environment, how do human beings fit into the natural world order? To approach this question, Darwin focused more on the scientific, biological aspects of humanity’s origins, though he often tailored his arguments anecdotally and through literary allusions, for instance by using John Milton’s poetry to explain the paradoxically beautiful and terrifying aspects of nature. Conversely, Thoreau chose to explore how human beings fit emotionally into the natural world in a relatively new society that had shifted its focus towards expansion and industrialism. In doing so, he challenged the inner fears that many Gothic writers held for the often-grotesque qualities of the wilderness in nineteenth-century America.

In this thesis, I explore the close relationship between natural selection and transcendentalism – a relationship that is often ignored in nineteenth-century scholarship – in order to argue that Darwin’s *Origin* and Thoreau’s *Walden* posit a strong interconnection between human beings and other natural organisms, similar to what twenty-first century environmental scholar Stacy Alaimo calls “trans-corporeality,” or the inseparable interconnections between all organic beings. As this thesis is also a trans-Atlantic exploration of humanity’s relationship with nature, I additionally argue that this interconnected relationship is exactly what early American Gothic writers found to be so terrifying about their close proximity to the Western frontier, prompting Thoreau to embark upon his experiment at Walden Pond to combat the country’s unjust interpretation of what I will refer to as “grotesque trans-corporeality.” Despite their differences, in other words, Darwin and Thoreau came together intellectually at a key point during the nineteenth century: both emphasize just how interconnected human beings are within their environments and with the natural world as a whole. Moreover, both make the case that humanity should feel emboldened by such interconnected sentiments instead of viewing them as terrifying concepts.

Alaimo briefly invokes Darwin to make her own points about the importance of embracing concepts of interconnectedness and supporting environmentally sound practices. In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), Alaimo argues that human beings should champion a new definition of the environment that she calls trans-corporeality, which is the belief that human beings are completely inseparable from the natural world, from the food we consume to the very air that we breathe and exhale. Humans do not necessarily live in a particular environment, she writes, so much as our bodies quite literally represent that environment. She considers the perspectives of those who are interested in environmental studies



and feminist theory, though one could argue that her specific focus is on environmental justice – the doctrine of fair treatment for all living things from discriminated minority groups to the natural ecosystem of all flora and fauna (x). Such sustainable practices are also present in Darwin’s and Thoreau’s work. Specifically, both Darwin’s and Thoreau’s texts can be analyzed according to their strong arguments for embracing ideologies similar to the theory of trans-corporeality, as far as the theory itself relates to both a Darwinian and a Thoreauvian lens.

Because the concept of trans-corporeality is so seminal to the arguments of this project, major sections of each chapter will be devoted to explaining Darwin’s and Thoreau’s influences upon this theory. For example, Alaimo’s main argument in her first chapter, “Bodily Natures” is that humanity must embrace her new definition of trans-corporeality because the term “environment” is nothing but a cold, lost word. To Alaimo, the environment has been drained of all that has previously been recognized as “nature,” and it has become nothing but an empty space; a playground for human “development” (1-2). Therefore, before the human species (with its racist, classist, and capitalist ideologies) does any more lasting harm to the natural world, she argues that it is imperative that we embrace a new definition of the environment – trans-corporeality. If this notion were actually put into practice, she argues that it could produce potent ethical and political possibilities for the sustainability of the natural world, at least as far as we consider human corporeality existing within the more-than-human world.

However, the major weakness with Alaimo’s text is that it seems to argue that her theory of trans-corporeality is somehow a new, refreshing way to look at humanity’s interaction with the natural world. Yet reading Darwin’s *Origin* or Thoreau’s *Walden* reveals that this notion of trans-corporeality has actually existed through Trans-Atlantic perspectives for more than a century. Moreover, while Alaimo does write explicitly about Darwin, she never mentions

Thoreau's sentiments about embracing humanity's interconnection to the natural world, a very curious omission since Alaimo argues for a version of the same kinds of social and political change that Thoreau championed in the middle of the nineteenth century. Yet, by and large, society has ignored Thoreau's plea, and it may well ignore Alaimo's since she covers similar ground but without much acknowledgment that this battle has been fought – and, arguably, lost – before. Thoreau wished for humanity to strike a healthy balance between industrializing our society and embracing the innate knowledge that can be attained when individuals interact with their local bioregions. Society has ignored this plea, as evidenced by the fact that we need to specify the term “trans-corporeality” in the first place.

In her sixth chapter, “Genetics, Material Agency, and the Evolution of Posthuman Environmental Ethics in Science Fiction,” Alaimo does acknowledge that Darwin's theories likely provoked “a rich ethical sense of kinship between the human and other animals” while also denying us “the mental or spiritual exceptionalism that underwrites the untrammled use of the rest of the world” (151). However, when she explains that “many humans remain repulsed by the idea of their own animality, as displayed by horror films such as *The Island of Dr. Moreau*,” she ultimately misses an opportunity to credit Darwin as the mutual, shared progenitor of posthumanism, “in which there are no solid demarcations between human and animal and in which the human is coextensive with the emergent natural/cultural world,” and she misses the chance also to acknowledge Thoreau's equally important contribution in influencing nineteenth-century audiences to accept and embrace humanity's trans-corporeality (151).

For example, Thoreau explores the wonder of humanity's animality as well as our less than exceptional footing in the natural world order in “Spring,” in which he describes finding a dead horse on the path to his house. The creature has been rotting for some time, and seeing the

natural world breaking down and absorbing the horse's body so ravenously makes Thoreau reflect upon "the assurance it gave [him] of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature" (213). However, Thoreau feels no fear for this frightening example of the grotesque and powerful dominance of the wilderness. Therefore, when Alaimo makes her arguments that humans fear their own animality and that they could be so easily consumed by the natural world, she seems to be channeling Thoreau, and his objection to his Gothic contemporaries, without even realizing it.

Just like Thoreau's work, Darwin's writing has had a major influence upon the theory of trans-corporeality. For example, in Chapter IV of *Origin*, Darwin uses his accumulated research of different flora and fauna that he gathered more than twenty years previously during the voyage of the Beagle to create a metaphor for the creation of all life. In this metaphor, his Tree of Life, Darwin helps his Victorian audience visualize how all species are interconnected through evolution, extinction, and descent. Therefore, though Alaimo has proposed that we embrace her understanding of the environment as a trans-corporeal entity, she is not offering a novel theory. Darwin did not use the term "trans-corporeality," but he did articulate humanity's interconnected relationship with nature and the rest of life on this planet in his explanation of the Tree of Life, "which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications" (135).

The second chapter of my thesis, titled "The Miltonic 'Tree of Life' and Trans-Corporeality in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*," takes this idea as its central concern. There I argue that Darwin challenges the nineteenth-century's Malthusian fear that human beings will inevitably go extinct by depleting their natural resources and instead argues that humanity has a vested interest in living harmoniously with all manner of flora and fauna.

Moreover, just as Alaimo argues that humanity should embrace its trans-corporeality, Darwin's *Origin* argues for a similarly interconnected existence between human beings and the natural world by using his metaphor of a great Tree of Life. In fact, Darwin himself had anticipated the possibility that his *Origin* would be met with harsh criticism and in some cases outright fear, for several naturalists in the middle of the nineteenth century still adhered to Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798), in which he argues that every single species of plants and animals could hypothetically ravage all natural resources in the world if its propagation went unchecked by society. However, Darwin's theory of a metaphorical Tree of Life, which he drew from Milton's early masque *Comus* (1634), challenged such contemporary theories. In Milton's narrative, the characters of Comus and the Lady debate whether or not the resources of the world are meant to be consumed for the pleasure of mankind, for both stake their claims on the assumption that mankind is the center of all consideration in the universe, much like Darwin's Victorian audience.

By drawing upon this narrative, Darwin anticipates the opposition from the Malthusian naturalists, and he argues in *Origin* that humanity's central position in an all-powerful "great chain of being" is a fallacy that must be reconsidered. His arguments did not go unchallenged, for he writes in his letters that even some of his closest friends were hesitant to support *Origin*. Even so, he did not blame his other colleagues for going to the "odious trouble" of defending him (Darwin, *Evolution* 14). In fact, he encourages readers to consider the perspective that all species and all forms of life live in tandem with each other and are dependent upon the careful balance of ecosystems harmonizing together. Of course, this notion that all forms of life are constantly in the balance and are susceptible to extinction remains a paradoxically beautiful and frightening notion. Much of Darwin's nineteenth-century audience looked upon *Origin's*

arguments as a threat towards the perceived superiority of human beings. More recently however, texts such as Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) have argued that Darwin's theories of evolution and descent celebrate universal and cosmic connections between all forms of life rather than abandoning spirituality and moral principles. In doing so, Darwin argues in *Origin* that the process of evolution through natural selection offers a much more interconnected view of humanity within nature than his contemporaries were prone to recognize – a view that uses his spiritual metaphor of a great Tree of Life to posit that human beings should not fear their trans-corporeality, for although all individual lives must come to an end, extinction will always produce new life, filling “the crust of the earth” with the “dead and broken branches” of those who have returned to nature (Darwin, *Origin* 135).

The “beautiful ramifications” of such realities were not lost on Darwin's American readers. Much of Darwin's English audience interpreted his theory of natural selection as an ugly suggestion that there is no meaning to life, for if all forms of life are represented equally on his great Tree of Life, what purpose does humanity serve that cannot be met by other creatures or species? Across the Atlantic, nineteenth-century American settlers also wrestled with the notion that all forms of life are equal and connected. Living in an age dominated by concepts of individualism excited some, but many others feared their close proximity to the wilderness. Though the Western frontier often invited feelings of freedom and a break from regimented society, it also induced feelings of terror and madness for many Gothic writers and novelists. In response to this fear, stories of humanity living in connection with the American wilderness presented the suggestion that such human concepts as morality and “civilization” are false ideas, and that human beings possess no better an inner “nature” than the birds and beasts wandering the forests and swamps of the strange and mysterious Western landscape.

Examining this frightful phenomenon through a Thoreauvian lens, the third chapter of my thesis, titled “Grotesque Trans-Corporeality and Spiritualism in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and ‘Walking,’” argues that American audiences feared humanity’s interconnection with nature, especially considering that many Americans in the nineteenth century still wrestled with their own individual identities when faced against the chaotic landscape of a strange and wild wilderness. In popular Gothic fiction, this phenomenon produced an element of terror that I will refer to as “grotesque trans-corporeality,” an overwhelming sense of fear and dread that Americans experienced while living in close proximity to the transformative powers of nature. The chapter will therefore examine the evolution of certain nineteenth-century Gothic narratives, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Roger Malvin’s Burial” (1846), to argue that the close, inseparable link with the natural world that Darwin discusses in *Origin* is exactly what American audiences found to be terrifying and grotesque about the wilderness, and is exactly what Thoreau fights against in his work.

American settlers had left behind the architectural ruins of Great Britain, with its abandoned castles and church graveyards, and they no longer possessed these Gothic environments to reflect upon their fearful melancholy of the human spirit. Instead of haunted ruins, they possessed only a haunted wilderness. As a response to this reaction from the Gothic writers of his time, Thoreau argues in both *Walden* and “Walking” (1851) that it is not the natural world but rather society itself that can be toxic and dangerous for the individual spirit, and humanity should try to embrace its interconnectedness with the natural world. Thoreau essentially challenges his Gothic contemporaries by foreshadowing Darwin’s call to “regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature” (Thoreau, “Walking” 260). By doing so, he suggests that humanity should not fear its close connection to nature; rather, people should fully

embrace the beauty of their own interconnection with the natural world. Therefore, Thoreau makes numerous observations in *Walden* that point to his understanding of humanity's trans-corporeality. At the same time, he challenges America's nineteenth-century view that humanity's trans-corporeality was frightening and grotesque.

Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality is in some ways a freshly recycled examination of these environmental ideologies and concerns that are not always reflected upon in our culture, though these environmental stances could be much stronger by acknowledging the contributions that both Darwin and Thoreau had upon her theory of trans-corporeality. *Bodily Natures* is essentially a call-to-arms for all scholars concerned with environmental justice, especially as society continues to exploit the natural landscapes of other forms of corporeality. However, in my concluding chapter I argue that, as necessary as this call-to-arms may be to the survival of sustainable practices, both nineteenth-century and environmental scholars would benefit from re-reading and embracing the trans-corporeality that both Darwin and Thoreau found in their exploration of humanity's existence within the natural world, especially if they have a mutual appreciation for supporting such sustainable practices in our environment.

CHAPTER II: THE MILTONIC “TREE OF LIFE” AND TRANS-CORPOREALITY IN  
CHARLES DARWIN’S *ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES*

As buds give rise by growth to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch out and overtop on all sides many a feebler branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications.

– Darwin, *Origin* 135

1. Darwin and His Origin

When he published his meticulously researched *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, Darwin shocked the world by refuting the longstanding belief in the individual creation of each species, establishing in its place the theory that all life descended from a common ancestor. For Darwin, this ancestral history could be represented with his image of the great “Tree of Life,” to which all living things could trace their origins. Of course, this was an incredibly controversial suggestion that contradicted both contemporary scientific and religious beliefs, some of which supported a division among both species and social classes. By extension, Darwin introduced the idea that humans were not the special products of divine creation “but evolved according to principles that operate everywhere else in the living world” (Mayr 23). Darwin upset notions of a perfectly designed, benign world that merely exists alongside humanity for our pleasure, substituting instead a concept of competitive struggle for survival. In other words, he suggested that humanity lives alongside other species as part of a natural order much larger than just the human race itself. Therefore, I argue that while his arguments in *Origin* were both controversial and revolutionary, Darwin’s view of nature did not posit the ugly, “survival of the fittest” mentality that eventually became popular through the influence of well-known biologists such as Herbert Spencer and Sir Francis Galton. Rather, Darwin’s understanding of the natural world offers a



much more interconnected view of humanity within nature than his contemporaries were prone to recognize – a view that argues against a Malthusian fear of fecundity and posits both biological and spiritual connection with the natural world, after the fashion of what might now be considered by “trans-corporeality.”

Darwin faced challenges while promoting his theory of natural selection in the nineteenth century, meeting essentially with the same opposition that his supporters encounter today: that his plot of natural selection and “survival of the fittest” was vicious and dangerous, both socially and spiritually. Even Darwin’s close friend Leonard Jenyns admitted in an 1860 letter that he was “not one of those in the habit of mixing up questions of science and scripture,” and that he could not bring himself to believe that “man’s reasoning faculties & above all his moral sense” could have in any way been “obtained from irrational progenitors, by mere natural selection” (*Evolution* 2). In the same year, Darwin admitted in a letter to T. H. Huxley that his friends and defenders had the biggest reason to be upset with him: “I often think that my friends...have good cause to hate me, for having stirred up so much mud, & led them into so much odious trouble” (14). However, in the same letter he goes on to clarify that “if I had not stirred up the mud someone else certainly soon would” (14). This statement suggests that, though his theories were controversial, the topic of mankind’s interconnection with the natural world and spiritual questions of whether morality could exist in nature were, at the very least, topics that other intellectuals, such as Alfred Russell Wallace, had been considering for decades, which spurred Darwin on to reveal publicly his carefully considered theories of natural selection.

However, although Darwin’s theory of natural selection seemingly depicts a startling reality of how harsh life can sometimes be for specific species, critical distinctions in Darwin’s arguments point to humanity’s interconnection with the natural world as being preferable to the

proposed existence of a benevolent, yet ultimately passive creator. In an 1860 letter to Asa Gray, a Harvard botanist and correspondent of Darwin's, Darwin wrote: "I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do...evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us" (11). He argues that there seems to be "too much misery in the world" and that he "cannot persuade [himself] that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the Ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice" (11). Through his own lifelong research he had become, according to Huxley's new terminology, an agnostic, and like many other Victorian agnostics, "he exemplified in his life and work a high-minded benevolence, kindness, and generosity not only to other people but to all creatures;" he wrote constantly about "grandeur," particularly the "beautiful" and "wonderful" forms of life in the natural world (Appleman 4). The point is that, though the world is often cruel to individuals, the human species has nothing to fear from embracing Darwin's enthusiasm for our interconnection with the planet and from the fecundity that leads to increased variability and increased potential for change and development, but this was not what all Victorians believed at the time.

## 2. Malthus and Milton

Based on Malthus's writing concerning population and Milton's intuitive retelling of the Genesis story, I suggest that both men influenced greatly Darwin's work on evolution and natural selection. In the middle of the nineteenth century, many naturalists still aligned themselves with Malthus's claims that "the germs of existence contained in this earth, if they could freely develop themselves, would fill millions of worlds in the course of a few 1000 years" (5). Only scarcity of food, "that imperious, all pervading law of nature," restrains them from

doing so, such that “[t]he race of plants and the race of animals shrink under this great restrictive law; and man cannot by any efforts of reason escape from it” (5). According to literary critic Gillian Beer in *Darwin’s Plots* (1983), Malthus feared that every plant or animal species whose propagation went unchecked could “rapidly colonize,” taking over the entire world and leaving nothing for other species (29). For Malthus, unchecked propagation was dangerous for humans as well and should be prevented with draconian methods of suppression amongst the poor. But Darwin felt that fecundity was a liberating principle, and he anticipated that there would be opposition to his theories of evolution and natural selection from those “simple naturalists” who still followed Malthus’s theories on propagation (*Evolution* 10). Malthus was a major influence upon Darwin; however, his essay on propagation did not ultimately offer a more complete narrative of humanity’s inseparable link with the natural world than Darwin’s theories did (10). Therefore, he needed to address and debate such problems of fecundity that his opponents would find in his arguments, and he found such inspiration in Milton’s poetry.

Darwin’s fascination with Milton during his early years sailing aboard the *Beagle* inspired him with the imaginative sustenance not only to anticipate these problems of fecundity but also to create his metaphor of the great Tree of Life. Milton’s *Comus* stages a similar debate amongst the characters whether or not humanity is at the center of the universe and at the top of some sort of hierarchy in nature. In the poem, a woman and her two brothers are lost in the wilderness when the woman, referred to as “the Lady,” is lured away and imprisoned by the necromancer Comus. The Lady, who represents the virtuousness of temperance and chastity, engages in a psychological and philosophical battle with Comus, who is a manifestation of humanity’s self-indulgent nature. According to Gillian Beer, Darwin’s natural world seems very similar to Comus’s anti-Malthusian view of superabundance and the natural productivity of the

earth itself (30). In the play, Comus views the abundance of beauty and resources in the world as meant for man's pleasure: "Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth, / With such a full and unwithdrawing hand, / Covering the earth with odors, fruits, and flocks, / Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable, / But all to please, and sate the curious taste?" (Milton 710-4). Comus claims that not only should humanity indulge its "curious taste" to consume the resources and beautiful bounties of Nature's "unwithdrawing hand," but in fact that it is mankind's duty to do so (731). Otherwise nature itself would be wasted, and we would be overwhelmed by it: "The herds would over-multitude their Lords...If you let slip time, like a neglected rose / It withers on the stalk with languish't head. / Beauty is nature's brag, and must be shown" (743-5). To make a statement about the dangers of indulgence, Milton even goes so far as to have Comus say: "Beauty is nature's coin, must not be hoarded," suggesting that mankind's greedy and debauched tendencies extend to even the economic and capitalist environments; nature "must be shown," it "must not be hoarded" like gold or currency, but spent and used like a marketable commodity (739).

In response to Comus's libertarian arguments for nature's fecundity, the Lady argues that indulgence and debauchery come from an imbalance of want and desire among men. She suggests that, "If every just man that now pines with want / Had but a moderate and beseeeming share / Of that which lewdly-pamper'd Luxury / Now heaps upon so few with vast excess, / Nature's full blessing would be well dispens't / In unsuperfluous even proportion" (768-73). Instead of a few people consuming all that is natural and beautiful in the world to "vast excess," the Lady argues that humanity should embrace a more even distribution of wealth and resources, making her argument an interestingly modern and socialistic one. Beer argues that Darwin's preoccupations at the time that he was writing *Origin* were with fecundity and fertility, "the

mechanisms of increase and generation and the significance of these for the development of nature through time” (31). In *Comus*, the characters assume that mankind is at the center of all consideration, as far as indulging in the vast resources of the natural world is concerned, but Darwin’s goal was to displace mankind from this central position and to encourage people to consider the perspectives of other species and other forms of life on the planet. However, he had to suggest this sentiment rather delicately, and this philosophical debate between Comus and the Lady must have provided Darwin with the appropriate vantage point to anticipate and consider these Malthusian problems of fecundity and superabundance.

The inspiration Darwin drew from this debate between mind and body, rationality and libido can also be seen in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667). Not surprisingly, in his autobiography, written in 1876, Darwin states: “in my excursions during the voyage of the *Beagle*, when I could take only a single volume, I always chose Milton” (*Letters* 1: 57). In the seventh chapter of *Paradise Lost*, where the archangel Raphael gives Adam and Eve a detailed account of the creation of the earth, Milton’s language is that of superabundance and sexual congress: “...over all the face of Earth / Main Ocean flow’d, not idle, but with warm / Prolific humor soft’ning all her Globe, / Fermented the great Mother to conceive, / Sate with genial moisture, when God said, / Be gather’d now ye Waters under Heav’n / Into one place, and let dry Land appear” (VII. 278-86). As Beer explains, in *Paradise Lost* Darwin met the full poetic expression of “separate creation” – that is, of fully formed, full-grown species (31). Milton’s suggestion is that life had been ordered – “Be gather’d now” – to form from some lyrical union between Mother Nature, “the great Mother,” and a divine creator, rather than through generation or descent. It is significant that, however removed from natural selection Milton’s Genesis story appears to be, there are traces of trans-corporeality between the earth and its creatures throughout *Paradise*

*Lost*. For example, as the planet is populated by flora and fauna, the lion, “pawing to get free,” literally breaks its way out of the earth, and the stag “...from under ground / Bore up his branching head” (VII. 464 / 469-70). Such phrasing suggests that there is a deeper connection between the creatures of the earth and the planet than most readers in the seventeenth century would have believed. Darwin seems to have noticed such trans-corporeal connections between Milton’s earth and our own natural world even at an early age.

Ironically, perhaps the most tragic evidence to suggest that Milton had a striking influence on Darwin as he constructed his theories of natural selection would be the fact that, over time, he lost interest in the poet. In his autobiography, Darwin says that his “chief favorite” book was Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (*Letters* 1: 57). However, he goes on to say that his “mind has changed over the last twenty or thirty years” (81). Up to the age of thirty and beyond, he says, “poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton...gave me great pleasure and intense delight” (81). However, he then admits that he “cannot endure” reading poetry anymore. He laments this “loss of the higher aesthetic tastes,” saying that his mind “seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts” (81). Near the end of this train of thought, Darwin reflects, “if I had to live my life again, I would have made a rule to read some poetry...at least once every week; for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use” (82). He further laments that his loss of Milton and his loss of these “higher aesthetic tastes” in general constitute “a loss of happiness” and may possibly be “injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature” (82). In these assertions, Darwin echoes the lamentations of John Stuart Mill from his *Autobiography* (1873), written fifteen years prior to Darwin’s *Life and Letters*. Similar to Milton’s lost appreciation for Milton and for poetry itself, Mill recounted that

his intensive study of Latin, arithmetic, and philosophy at such a young age had existential consequences on his mental health. During some of the critical years when Darwin was developing what would eventually become his theory of evolution and natural selection, he literally carried Milton's emotional and spiritual retelling of the Genesis story with him around the world, and as he read *Comus*, *Paradise Lost*, and Milton's other works during these excursions, he must have been challenged intellectually and spiritually by conflicting thoughts of creation: one being the widely-held belief represented by Milton and religious institutions that all species had been fully formed and fully grown at their immediate origins, and the other being his own eventual hypothesis that species were not tethered to some divine chain of being but evolved generationally and from descent.

According to Nils Hellstrom, "Milton's vivid account of Creation, with the centrality it accorded to the Tree of Life, impressed young Darwin, who read descriptions of Paradise in paradisiacal places" (247). This can be seen throughout his journal during the voyage of the *Beagle*, particularly towards the end when Darwin writes: "Epithet after epithet was found too weak to convey to those who have not visited the intertropical regions, the sensation of delight which the mind experiences" (*Beagle* 367). During these later accounts, he compares the land to "one great wild, untidy, luxuriant hothouse, which nature made for her menagerie," but he goes on to say that mankind has "taken possession" of the natural world, and has "studded it with gay houses and formal gardens" (*Beagle* 367). After lamenting mankind's "possession" of the environment, Darwin bestows human qualities onto the natural world with the same tone that Thoreau and his Transcendentalist contemporaries use to discuss the spiritualism that they find in nature, such as when he calls trees "handsome," "remarkable," and "beautiful figures" to gaze upon during his daily walks (*Beagle* 368). Therefore, though humanity has generally understood

that the environment is a trans-corporeal entity for some time, Darwin would surely be the grandfather of such a theory. He did not directly use language such as “trans-corporeality,” but Darwin did articulate our interconnected relationship with nature and the rest of life on this planet in his explanation of the Tree of Life, “which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications” (*Origin* 135).

### 3. Dennett, Thoreau, and the Tree of Life

Darwin’s trans-corporeal notion that we are inseparable from all life on this planet – from the most seemingly insignificant creatures to the very environments that we cultivate to produce sustenance – is a beautiful idea that brings with it some frightening ramifications. To consider these ramifications, one must fully understand what was so frightening about Darwin’s ideas, and how he attempted to quell such fears by explaining how his metaphor of a great Tree of Life unites all species under the umbrella of trans-corporeality. Dennett uses his own fantastical explanation of an imaginary substance he calls “universal acid” to explain just how frightening the concept natural selection was for Darwin’s Victorian audience as well as for audiences today. As Dennett puts it, suppose you have a liquid that is so dangerous and so corrosive that it eats through absolutely anything. The problem then becomes: what do you keep it in? If it dissolves glass, steel, and any other material on the planet, what would happen to our world if such a substance were ever created? Dennett asks, “After everything had been transformed by its encounter with universal acid, what would the world look like?” (63). The takeaway is that Darwin’s idea of natural selection actually looks quite like Dennett’s fictional universal acid: it eats away at just about every traditional concept or explanation of life that we have hypothesized



in our history on this planet. Afterwards, it leaves behind a beautiful new understanding of our interconnected existence to all forms of life not just in our own history but throughout the earth's history as well. However, Darwin's new idea also leaves in its wake a new terrifyingly revolutionized world-view that appears to view life with no real spiritual regard.

This is why Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection can be considered to be one of our species' most important hypotheses. Dennett says it best when he explains that Darwin's theory of natural selection "unifies the realm of life, meaning, and purpose with the realm of space and time, cause and effect, mechanism and physical law" (21). His idea was a celebration of trans-corporeal, cosmic connections, not the nihilistic abandonment of spiritual principles that many have taken it to be. Unfortunately, the most common fear associated with Darwin's theory of natural selection is that it will explain away all of the morals and meanings that we have accumulated as a society throughout our world history. According to these fears, the "universal acid" of evolutionary theory has dissolved our messages and monuments, and "humanity" – or at least the part that holds spiritual and moral meaning to most people – will cease to exist. Of course, in a competitive and complex geopolitical age characterized by capitalist striving and exploitation, a more realistic fear might be that humanity's social Darwinist thinking might encourage us to deny the existence of real problems and real dangers to our species and to our trans-corporeal environment.

To use a real world example of how social Darwinist thinking leads to dangerous trans-corporeal relations, Union Carbide's 1984 toxic waste spill in Bhopal, India, still remains one of the worst social disasters that have befallen a civilization in recent memory. The Bhopal disaster is also arguably the most striking example of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," by which he means "calamities that patiently dispense their devastation while remaining outside our

flickering attention spans – and outside the purview of a spectacle-driven corporate media” (6). Nixon’s argument is that sudden, violent threats such as the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> are so terrifying and so threatening to our immediate survival that they have partially dulled our perceptions to the equally catastrophic ramifications that social disasters such as the Bhopal spill have had on entire peoples and for the natural world itself. If we take the theory of trans-corporeality seriously, these examples of slow violence are in reality very dangerous threats to all living things that coexist with the rest of the trans-corporeal world. If our commitments to sustainability and environmental justice truly attempted to function with these notions of trans-corporeality in mind, more people could possibly be educated about how social Darwinist thinking greatly disadvantages all species, specifically when the environment is compromised.

To this day, mothers in India continue to poison their infants unknowingly with toxins contained in their own breast milk. A study in 2003 indicated that toxic substances such as mercury were spilled into the ground and the soil during the Bhopal disaster, poisoning food supplies not only for the present generation but for future generations as well (Sanghi et al 73). For this reason, those who care about the sustainability of the world should have a vested interest in ideologically resisting and actively combating dangerous beliefs and practices that ignore slow violence. For those who follow and support the theory of trans-corporeality, it is about a grander sense of planet, not merely “place.” This argument can be explained by acknowledging the fact that the most tangible trans-corporeal substance is food, “since eating transforms plants and animals into human flesh” (Alaimo 12). Flesh, dirt, and even life itself are not separate or distinct concepts according to trans-corporeality. Through our own fear of accepting the notion that mankind is not divinely ordained and that we are intrinsically connected to all other “lower” forms of life on this planet, we may destroy some delicate balances in the natural world that are

both valuable and necessary to sustain our continued existence. This is why we must work hard to separate and differentiate both of these fears by reassessing what Darwin meant with his metaphor of the Tree of Life.

What Darwin discovered was not one simple narrative of our origins but rather a series of related narratives that he initially had no real way of distinguishing. Thus, before speculation and criticism of his view of natural selection could arise, he needed to defend preemptively his thesis that all life descended from common ancestors, a defense that he attempted with his explanation of the Tree of Life, where “buds give rise by growth to fresh buds” and then “overtop” the “feebler branches” in the tree (*Origin* 135). “Feebler branches” can and do “overtop” other creatures of course, but the fact that all buds and branches stem from the same tree told an evolutionary narrative that was important for all of his readers to understand. In Chapter XIII of *Origin*, Darwin further helps his readers visualize the trans-corporeal nature of his Tree of Life through the process of extinction. For Darwin, extinction was the key to explaining how all forms of life are inseparably connected:

Extinction has only separated groups: it has by no means made them; for if every form which has ever lived on this earth were suddenly to reappear, though it would be quite impossible to give definitions by which each group could be distinguished from other groups, as all would blend together by steps as fine as those between the finest existing varieties, nevertheless a natural classification, or at least a natural arrangement, would be possible. (*Origin* 155)

Using the process of extinction to explain how humanity’s origins are interconnected and perhaps even “spiritually” aligned with the rest of life on this planet is certainly an effective way to structure an argument for natural selection, and this is demonstrated in the following images:

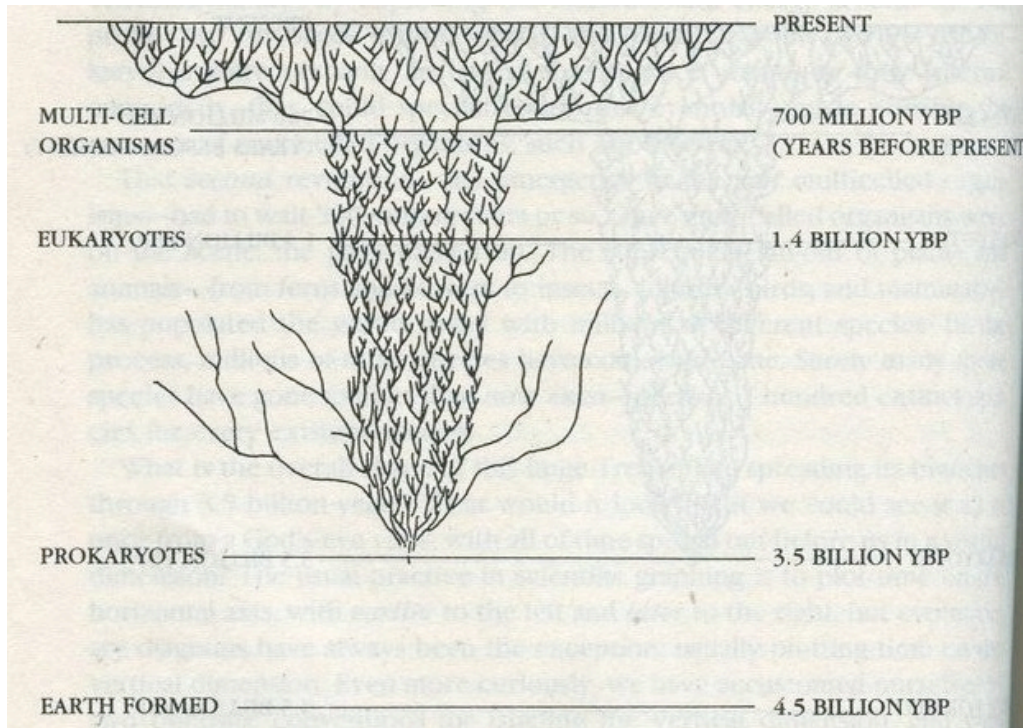


Fig. 1. Tree of Life – Dendrogram. Dennett, Daniel C. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. 88.

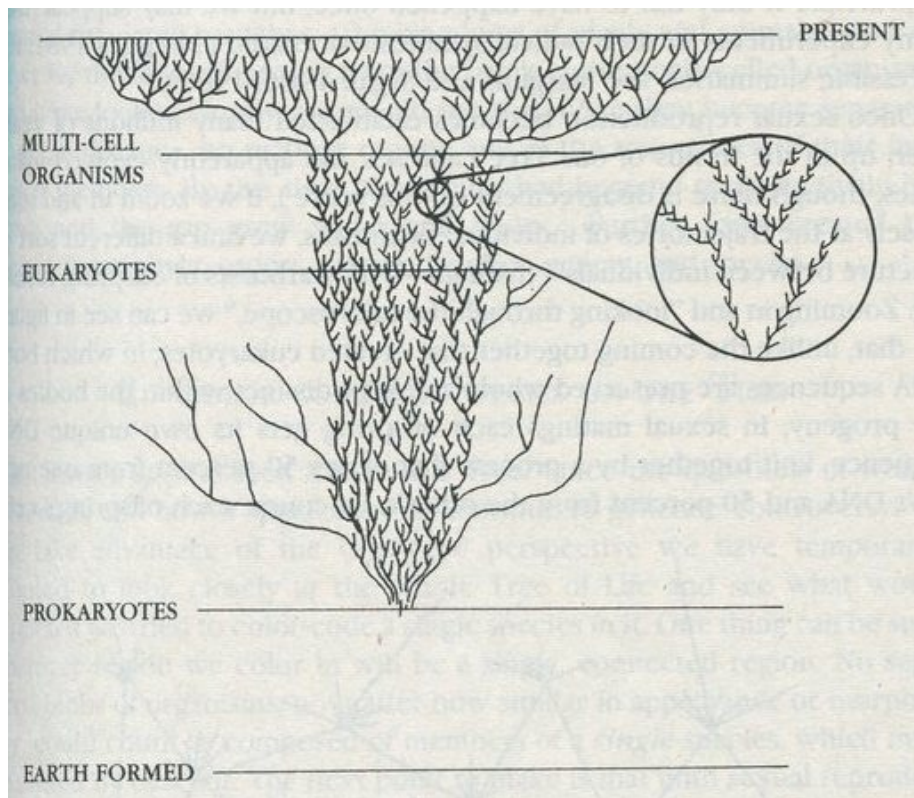


Fig. 2. Tree of Life – Zoomed. Dennett, Daniel C. *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. 89.

Using the process of extinction to explain how humanity's origins are interconnected and perhaps even "spiritually" aligned with the rest of life on this planet is certainly an effective way to structure an argument for natural selection. If readers were to look at figures of Darwin's Tree of Life as illustrated by Dennett (Fig. 1.), they would see that its ever-spreading branches, dating as far back as 3.5 billion years, make the division of species look particularly miniscule from a god's-eye perspective, for the innumerable distinct species do indeed "blend together." However, if readers were to zoom in on these branches (Fig. 2.), particularly around the development of multi-cell organisms, they would see that most trajectories end in termination: without mating and without creating new branches in the tree. As Dennett argues, this is the Malthusian crunch. Everywhere we look, the branches of Darwin's Tree of Life are covered with "the short, terminal fuzz of birth-death without further issue" (91). Darwin's own Tree of Life gives evidence through the process of extinction and generational descent that the Malthusian fear of superabundance and fecundity in nature ought not to be feared, for they are natural processes for all living creatures that will eventually be checked by extinction.

In brilliant anticipation of his critics, Darwin emphasized the harmony of his theory of evolution with religious cosmogonies around the world that also utilized a Tree of Life metaphor. For example, in the Christian Genesis story we read that: "the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food, and in the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (*The NIV Study Bible*, Gen. 2.9). The trees are positioned alongside each other in the Garden of Eden, and one of Darwin's major challenges concerning the religious environment of his age was expressed by the image of these two contrasting trees: life versus knowledge, obedience versus sin. Therefore, in his own explanation of mankind's origins in his Tree of Life, Darwin used Malthus's arguments

against superabundance and fecundity alongside his own understanding of the extinction of species to condense this image of two separate trees into one even greater Tree of Life.

According to Beer, “Darwin needed a metaphor in which degree gives way to change and potential, and in which form changes through time” (33). In Milton, Darwin found a means of explaining his theory through this image of his Tree of Life. However, Darwin’s “metaphor” wasn’t really a metaphor at all; rather it was a combination of theological teachings with real world events of special extinction throughout our planet’s history. This is why some audiences may find comfort and perhaps even newfound spiritual connections in the notion that all forms of life are connected through Darwin’s great Tree of Life and through its trans-corporeality.

For example, in the beginning of Chapter XIII in *Origin*, Darwin discusses the mutual affinities of organic beings in the natural world. He starts by stating that, “From the first dawn of life, all organic beings are found to resemble each other in descending degrees, so that they can be classed in groups and under groups” (151). According to Darwin, this observation is why so many naturalists take it upon themselves to classify all manner of flora and fauna not just by how they are similar, but also by how they differ from one another. He goes on to question what is to be gained by such a classification system. Beyond the simple explanation of engaging in “an artificial means of enunciating, as briefly as possible, general propositions” regarding relationships between species, Darwin speculates that this method of classification is practiced by naturalists for the express purpose of understanding some sort of divine plan in nature: “[naturalists] believe that [this classification] reveals the plan of the Creator; but unless it be specified whether order in time or space, or what else is meant by the plan of the Creator, it seems to me that nothing is thus added to our knowledge” (153). To make his point, Darwin then paraphrases the expressions of the eighteenth-century Swedish botanist and zoologist, Carl

Linnaeus, saying that characteristics do not give us our genus, rather our genus gives us our characteristics (153). This idea convinces Darwin that there must be “something more” that is “included in our classification, than mere resemblance,” and he even repeats the phrasing again to re-emphasize his point: “I believe that something more is included; and that propinquity of descent, – the only known cause of the similarity of organic beings, – is the bond, hidden as it is by various degrees of modification, which is only partially revealed to us by our classifications” (153). This bond of descent is nothing less than humanity’s trans-corporeality with the rest of the natural world.

Later in the chapter, after Darwin explains the complexities of how the gradual divergence in character of different species all descended from common parents, together with their relation by inheritance from even more removed ancestors, he says, “we can understand the excessively complex and radiating affinities by which all the members of the same family or higher group are connected together” (154). Ironically, given the ugly suggestion and fear from Darwin’s Victorian audience that extinction in nature renders all life spiritually meaningless, Darwin was able to use his metaphor of the Tree of Life to explain how extinction is the most natural of processes that binds all life together in the most meaningful way. To Darwin, the “dead and broken branches” that cover the Tree of Life are what influence further descent and further life; there cannot be future life and future interconnection between all species and between all manner of life without extinction. This is the reality that Darwin wanted to show in his research. It is a reality that the natural world – the origin of species – creates life with mortality, but this does not necessarily have to be frightening, for all life must eventually succumb to death. Darwin says that this natural selection of the Tree of Life, “which results from the struggle for existence, and which almost inevitably induces extinction and divergence of

character in many descendants from one dominant parent-species, explains that great and universal feature in the affinities of all organic beings” (155). To Darwin, the process of descent, and therefore the process of extinction, was this “hidden bond of connection” which naturalists had been seeking to explain and understand for hundreds of years (155). It is this same “hidden bond of connection” between all species in the great Tree of Life that encouraged Thoreau and the American Transcendentalists to see a deeper spiritualism and interconnectivity between humanity and the natural world, for though “we shall never...disentangle the inextricable web of affinities” between the members of any one species, we do not have to look to some unknown, theological plan of creation to find meaning and connectivity with the natural world, according to Darwin (155).

In his Foreward to *Faith in a Seed* (1993), the recently published work of Thoreau’s *The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings*, nature writer Gary Paul Nabhan identifies this same “hidden bond of connection” between Darwin and Thoreau. In 1860, Thoreau received his first copy of Darwin’s newly published *Origin* from Asa Gray, which gave him “the tool that would help him probe the composition of the local forests” (xiii). More importantly, reading Darwin gave Thoreau “an overview of evolution and natural selection that provided him an authoritative context for his observations,” making him the first Anglo-American field ecologist to be influenced by Darwin’s theory of natural selection and adaptation (xiii-xiv). During the last years of his life, Darwin’s work heavily shaped Thoreau’s, and he anticipated issues in plant population biology and coevolution that did not become fully articulated in evolutionary ecology until the early 1970s (xiv).

Later, in the Introduction to *Faith in a Seed*, American historian and biographer Richard D. Richardson Jr. discusses the major tenets of Transcendentalism, an early nineteenth-century



American philosophy that taught that humans could acquire innate knowledge by interacting with nature. He explains, “insofar as Transcendentalism was a premonition of the interconnectedness of all of nature, the work of Darwin...did not destroy, but rather confirmed, the basic insights of Emerson and Thoreau,” arguably the most influential members of the movement itself (7). One might say that Darwin’s ideas fell on fertile ground, for shortly afterwards, Thoreau embarked upon a close examination of the connections between different flora and fauna around the area of Concord, Massachusetts. Richardson comments that Thoreau copied extracts from *Origin* into his notebook on natural history, saying that he followed Darwin’s arguments closely (12).

In fact, throughout *The Dispersion of Seeds*, Thoreau emerges as a major ally of Darwin, as he argues against the concept of special creation, instead making a positive case for Darwin’s developmental concept of continuous creation through his metaphor of the Tree of Life (13-4). There even appears to be an interest in fecundity. Richardson argues that “from behind the pressing issue of fecundity in Thoreau’s manuscript there emerges, tentatively and incompletely, but unmistakably, a powerful metaphor of death and rebirth,” for Thoreau’s *Seeds* was not about speciation – as was Darwin’s text – nor about population control – as was Malthus’s (16). Just as Darwin uses his metaphor of the Tree of Life to stress how life is interconnected for all organic species, Thoreau uses the Quaker metaphor of the seed to signify not only birth but also rebirth. Every day is a day of creation, death, and rebirth, for as Thoreau explains in *Seeds* “The very earth itself is a granary and a seminary, so that to some minds, its surface is regarded as the cuticle of one living creature” (151). Though he died shortly after discovering Darwin’s work on evolution and natural selection, Thoreau was greatly influenced by *Origin*, even if much of its

contents merely reaffirmed the Transcendentalist's thoughts on humanity being more connected to nature than many Americans dared to imagine.

Above all, though it presents an “inextricable web of affinities,” Darwin's image of the Tree of Life stresses evolutionary organization (*Origin*, 155). By creating his own image of this metaphorical concept of a tree, he rebutted long-held ideas of a hierarchical “great chain of being,” which had been used by those in power to oppress other species and even other classes of people. Such ideologies fixed all forms of life into specific positions that were thought to be permanent and immovable, rather than fluid, trans-corporeal, and susceptible to change over time. As such, a proposed chain of being conflicts with the concept of trans-corporeality, primarily because it stresses that while all elements and “bodies” living within the natural world are equal, they can all change at a moment's notice, which in turn alters conditions for other bodies. Thus, if humanity is to understand and embrace Darwin's explanation of what can now be identified as a trans-corporeal narrative of life on this planet, both science and society must rise above the microscopic, analytical view of the Tree of Life, from the flourishing bud to the dead and broken branch, to embrace a more symbiotic connection between species.

#### 4. The Grotesque

Another piece of evidence that suggests that there are trans-corporeal, unbreakable bonds between human life and the natural world is represented in what we find to be grotesque in nature – that is to say, what we find to be shocking and appalling about how the natural world violates our personal, physical space and encourages Darwin's suggestion that there exists no “great chain of being.” This concept is explored more in-depth in my third chapter concerning Gothic writers, Thoreau, and the Transcendentalists. However, one might choose to explore this

phenomenon further in novelist Patrick McGrath's *The Grotesque* (1989) in which Darwin's Tree of Life visually represents this idea that there is no "great chain of being" upon which individuals may hang their claims of special dominance.

*The Grotesque* combines elements of realism and humor with macabre imagery and disturbing plots of murder and intrigue to make an argument about the necessary extinction of classism in a civilized, modern world. McGrath's text is relevant to the discussion of Darwin's Tree of Life and to the concept of trans-corporeality firstly because it is a post-modern example of Darwin's influence and resonance throughout the ages, and secondly because its themes connect to the following chapter on Thoreau and what I call "grotesque trans-corporeality." In the narrative Sir Hugo, a classist quadriplegic, broods and ruminates over the inevitable extinction of his family lineage. Quite appropriate to the discussion of Darwin, trans-corporeality, and the fear of extinction, Sir Hugo's family estate of Crook Manor is personified as a dying mammoth, "down on its knees but tossing its tusks against heaven in one last doomed flourish of revolt," as its windows, like eyes, peer through the overrun foliage of nature at an otherwise indiscernible future (32). However, to Hugo, his home is a representation of beauty and wonder. It exists in reality as the accumulated success of his once renowned family's name. It is also dying. Like Sir Hugo and many of Darwin's contemporary critics, Crook Manor is merely a remnant of centuries long past, and both are resistant to change.

Sir Hugo considers this resistance to be a good thing, and he channels Darwin to support it. At dinner, Hugo's wife and daughter tease and belittle him for sticking to the same schedule every day, even eating the same meals. However, Sir Hugo remains steadfast and stubborn in the face of this critique. "Like Darwin," Sir Hugo asserts, "I do not care what I eat as long as it's the same every day" (15). Hugo misinterprets Darwin's argument for adaptation; he considers

himself to be strong for resisting change. This flawed ideology is the same subconscious fear that Joanna Macy reveals in *Ecopsychology* (1995) to be what we all secretly harbor: “[h]ardships, failures, and personal death” are the most important psychological realities of our time (241). According to Macy, we all secretly fear that our hardships, trials, and tribulations are for naught and that after death our sphere of influence will vanish from this world. Hugo does not want to believe that he is inferior to anyone, let alone that his opinions and accomplishments will disappear. However, according to Darwin’s metaphor of the Tree of Life, though all mortal beings succumb to death eventually, their impression upon the world lives on in their descendants. And even if a species were to become extinct and vanish from the world, the same divergence that inspired extinction also inspired the creation of a new species, and therefore new life. The concept of extinction itself challenges the Malthusian fear of superabundance and encourages the trans-corporeality of new life. An amateur paleontologist who once reconstructed the bones of dinosaurs in his own makeshift barn-laboratory, Sir Hugo seeks to make sense of the past like a detective piecing together different parts of history that remain strange and unclear.

Like Sir Hugo, many human beings experience such a yearning for consistency and harmony in a well-patterned world. According to Heinz Antor, this yearning is “a reflex of our need for orientation, our will to understand and thus control and domesticate the world we live in in order to feel safe in it.” (12). Sir Hugo similarly sits as the head of his decayed household during the last years of the twentieth century, ruling over what lands he still controls and, more importantly, can make sense of. In *Darwin and the Novelists* (1988), George Levine states that Darwin seemed to piece his theory of evolution together “like a detective in a literary genre that owes much to science, through fragments and traces, building vast structures from seeds and

spores and insects and fossils” (1). Levine’s statement on Darwin as “a detective in a literary genre” is relevant to Antor’s notion that human beings are pattern-building animals: though we may feel that we are influenced and shaped by nature to be the dominant species, we crave always to understand more about the world and our orientation within it, as both Darwin and Thoreau sought to discover. Although today we can realize the benefits that the theory of transcorporeality would offer us in terms of understanding our orientation within the natural world order, what Darwin offered to his nineteenth-century audience in his explanation of the Tree of Life was not just a structured organization of species and an understanding of extinction but also the concept of a struggle for existence.

#### 5. Nothing to Fear from Extinction

Darwin’s scientific discoveries were and still remain controversial for some, for he presented the world with a softer, romanticized vision of what he called the “Struggle for Existence” in Chapter III of *Origin* (107). This notion may not sound particularly romantic, but it is much gentler than the harsh and unforgiving “survival of the fittest” rhetoric of some of Darwin’s contemporaries and intellectual descendants. This notion of the “survival of the fittest” was originally coined and popularized by Spencer and Galton, Darwin’s fierce defenders. However, it was Huxley who argued in 1873 that: “We are in the middle of a gigantic movement, greater than that which preceded and produced the Reformation” (Appleman 7). He was talking about the persuasiveness of the scientific method, so clearly adapted and championed by Darwin during his five years of exploration aboard the *Beagle*, twenty years spent patiently studying specimens, and two more years of work on the steadily growing manuscript of “Natural Selection” (6). The fact that Victorians celebrated scientific progress in the Crystal Palace during

the Great Exhibition in 1851, a mere eight years before Darwin published his *Origin*, effectively demonstrated that science had proven itself to be both interesting and beneficial to the common person. And because Copernicus and the church had separated society from scientific thinking for centuries, no discovery had been as staggering as Darwin's; according to Huxley, "there was no reconciliation between free thought and traditional authority" (7). One or the other would have to succumb to extinction.

Though they ultimately supported Darwin, intellectual figures such as Spencer and Galton possessed an overt insistence that the strong survive while the weak fade into extinction. This essentially created the same unfortunate social Darwinian ideologies that many people – then and now – associate with the theory of evolution. Darwin merely found an incredible fascination in the interconnected extinction of all species, as well as beauty in the trans-corporeal coexistence of life in the natural world. While life can be a vicious struggle for all species, the simple relationships of organisms with other organisms was the most stunning and exquisite of all relations for Darwin (*Origin* 107). In his autobiography, Darwin states that his fascination with the relationships between organisms led him to observe that these relationships could perhaps encourage species to change or to "gradually become modified" (*Letters* 1: 67). This supposition, in a word, "haunted" Darwin, but he goes on to say that "neither the action of the surrounding conditions, nor the will of the organisms...could account for the innumerable cases in which organisms of every kind are beautifully adapted to their habits of life" (67). He continues to argue that he had always been struck by such adaptations, but that it seemed "almost useless to endeavor to prove by indirect evidence that species have been modified" (67). Such a suggestion could be revolutionary, but only with the right evidence.

In his 1924 essay, “Literature and Revolution,” Leon Trotsky writes that the best art is revolutionary: “art is always a social servant and historically utilitarian. It finds the necessary rhythm of words for dark and vague moods, it brings thought and feelings closer or contrasts them with one another...it educates the individual, the social group, the class and the nation” (883). In this way, the best art, whether it is fine art or literature, revolutionizes the masses and encourages people to project new cultural beliefs in place of old, outdated ones. Trotsky did not wish to incriminate writers or artists with the thoughts that they expressed. Instead, an audience should encounter a text and ask themselves, not the creator, how it makes them feel. Further, what are the social conditions for these feelings? What place do these thoughts have in the historic development of a culture’s ideology? These are the questions that a nineteenth-century reader might have asked himself or herself while first reading Darwin’s *Origin*. This text remains an important work of science, as Darwin’s reasoning works mainly within the scientific method. However, his tone and language in *Origin* are often artistic and poetic, an indication that Darwin hoped implicitly to reach as many people as he could with his theory of natural selection and to enlighten his Victorian audience regarding the gentler trans-corporeal connections of the natural world and all living creatures that thrive within it.

As a counter-argument, some might argue that Darwin did not exactly mean to “revolutionize” anyone or anything, that he was reluctant to publish any of his work regarding the transmutation of species that clashed against conventional scientific and religious opinion, especially after Jean-Baptiste Lamarck had tried to challenge that same conventional opinion and had been attacked and ridiculed by the entire scientific community years before Darwin’s *Origin* (Appleman 5). In fact, one could argue that the only reason that Darwin eventually published any of his thoughts or his diligently researched findings after the voyage of the *Beagle* was because

Alfred Russell Wallace was proposing to publish his own recent discovery of the principles of natural selection in 1858. However, in his autobiography, Darwin writes: “I gained much from my delay in publishing from about 1839, when the theory was clearly conceived, to 1859; and I lost nothing by it, for I cared very little whether men attributed most originality to me or Wallace” (*Letters* 1: 71). Taking Darwin’s own claim here into consideration, I would argue that Darwin was reluctant to publish his *Origin* precisely because he knew what a revolutionary and dangerous idea his theory would be at the time; he knew that such a theory would need to be presented to the public after careful study and exploration, for he was “a tenacious empiricist” and “a tired gatherer of facts” (Appleman 6). He did not care so much that he would receive credit for such a theory, but he did care that it should be presented to the scientific community under the most careful research and study.

Darwin writes that he read Malthus’s *Essay on Population* in 1838, fifteen months after he had begun his systematic enquiry that would eventually become his *Origin* (*Letters* 1: 68). He says that he was “well prepared to appreciate the struggle for existence which everywhere goes on from long-continued observation of the habits of animals and plants,” but that it struck him as being interesting and exciting that “under these circumstances favorable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavorable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species” (68). He then writes that it was this fascination that spurred him on to continue researching and writing his theory of natural selection for almost twenty years, but he also clarifies: “I was so anxious to avoid prejudice, that I determined not for some time to write even the briefest sketch of it” (68). Interestingly, after he and Wallace finally published some of their own individual findings on the transmutation of species in the “Journal of the Proceedings of the Linnean Society” in 1858, their joint productions “excited very little attention,” which suggested



to Darwin “how necessary it is that any new view should be explained at considerable length in order to arouse public attention” (69-70). And this is exactly what Darwin did when he finally published *Origin* a year later.

There is much evidence to suggest that Darwin found an interconnected, arguably spiritual link between the processes of evolution, extinction, and descent, which today might be characterized under the term of “trans-corporeality.” Surely, Darwin never used such a term specifically in his writings, but its messages and themes cover *Origin* much like the “fresh buds” and “broken branches” on Darwin’s Tree of Life. This is especially true in the closing chapter of the book. At the end of Chapter XIV, after Darwin has presented his recapitulations and conclusions, he writes, “It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing...with worms crawling through the damp earth” (174). He says that it is incredible to think and then reflect upon these interconnections. Similarly, trans-corporeality encourages us to imagine that our interconnected environment “runs right through us in endless waves, and [that] if we were to watch ourselves via some ideal microscopic time-lapse video,” much like Dennet suggests we examine the unimaginably detailed patterns of Darwin’s Tree of Life, “we would see water, air, food, microbes, and toxins entering our bodies as we shed, excrete, and exhale our processed materials back out” (Alaimo 11). As trans-corporeality explains, the human has always been made up of the changing elements of the material world and the natural world, which blend together more often than we would like to imagine.

Darwin makes this same point about humanity’s strongly bonded interconnections with the environment when he suggests, “these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws

acting around us” (*Origin*, 174). This is the closest that Darwin gets in *Origin* to saying outright that human beings specifically are just as interconnected with the rest of the natural world as the connections between all manner of flora and fauna, and he finds this connection to be a beautiful, cyclical reality of life that is arguably spiritual from a Thoreauvian, Transcendentalist lens. Yes, extinction and mortality are frightening subjects that humanity’s theological ideologies have historically attempted to alleviate through the assurances of a “great chain of being” and the divine plan of a shared Creator, but Darwin argues against such ideologies. He argues that “[from] the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely the production of the higher animals, directly follows” (174). To Darwin, there is beauty and wonder associated with the notion of his great Tree of Life and the transcorporeality that it offers to the world: “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved” (174). This closing is both a sobering and comforting reminder that, while all life must end, new life, under the repeated process of descent, will always continue to move forward.

CHAPTER III: GROTESQUE TRANS-CORPOREALITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN HENRY  
DAVID THOREAU'S *WALDEN* AND "WALKING"

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, – to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society. I wish to make an extreme statement, if so I may make an emphatic one, for there are enough champions of civilization.

– Thoreau, "Walking" 260

1. Trans-Atlantic Connections

In the middle of the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon to characterize the natural world as a sinister entity. Charles Darwin's diligently researched theories of evolution and natural selection in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) frightened European audiences who believed that the human species had been granted a commanding position in a divine "chain of being." At the same time, across the Atlantic, Henry David Thoreau's deep sense of connectedness to the natural world evolved through his own explanation of how the frightening, grotesque aspects of humanity's deep interconnection with nature were nothing to fear. In fact, the spiritual passion with which Thoreau addresses his forays into the wilderness are reminiscent of the major tenets of trans-corporeality, specifically with the notion that humanity's inseparable link with the environment is a reality that all citizens of a society have a moral obligation to acknowledge and embrace. Therefore, I argue that in both Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) and "Walking" (1862), the American Transcendentalist prophetically channels Darwin, his European counterpart, to argue that society is toxic for the spirit because it presumes to offer an antithesis to nature, and that humanity should embrace its interconnectedness with the natural world, unlike many American Gothic writers who viewed humanity's trans-corporeality with nature as

something that was both frightening and grotesque, which I refer to in this chapter as “grotesque trans-corporeality.”

It would have been difficult for any moderately skilled Victorian reader to be unfamiliar with the furor that Darwin’s writing aroused. In July of 1859, Darwin sent his nearly completed manuscript of *Origin* to the publisher John Murray, remarking in a letter to Murray: “whether the book will be successful to a degree to satisfy you, I really cannot conjecture. I heartily hope it may” (*Letters* 1: 516). According to Ernst Mayr, *Origin* became “the book that shook the world” (27). When the book was finally published in November of 1859, it sold nearly 3,800 copies, and throughout Darwin’s life it sold more than 27,000 copies in Britain alone, eventually passing through several different editions (27). This was mostly because the Western worldview before 1859 was vastly different before Darwin published his theories of natural selection. Even though other evolutionary thinkers like Charles Lyell and Robert Chambers had previously published material that essentially paved the way for Darwin to report his own findings, none did so as accessibly. Today, we recognize the importance of Darwin when discussing our world’s population explosion, the purpose of man and the universe, our general struggle and competition for existence, and humanity’s relationship with the environment. Even in 1859, Darwin refuted the belief that each species had been created individually, offering in its place the concept that all life descended from a common ancestor. Darwin’s metaphor of the great Tree of Life challenged contemporary views that supported a division amongst species and social classes. By extension, he introduced the idea that humans were not the special products of divine creation, and this revelation severely startled both scientific and theological communities because it posited the notion that the natural world could be chaotic, indifferent to the sufferings of humanity, and in

some cases it could even manifest itself as a sinister entity – a belief and fear that Thoreau would take upon himself to combat.

## 2. Early American Gothic

In the nineteenth century, British Gothic had for some time appeared – at least in part – as a contest between modern life and earlier, less “civilized” forms of society, particularly as played out in ruined castles, country churchyards, and mausoleums. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, this sinister manifestation of nature had been represented in early American Gothic literature. Charles L. Crow discusses how there was a distressing lack of ruins in early America compared to that of Great Britain. These architectural histories had provided writers with the inspirational melancholy to contemplate stories set in haunted castles, country churchyards, and other frightening structures that have since become associated with the Gothic. However, as there were no ruins for early American writers to reflect upon, the landscape of the haunted wilderness became a source of deep fear and individual reflection. Americans felt terrified when they observed just how delicate human civilization was when compared to the strange, dark power of the environment. According to Crow, “Gothic is the tradition of oppositional literature, presenting in disturbing, usually frightening ways, a skeptical, ambitious view of human nature and of history” (2). For early American writers, the Gothic provided not just a means of exploring the frightening aspects of nature but a mode of therapy for expressing imaginatively the fears and forbidden desires of a new nation struggling to identify its beliefs, fears, and principles.

As Andrew Smith argues, the term “Gothic” does not necessarily refer to a specific genre as much as it identifies a mode of storytelling. In this way, “the Gothic...mutates across

historical, national, and genetic boundaries as it reworks images drawn from different ages and places” (4). This mode of storytelling has historically been used to give voices to oppressed groups while also providing an approach to taboo subjects such as miscegenation, incest, disease and – most relevant to the discussion of Darwin and Thoreau – death and extinction. In his landmark study *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), Leslie Fiedler argues that the American Gothic “established...a tradition of dealing with the exaggerated and the grotesque, not as they are verifiable in any external landscape...but as they correspond in quality to our deepest fears and guilts as projected in our dreams or lived through in ‘extreme situations’” (155). Tom J. Hillard supports Fiedler by explaining that the Gothic has always been a means of confronting safely that which is threatening, frightful, and culturally or socially reprehensible; it is a reaction to the past, a buried secret that corrodes the present (691). Therefore, to early American writers who were experiencing the terror of the wilderness, Gothic works began to reflect distrust, contempt, and fear towards what Americans perceived to be the hostility of the natural world. Like the Victorians who responded negatively and fearfully to Darwin’s message concerning humanity’s interconnection with the natural world, early Americans used the Gothic to project their own fears about how obtaining individual identity in the new world meant sacrificing the safety and comforts of society to embrace some dark truth that human nature was as wild and ruthless as nature itself. These stories remained popular and terrifying well after Transcendentalists like Thoreau encouraged American audiences to venture out into the woods, even though many still feared the sinister, almost unnatural behavior of the wilderness that the Gothic creates.

Overall, the Gothic mode of storytelling focuses on what it means to truly lose something – senses, memories, identities, even our bodies themselves. It is this loss, this fear of losing a part

of ourselves, that one can associate with the concept of trans-corporeality. Though the text never mentions Thoreau's confrontation with fear in the wilderness, *Bodily Natures* presents the argument that the human being cannot be separated from the environment, which happens to be Thoreau's main argument as well. In fact, "the environment" can only exist as a compilation of species and organisms that are dependent upon each other living together in unity, and the sooner we acknowledge this fact, the sooner we can put aside our fears of the natural world. Trans-corporeality "reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures," and by "emphasizing the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world," our species has the potential to forge ethical, political, and spiritual connections that acknowledge the inseparable nature between what is considered "human" and what is considered "environment" (Alaimo 2). This idea would suggest that our bodies are so interconnected with nature that even in death they decompose and fertilize new life for the rest of the natural world. To some early American Gothic writers, this suggestion was shocking and grotesque – it presented the strange, distorted, and monstrous reality of what happens to our bodies after they have been buried in a graveyard and removed from human observation. It is for this reason that I would argue that the concept of trans-corporeality is itself what early American Gothic writers found to be disgusting and grotesque in nature – it represents the same fear and contempt that Darwin's critics associated with his suggestion that all forms of life were inseparably interconnected with all other forms of life.

### 3. The Grotesque in Nature

One very prevalent theme across all early American writing that reflects this idea of grotesque trans-corporeality in the natural world is the subject of the unburied dead. This theme can be seen as early as 1782 in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*. A French aristocrat who adopted the persona of a simple American farmer, Crèvecoeur provides a powerful picture of pastoral life in early America, and his horrifying encounter with a caged slave near the end of Letter IX provides a Gothic moment that is grotesque in its depiction of the human body's decomposition in nature. On his way to a dinner party with a plantation slaver, Crèvecoeur encounters a scene that startles him. He says, "I was leisurely traveling along, attentively examining some peculiar plants which I had collected, when all at once I felt the air strongly agitated" (22). He then hears "a deep rough voice" above him, and he sees that a large cage has been suspended from the limbs of a tree, "all the branches of which appeared covered with large birds of prey, fluttering about, and anxiously endeavoring to perch on the cage" (22-3). To his mortification, he then sees that a slave has been left in the cage to die. Crèvecoeur observes, "that the birds had already picked out his eyes, his cheek bones were bare; his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds" (23). What is most shocking to Crèvecoeur is that this man represents an example of the unburied dead, for he is a "living spectre" who, though he has been deprived of his sight, can still distinctly hear and feel pain as the natural world tears him to pieces: "swarms of insects covered the whole body of this unfortunate wretch, eager to feed on his mangled flesh and to drink his blood" (23). Though shocking and horrifying, the image offers insight into the fears associated with Darwin's insistence that humanity is inseparable from a natural world which, as Crèvecoeur's narrative hauntingly displays, often appears to be wild and ruthless. Tales like these



would have undoubtedly made early settlers scoff at Thoreau's experiment to live and labor as a sojourner at Walden Pond despite his insistence that humanity could experience an interconnectedness and a solitude with the natural world, for "there can be no...melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature and has his senses still" (*Walden*, 91). Clearly, Crèvecoeur had borne witness to a very grotesque melancholy of his own.

As fears of the grotesque are linked directly to the concept of trans-corporeality, Crèvecoeur sees that "from the edges of the hollow sockets and from the lacerations with which he was disfigured, the blood slowly dropped, and tinged the ground beneath" (23). Crèvecoeur suggests that the slave's blood has literally been spilled as a sacrifice to the natural order of things – that is to say, that the strong survive and prosper only because the weak and the oppressed fade away into extinction. After Crèvecoeur arrives at the plantation, he inquires why the man has been left to die in the woods, exposed to the elements in such an unforgiving manner. His host tells him that the slave had apparently killed the overseer of the plantation, and that "the laws of self-preservation rendered such executions necessary" (23). The argument presented before Crèvecoeur is a startlingly proto-Darwinian suggestion, and he is unmistakably uncomfortable with such a "survival of the fittest" mentality. Earlier in his letter, Crèvecoeur similarly laments the ruthless history of mankind's never-ending atrocities on the earth: a history of "millions of people abandoned to the caprice of the maddest princes, and of whole nations devoted to the blind fury of tyrants" (20). He goes so far as to suggest that "the principles of action in man," are "poisoned in their most essential parts" (20). Like other early Americans who found themselves faced with the ruthless and chaotic nature of the wilderness, Crèvecoeur suggests that man is "an animal of prey," and that human beings "have rapine and the love of bloodshed implanted in [their] heart" (20). After pondering such dark thoughts, Crèvecoeur

decides that “if Nature has given us a fruitful soil to inhabit, she has refused us such inclinations and propensities as would afford us the full enjoyment of it” (20-2).

Of course, Crèvecoeur was not the only American Gothic writer to suggest such an idea. The grotesque nature of trans-corporeality in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Gothic fiction similarly reflects this ultimately negative and critical observation of humanity and of the natural world. Hawthorne’s “Roger Malvin’s Burial” represents another example of what made an American genre out of the wilderness, and in the first paragraph of the story the reader sees once again how the Gothic re-examines humanity’s history on the earth. Hawthorne begins his story by telling the audience about a war waged between American frontiersmen and a Native American tribe. According to Hawthorne, “The open bravery displayed by both parties was in accordance with civilized ideas of valor, and chivalry itself might not blush to record the deeds of one or two individuals” (51). However, just as Crèvecoeur questions the deeper principles of mankind and its ability to function decently in civilization, what begins as a noble act of courage and camaraderie between the dying Roger Malvin and his son-in-law Reuben ends in another frightful, grotesque example of trans-corporeality.

During the battle with this unnamed Native American tribe, both Reuben and Malvin are wounded, and there is a good chance that Malvin will die from his injuries. Reuben refuses to leave Malvin to “lie unburied in the wilderness,” but Malvin insists that he do so (53). He reflects, “In the cities, and wherever men dwell...they bury their dead in the earth; they hide them from the sight of the living; but here, where no steps may pass...wherefore should I not rest beneath the open sky, covered only by the oak-leaves, when the autumn leaves shall strew them?” (54). Malvin does not fear that his body may be devoured by wild animals, nor does he fear what will happen to his unburied remains once they decompose and blend with the natural

environment. However, Reuben insists that he will soon return to the woods. He uses his own bloody handkerchief to mark the great oak tree, and “as he bound it to the tree, he vowed, by the blood that stained it, that he would return, either to save his companion’s life, or to lay his body in the grave” (57). However, Reuben fails to keep his promise, leaving Malvin alone in the woods to face an uncertain fate. At the end of the narrative, Reuben returns to the woods with his family and finds what appears to be the same tree and rock where he left Malvin almost twenty years earlier. The sapling tree, “to which [Reuben] had bound the blood-stained symbol of his vow,” had grown large and strong, but Reuben then notes that there was one strange singularity observable in the tree, which made him tremble violently with fear: “The middle and lower branches were in luxuriant life, and an excess of vegetation had fringed the trunk, almost to the ground; but a blight had apparently stricken the upper part of the oak, and the very topmost bough was withered, sapless, and utterly dead” (69). Reuben’s intense guilt that he left his friend to die alone in the wilderness returns to haunt him in the form of this mysterious oak, looking visibly stricken and blighted by some dark corruption.

Not only does the oak with the dying branches serve to remind Reuben of his broken promise, but this betrayal in the eyes of nature is also met with a blood sacrifice of Reuben’s young son, whom Reuben shoots in a hunting accident. The entire narrative serves to remind Hawthorne’s American audience that this new world has no ancient ruins or haunted houses to hold humanity’s hidden fears, secrets, and shame. Instead, audiences would have to leave the haunted houses of Europe behind and face the trans-corporeal terrors of the American wilderness. However, not all early American writers viewed the often-grotesque nature of the natural world as a frightening thing. In fact, Thoreau challenged his contemporaries to resist such fearful ideologies concerning our co-habitation with the environment, and he did so in a way that

encouraged individuals to come to their own conclusions about our spiritual interconnection with the natural world.

#### 4. Thoreau Faces the Darkness

Thoreau fought for the idea that knowledge must be personally attained; an individual cannot have a belief simply because someone else urges society to believe it. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes, “It is never too late to give up our prejudices. No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What every body echoes or in silence passes by as true to-day may turn out to be falsehood tomorrow, mere smoke of opinion” (9). Just as Rob Nixon questions how society can turn long-term problems of violence into stories dramatic enough to sway public opinion about the importance of protecting the natural environment, Thoreau similarly argues that Americans must fight back against harmful social or political beliefs (Nixon 3). In *Slow Violence*, Nixon aims to shock his audience into realizing that poisoning the natural world with noxious chemicals can have just as much of a dangerous effect on the human species as something more immediate and drastically alarming, such as war and terrorism. Like many of his fellow American Transcendentalists, Thoreau wanted to rouse his readers out of their collective bondage to society; he wanted people to challenge their own cultural beliefs and fears about trans-corporeality and weigh their ideologies against personal prejudice and experience.

One should “love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity and trust,” to solve real problems not only theoretically, but practically, through self-reliance (*Walden*, 13). In fact, many Transcendentalists believed that the “reason” that one could experience by following self-reliance was a “faculty of the mind” and “a power in humans by which they perceived spiritual things in the same way that the senses

perceived ‘sensible’ facts” (Dahlstrand 9). This type of spirituality formed an alternate system of belief separate from Christianity, and “with the...secularization of the mind in nineteenth-century liberalism, socialism, as well as in science (especially Darwin’s theory of evolution), one can find widespread movements...that search for a universal spirituality that is not bound to any specific tradition” (Van Der Veer 1101-2). It was this universal spirituality that Thoreau believed could be achieved by observing and interacting with nature. To Thoreau, humanity projected its best qualities when people became self-reliant and independent instead of feeling bound by the constraining beliefs of an oppressive society. It is only from such “enlightened” individuals that sustainable ideologies that harmonize with the natural world can be reflected upon and projected to the public, though everyone must make this journey of interconnection with the natural world on his or her own. Specifically, Thoreau was not simply saying that humanity needed to renounce society as a whole. He argues instead that everything one really needs to know emanates from a certain inward source, precisely because the essence of the individual is intrinsically connected to – and therefore in natural harmony and sympathy with – all of the natural world and its environments. That is to say, it is precisely because all natural things are made of the same essence that one can rely upon an innate knowledge. All knowledge is therefore potentially innate, so long as it deals with the natural world.

To address this journey of interconnection and innate knowledge that Thoreau invites his readers to embark upon, one might examine the history and evolution of what religious scholar Bron Taylor identifies as dark green religions in North America. In his 2010 text *Dark Green Religions*, Taylor distinguishes between green religion (existing religious traditions that have embraced environmental concerns and values) and dark green religion (a non-institutionalized form of religiosity whose adherents hold that nature is sacred, has intrinsic value, and is therefore

due reverent care) (10). Dark green religion tends to be deeply ecological, biocentric, or ecocentric, and considers all species to be intrinsically valuable regardless of their usefulness to the human species, much like trans-corporeality states that all species are neutral in the sense that they all thrive and die together. In fact, Taylor states that these types of beliefs are usually “based on a felt kinship with the rest of life, often derived from a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related” (13). For many American Transcendentalists, Darwin’s evolutionary story of cosmogony and trans-corporeality was not only a scientific narrative: it was an odyssey – an epic, heroic journey for all species to embark upon to discover some deeper, innate knowledge that could be learned from living within the natural world. Thoreau was probably the most important architect and inspiration for this belief, leading to the influence of dark green religion today (32-3).

Taylor argues that European Americans in the nineteenth century were deeply conditioned by biased attitudes that did not view Darwin’s narrative of evolution or Thoreau’s odyssey into the wilderness as positive things. “Their perceptions and feelings regarding nature were often characterized by fear and hostility, or at least by deep ambivalence toward the wild landscapes that differed so greatly from the domesticated agricultural and pastoral ones they had left behind,” which of course led to the popularization of these fearful mentalities in Gothic fiction (43). In fact, Taylor points out that the cosmology and theology of Christianity in general, and Puritanism in particular, “reinforced the tendency among European settlers to consider the land, not as something sacred and worthy of reverence, but as a resource to be exploited for both material and spiritual ends” (44). However, it was Ralph Waldo Emerson who first challenged such harmful ideologies, for he found a means of melding a reverence for the creator with a reverence for the natural world.

In his 1836 essay, “Nature” Emerson argues that it is in the woods that humanity can “return to reason and faith” (26). He goes on to say, “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable” (26). This occult relation is of course another comparison between humanity and the natural world that draws several parallels to trans-corporeality. Emerson claims that he is both “not alone and unacknowledged,” for “the waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right” (26). Not only does Emerson seem to embrace the environment as it is defined by trans-corporeality, but he could also be credited as an early influence for Thoreau’s insistence behind the previously mentioned notion of an innate knowledge that can be accessed by living in tandem with the wilderness. Of course, Emerson differs from the concept of trans-corporeality in the sense that he claims there is a “me” and there is a “not me,” but he did believe that a sublime spirituality could be found in the natural world. Further, he rejected the Gothic notion that such human encounters with the wilderness were intrinsically tethered to fear, horror, and the grotesque trans-corporeality of life. However, whereas Emerson was not particularly well known for wanting to spark any polemical debates in the public sphere, Thoreau welcomed the opportunity “to live deep and to suck all the marrow of life,” for he embarked upon his experiment to live at Walden Pond with the expectation that he would not only “live deliberately,” but that he would also teach others by learning “what [life] had to teach” (Walden 65).

Thoreau reveals his most striking call for embracing humanity’s interconnection to the natural world near the end of *Walden* in his “Spring” chapter. Here, Thoreau does two things: he reveals a paradoxically dark and beautiful appreciation for the grotesque trans-corporeality of the

natural world, and he comes to startling conclusions about the interconnections between all forms of flora and fauna, specifically via a proto-Darwinian lens that acknowledges the cyclical formula of birth, death, and rebirth in nature. He writes, “we can never have enough of Nature,” and he argues that human beings must be constantly refreshed by both the beautiful and the terrifying powers of the natural world: “the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and Titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees, the thunder cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets” (213). Specifically, human beings must witness their limits transgressed by the natural world to both love and appreciate its power. He asserts, “We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us,” and we derive “health and strength from the repast” (213). Humanity’s interconnection with the natural world, our trans-corporeality within the natural order, is frightening and grotesque, such as when we feel “cheered” by the vulture feeding on the carrion, and Thoreau makes this point clear with his next example of a personal encounter in the forest.

Thoreau tells the story of how he once came upon a dead horse on the path leading to his house at Walden Pond. This curious sight “compelled [him] sometimes to go out of [his] way, especially in the night when the air was heavy, but the assurance it gave [him] of the strong appetite and inviolable health of Nature was [his] compensation for this” (213). The sight of a dead and decaying horse gives Thoreau a similar admiration for the natural order of things as others might feel when they observe the vulture feeding on the carrion. To Thoreau, the decaying horse is no different than the caged man is to Crèvecoeur, for they are both forms of life that, through their death, will nourish and sustain the rest of the natural world. This troubling connection is supported by the fact that Thoreau says he loves to see that “Nature is so rife with



life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organizations can be so serenely squashed out of existence,” and he gives the example of “pulp, – tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood!” (213).

According to the *Proceedings of the Boston Society of Natural History*, the last of Thoreau’s sentiments on this encounter is likely an allusion to newspaper accounts in 1850 of a “shower of flesh and blood,” or “blood rain,” coming from small organisms in Virginia that were thought to have been transported and carried by high winds (213). In some ways, Thoreau’s seemingly callous regard for life might appear ugly and grotesque, but that is not the point that Thoreau aims to make. Towards the end of “Spring,” he states: “The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence. Poison is not poisonous after all, nor are any wounds fatal. Compassion is a very untenable ground” (214). As one of the first American Transcendentalists to acknowledge and appreciate humanity’s trans-corporeality, Thoreau believed strongly that human beings must study and appreciate the power of nature to observe how frequently it transgresses our limits. Unfortunately, this also includes seeing and accepting what we may perceive to be the dark and frighteningly grotesque aspects of the natural world. But there cannot be life without death, and Thoreau understood this fact.

Taylor argues that this dark, arguably cruel appreciation for the susceptibility of all organisms to death and decay in the natural world represents just how much devotion Thoreau has to nature. Taylor says that to Thoreau, “Moral and spiritual growth comes from a long-term engagement with nature that is both openhearted and empirical” (53). This openhearted and empirical engagement is strengthened by observations of and loyalties towards the nature of local bioregions. When this occurs, Taylor says that people understand they belong to nature and

are mutually dependent on it – “and that defending and protecting nature and wild animals is critically important to human well-being” (53). To Thoreau, Taylor writes, “recognizing one’s own place in nature also meant an appreciation for one’s own eventual reuniting with the earth after death” (53). Therefore, when people interact with their local bioregions and come to understand and appreciate these interconnections with their own trans-corporeality, human pettiness and repressive behavior will decline.

The rest of “Spring” further discusses Thoreau’s conclusions about the interconnections between human beings and the rest of the natural world by expressing Darwinian ideologies about what would be defined today as trans-corporeality, though these other sentiments are less grotesque and more spiritual from a Transcendentalist perspective. In the chapter, Thoreau admits that few phenomena give him more pleasure and delight than “to observe the forms which thawing sand and clay assume in flowing down the sides of a deep cut on the railroad” through which he frequently passed on his way back from Walden Pond to his home village (204). He admits that this phenomenon is very common and seemingly minor compared to the larger scale of events that transpire in nature on a daily basis, but to Thoreau what makes this particular sand foliage remarkable is the way that it springs suddenly into existence. When he sees the slow, gradual, and cyclical rising of the sun on one side of the equation, compared to this “remarkable” sand foliage that nature creates in less than an hour on the other, he says “I am affected as if in a peculiar sense I stood in the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me, – had come to where he was still at work...I feel as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe, for this sandy overflow is...a foliaceous mass as the vitals of the animal body” (205). Here, Thoreau expresses for the first time in this particular chapter that human beings are interconnected with nature, and the grotesque trans-corporeality of the Gothic shifts from being a frightening concept to an

enlightening idea. To Thoreau, the sudden creation of thawing sand and clay that flows down the sides of railroad tracks depicts a modern phenomenon that helps him understand the ancient and cyclical elements of the natural world.

Much like Darwin acted as an empirical naturalist during his observations and studies on the voyage of the *Beagle*, Thoreau shows himself to be an astute observer of the natural world, particularly in his explanations of the slow, cyclical nature of all forms of life. He observes, “The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit. Even ice begins with delicate crystal leaves” (206). Then, in a move that pre-dates Darwin’s publishing of *Origin*, Thoreau touches upon the suggestion that all manner of life could be represented in a metaphor that mirrors Darwin’s Tree of Life: “the whole tree itself is but one leaf, and rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth, and towns and cities are the ova of insects in their axils” (206). What is fascinating about Thoreau’s prophetic invocation of Darwin’s own Tree of Life is that he does not shy away from including human beings in this interconnected structure of nature.

Only at the end of *Origin* does Darwin suggest that human beings occupy a place in his tree of living and evolving organisms, but Thoreau asks directly: “What is man but a mass of thawing clay? The ball of the human finger is but a drop congealed. The fingers and toes flow to their extent from the thawing mass of the body. Who knows what the human body would expand and flow out to under a more genial heaven?” (206). He goes on to depict the metamorphosis of his “thawing clay man” as its fingers transform into leaves that extend “in so many directions it tends to flow” into the “genial influences” of the natural world (207). Thoreau’s metaphorical tree does not depict the grotesque trans-corporeality of the frightening tree, covered with the carrion and birds of prey that assail Crèvecoeur’s caged man, nor does it depict the “withered,

sapless, and utterly dead” oak that reveals Reuben’s forsaken oath. For Thoreau as for Darwin, humanity’s interconnection with all natural organisms is an uplifting and beautiful thing. Darwin states at the end of *Origin*: “When I view all beings not as special creatures, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Silurian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled” (174). He both acknowledges and celebrates the fact that life is paradoxically beautiful and potentially short for all manner of living creatures and organisms. Thoreau further reflects in *Walden* that, “Many of the phenomena of Winter are suggestive of an inexpressible tenderness and fragile delicacy” (208). We are accustomed to viewing “Winter” as a king or a “rude and boisterous tyrant,” but “he adorns the tresses of Summer” with “the gentleness of a lover” (208). Again, Thoreau suggests that there is a cyclical “give-and-take” for all living organisms in the natural world between the beautiful and the grotesque, between life and death. Human beings are not exempt from this reality, and the sooner we come to a peace and understanding of this fact, the sooner we can see that “Nature has some bowels, and there again is mother of humanity” (207).

Thoreau ends “Spring” by detailing the rejuvenated spirit of nature once winter has finally started to transition back into a new season. He describes the melting snow and the fresh budding grass that “flames up on the hillsides like a spring fire” (208). Thoreau’s invocation of fire in this imagery implies that there is a necessary “purification” ritual that takes place every year. He explains, “it is as if the earth sent forth an inward heat to greet the returning sun; not yellow but green is the color of its flame” (208). This flame, according to Thoreau, represents “the symbol of perpetual youth, the grass-blade, like a long green ribbon” that “streams from the sod into the summer, checked...by the frost, but anon pushing on again, lifting its spear of last year’s hay with the fresh life below” (208-9). His description of the natural world returning to

life, like a phoenix from its own ashes, echoes Darwin's understanding of rejuvenation in his own Tree of Life, "which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever branching and beautiful ramifications" (*Origin* 135). Thoreau concludes that this seemingly spiritual phenomenon is the same for humanity, as "our human life but dies down to its root, and still puts forth its green blade of eternity," suggesting that while all living creatures eventually die, they live on through their descendants (*Walden*, 209).

### 5. Posthumous Sentiments on the Wilderness

Thoreau reiterates much of this belief that humanity should feel a cyclical, spiritual connection with the natural world in his essay "Walking," which was published posthumously in 1862, though it was written, edited, and presented to the public in several lectures between 1851 and 1860. More than anything else that he had written, Thoreau considered "Walking" to be one of his seminal works. In one such lecture, he said: "I regard this as a sort of introduction to all that I may write hereafter" (*Introduction* 1). Thoreau died in 1862, but the Darwinian themes of interconnection that appear throughout this essay show not only that Thoreau had read Darwin but also that "Thoreau was in the middle of many scientific and literary projects" where he aimed to explore the wilderness in search of a greater wisdom and understanding of the natural world (Taylor 50). Overall, "Walking" challenges much of the grotesque fears of trans-corporeality that many American writers expressed in the nineteenth century. Instead of fearing humanity's Darwinian connection to all other organic beings in the Tree of Life, Thoreau expresses delight, wonder, and excitement for our trans-corporeality. He embraces the fact that "[w]e have a wild savage in us" ("Walking," 281). To Thoreau, it was a good thing that human beings could act and feel the same way that animals do in their natural habitats.

In “Walking,” he directs his audience’s attention to the natural world and exclaims: “Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty, and such affection,” but the reason why we often regard this mother with fear and disgust is because “we are so early weaned from her breast to society, to that culture which is exclusively an interaction of man on man, – a sort of breeding in and in, which produces at most a merely English nobility, a civilization destined to have a speedy limit” (281). Therefore, he argues that the reason why both Darwin’s critics and American Gothic writers fear the grotesque trans-corporeality of the natural world is because they have been unnaturally separated from their organic environment; human beings have in a sense been perverted by their interactions with society and with the world of civilization. In fact, it could be argued that this long-lost spiritual connection that Thoreau felt for nature suggests that these “New World forests” essentially acted as substitutes for “Old World cathedrals” and religious institutions (Adler 8).

This argument would have certainly been shocking and alarming to many people, but Thoreau does preface “Walking” with a similar sentiment that argues for the same message. He says that he wishes “to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil” (260). To Thoreau this argument that he presents in “Walking” needed to be made because there were already “enough champions of civilization,” whereas American Gothic writers had only regarded the natural world with fear and hatred since colonization (260). He admits, “I wish to make an extreme statement,” and this extreme statement is essentially the same one that Darwin makes in terms of humanity’s trans-corporeality: Thoreau wishes “to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (260). Throughout the piece, Thoreau explains that he came to

understand this essential truth through the process of becoming a walker and by walking within and through the natural world.

Thoreau believed that he could not “preserve [his] health and spirits” unless he spent several hours walking “through the woods and over the hills and fields” (262). In doing so, he came to the realization that “When we walk, we naturally go to the fields and woods: what would become of us, if we walked only in a garden or a mall?” (263). This is Thoreau’s fear, that human beings have somehow withered, decayed, and become “lesser” by their associations with society. He goes on to make a strikingly modern argument against the dangers of deforestation and other destructive practices when he says that “Nowadays, almost all man’s improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and the cutting down of the forest and all of the large trees, simply deform the landscape” (264). However, this destruction of the environment and deformation of the landscape were by no means simple aesthetic scars. Thoreau believed that “climate does...react on man, – as there is something in the mountain-air that feeds the spirit and inspires” (271). He asks the question, “Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences?” (271). From reading *Walden* and “Walking,” one could argue that Thoreau believes the answer to his question is most assuredly yes. After posing this question, Thoreau discusses a dream-like panorama of the Rhine. Much as Crow argues that the lack of ruins in early America influenced Gothic introspection, Thoreau describes the scenery by saying that “the foundations of castles were yet to be laid, and the famous bridges were yet to be thrown over the river; and I felt that this was the heroic age itself...for the hero is commonly the simplest and obscurest of men” (273). Thoreau would have everyone come to this understanding.

He later says, “I would have every man so much like a wild antelope, so much a part and parcel of Nature, that his very person should thus sweetly advertise our senses of his presence, and remind us of those parts of Nature which he most haunts” (274). Thoreau acknowledges how the natural world can both haunt us with its grotesque trans-corporeality while also enlightening the average person with a deep sense of spirituality so long as that person is willing to venture out into the wilderness and experience its deep interconnection with all forms of life. The most suggestive example of this connection that Thoreau discusses is the connection he feels with swamps. “I derive more of my subsistence from the swamp which surround my native town than from the cultivated gardens in the village,” says Thoreau (274). When he wishes to “recreate himself” within the natural world, Thoreau says that he seeks “the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp,” for the swamp represents a “sacred place... There is the strength, the marrow of Nature” (275). Unlike Gothic writing, in which the swamp represents a dark and macabre environment, Thoreau believes that the swamp represents the perfect location of interconnection between the natural world and civilization. According to Thoreau, “A township where one primitive forest waves above, while another primitive forest rots below... is fitted to raise not only corn and potatoes, but poets and philosophers” (276). In other words, in such close proximity to swamps, “the marrow of Nature” can encourage people to have positive introspection rather than to simply fear nature and endlessly cultivate its surroundings for selfish purposes.

However, although Thoreau makes it clear in both *Walden* and “Walking” that he believes civilization to be slightly toxic, he does argue that there should be some sort of “middle-ground” between complete withdrawal from civilization and utter submission to it. For example, he says toward the end of “Walking” that he would not have every man nor every part of a man



cultivated, any more than he would have every acre of earth cultivated: “part will be tillage, but the greater part will be meadow and forest, not only serving an immediate use, but preparing a mould against a distant future, by the annual decay of the vegetation which it supports” (282). Here he also acknowledges that “annual decay” and extinction are the “mould” or the structure for supporting the cyclical continuation of all living organisms and their trans-corporeality with each other, much like Darwin argued in his explanation of the Tree of Life that the concept of evolution and descent lies in both understanding and appreciating the fact that everything is susceptible to extinction. Therefore, Thoreau argues in “Walking” that humanity would become less fearful of its interconnection to the natural world if humans occasionally removed themselves from society and spent more time trying to experience a spiritual connection with the wilderness, for humanity’s “desire to bathe [its] head in atmospheres unknown to [its] feet is perennial and constant” (282-3). True to the idea of cyclical narration, Thoreau argues that there is a human, perennial desire to find a “middle-ground” between nature and civilization as early as his 1849 volume *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

According to K. P. Van Anglen, Thoreau’s account of this trip with his brother, John, to the Merrimack River suggests that paradise can be regained by appreciating and understanding humanity’s interconnection with nature: “[*A Week*] is a travel narrative that maintains that the American wilderness is the new Eden, the spot of time where humanity can be reborn into innocence” (196). Thoreau did not believe that Americans were hopelessly fallen. They were not “primordially cursed like their Old World cousins to live with the morality, guilt, self-consciousness, history, civilization, and death that in romantic readings of Genesis replaced Original Sin” (196). Thoreau came to this belief by understanding and appreciating both the beauty and the wildness of the natural world. He believed that Americans should row upstream,

away from their Miltonic, postlapsarian world of civilization to a pastoral realm where they could reunite with nature – “toward a New World Garden that, by engendering an artistic wisdom to see aright, will then enable them to benefit the human community upon returning home once more” (196). Of course, as Thoreau believed that knowledge must be personally obtained, every American must individually make this Edenic journey into the unknown wild.

This is Thoreau’s dream – that humanity can resist its fears of the more grotesque aspects of the wilderness and embrace the trans-corporeality of civilization and the natural world. By prophetically channeling both Darwin’s explanation of a great Tree of Life and the twenty-first-century understanding of trans-corporeality, Thoreau argued that humanity should not bind itself to the oppressive reins of society. Instead of fearing and retreating from the idea of close interconnection with the natural world, like many Gothic writers projected in their fiction, Thoreau fought for the idea that every person should make a personal journey into the wilderness. One should walk into the natural world, come to a more spiritual understanding of humanity’s trans-corporeality, and return to civilization enlightened.

## CHAPTER IV: CONCLUSION

Two things may be gleaned from the inseparable link shared between these two giants of nineteenth-century literary and intellectual life. First, Darwin and Thoreau's ultimately uplifting and optimistic ideologies concerning humanity's role as a cooperative, trans-corporeal agent of the environment were strong enough to bridge the geographical gap between two nations an ocean apart. Second, their shared, ideological message of humanity's interconnected link with the natural world bears such vital fruit that it continues to inspire ongoing conversations today, especially as this message relates to environmentalism and sustainable practices. Though many scholars have addressed separately the importance of acknowledging Darwin and Thoreau's influence upon evolutionary theory and Transcendentalist ideologies, few have attempted to highlight how both men's works argue frequently for the same sustainable sentiments. Alaimo's failure to address Thoreau's influential impression upon the Transcendentalists and upon modern dark green religions to combat grotesque interpretations of the environment ultimately represents a missed opportunity on her part to convince twenty-first-century readers to embrace their own trans-corporeality.

Of course, some nineteenth-century scholars may argue that imploring individuals to embrace their own trans-corporeality and challenging societies to rethink their harmful environmental ideologies contradicts Darwin's argument that fecundity is a liberating and creative principle. Perhaps Malthus was right in assuming that any species allowed to run amok in its unchecked prorogation would eventually destroy itself along with the rest of the natural world. However, this is not a contradiction for two reasons. One is that Malthus was simply arguing that fecundity and superabundance were dangerous because they lead to a depletion of resources. He argued that nature had "scattered the seeds of life...with the most profuse and

liberal hand,” but it had been “comparatively sparing in the room and nourishment necessary to rear them” (Beer 29). Malthus was saying that there simply were not enough natural resources for all existing species to competitively co-exist, not that any “dominant” species would consciously ruin the environment for everything and everyone, which Milton’s Lady fears is the case for Comus’s reckless mentality. The other is that an individual’s desire to revolt against harmful environmental ideologies comes not only from a self-preservationist mentality but also from a moral obligation.

Darwin argues in Chapter III of *Origin* that each species has a biological drive for self-preservation: “any variation...if it be in any degree profitable to an individual of any species...will tend to the preservation of that individual” (*Origin* 107). This was his premise for the entire principle of “Natural Selection.” More than a decade later, Darwin determined for the first time to write directly about human life, human evolution, and human society in the *Descent of Man* (1872). In this text, he expands upon his arguments in *Origin* to posit that this struggle for survival is a moral obligation, even for human beings: “social instincts lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of his fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them, and to perform various services for them” (*Descent* 98). He claims that actions of morality and sympathy were the result of the greater society as a whole looking out for one another, “for [these actions] are performed too instantaneously for reflection, or for pleasure or pain to be felt at the time” (*Descent* 110). In other words, behaviors of sustainability necessary for the survival of the species gradually become woven into our biology itself. Combating actions and beliefs that threaten the environment are in reality more natural than the selfish actions that Malthus feared would lead humanity to cannibalize its fellow creatures and environments. Thus, just as Thoreau and Crèvecoeur fear to different degrees that human society has the potential to be toxic

for the spirit's trans-corporeal connection to the wilderness, protecting the environment from calamities of slow violence that threaten the natural world becomes a moral obligation as well as a biological drive to combat our own extinction.

Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and Thoreau's *Walden* and "Walking" provide insights into the interconnections between our species and the natural world, and these trans-corporeal insights have the potential to influence potent sustainable practices by ideologically challenging audiences to treat their environments as they would treat their fellow human beings who exist not only within the world, but as part of the world. Encouraging any world citizen to fight back against harmful cultural beliefs and practices may indeed sway popular opinion about sustainability, and it is the first step in projecting the interconnected nature of trans-corporeality, as well as the dangers posed to it by slow violence.

Much earlier in his life, towards the end of the journal that he wrote during the voyage of the *Beagle*, Darwin reflected on the ultimately "good-humored patience" and "selfishness" of human beings (*Beagle* 377). In his travels, Darwin concludes that he learned "how many truly goodnatured people there are, with whom [I] never before had, or ever again will have any further communication, who yet are ready to offer [me] the most disinterested assistance" (*Beagle* 377). Even before he published *Origin*, in other words, Darwin had become aware of the interconnected nature of humanity and the long-lasting impressions that living beings can have on each other. For this reason, I maintain that Darwin and Thoreau both thought in terms of trans-corporeality long before the term had been coined in the twenty-first century. Postmodern scholars would do well to acknowledge the complexities, successes, and failures of a very long tradition of writing about environmental concerns. If nothing else, the fact that our world still experiences such environmental tragedies is a testament to the fact that there are too few people

in the world who have taken Darwin and Thoreau's sentiments into serious consideration.

Acknowledging the insights and warnings that *Origin*, *Walden*, and "Walking" have to teach us are therefore of utmost importance in today's contemporary times, even if acknowledging such trans-corporeal connections may occasionally force us to face the seemingly grotesque nature of life.

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