Chapter 12
Capitalism and the Moral Geography of Walden

A peripatetic philosopher, and out-of-doors for the best part of his days and nights, [Thoreau] had manifold weather and seasons in him; the manners of an animal of probity and virtue unstained. Of all our moralists, he seemed the wholesomest, the busiest, and the best republican citizen in the world; always at home minding his own affairs. A little overconfident by genius, and stiffly individual, dropping society clean out of his theories . . . there was in him an integrity and love of justice that made possible and actual the virtues of Sparta and the Stoics—all the more welcome in this time of shuffling and pusillanimity.

—Bronson Alcott

Thoreau is extravagant, even self-consciously defiant, when he claims in Walden to feel more at home at the Pond than in Concord:

Yet I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. There can be no very black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of nature and has his senses still. There was never yet such a storm but it was Aeolian music to a healthy and innocent ear. Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness. While I enjoy the friendship of the seasons I trust that nothing can make life a burden to me. (W 131)

This is more than a simple claim to be comfortable in woods where his neighbors felt uneasy. The invidiousness of the distinction between nature and society becomes so strong that Thoreau transplants the few desiderata remaining in Concord, cultivating them in the woods instead:

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was
at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sight and sound around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again. (W 131–132)

Gentle, sweet, beneficent, friendly, sustaining, sympathetic, kindred, nearest of blood, humanest: this rising catalogue paints a community all the more tightly bound the larger it grows, with nature occupying the far end of every social bond. It is not just that Thoreau feels strongly about rural landscapes. The sharp negative remains firmly in place: such feelings are not possible in the company of other people.¹

Reversals like this seemed perverse to many of Thoreau’s early readers. For instance, Emerson records, in his Journal for August 1843, his feelings about the early excursion essay, “A Winter Walk,” which rehearses many of the distinctive rhetorical strategies on which Walden depends:

H. D. T. sends me a paper with the old fault of unlimited contradiction. . . . He praises wild mountains & winter forests for their domestic air; villagers & wood choppers for their urbanity; and the wilderness for resembling Rome & Paris. With the constant inclination to dispraise cities & civilization, he can yet find no way to honour woods & woodmen except by paralleling them with towns and townsmen.

Emerson’s frustration measures the degree to which his protégé was writing against the grain.² The most familiar contemporary idiom for description of forested hills such as those around Walden Pond focused exactly on their forbidding emptiness, on the awful sublimity of endless repetition. Such a landscape was read as a field of conquest, of struggle for the establishment of civilization within and against an encompassing, and potentially engulfing, nature. By describing a comfortable community in nature and opposing it to the alienated life of Concord, Thoreau was appropriating and modifying an alternative tradition. The pastoral valorized a middle or picturesque landscape in opposition to the deprivations of both the city and the wilderness. His strongest modification of