US (POST-)PASTORAL NON-FICTION AND THE TOXIC SUBLIME

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Conference title: "New Perspectives in English and American Studies"
Jagiellonian University, Krakow (Poland) – April 20-22 2017

As Frank O'Hara mentions, "[i]n past times there was nature and there was human nature; because of the ferocity of modern life, man and nature have become one" (1971). However, this statement is wrong as nature has, in fact, never been 'neutral', independent of human influence but has instead always been depicted and defined by humans. In the age of the Anthropocene, numerous are the ways of reconsidering our relationship with our physical environment and reframing the pastoral mode so that it would best illustrate the interconnectedness between the human and the non-human. For example, Joshua Corey recently proposed an analysis of "postmodern pastoral poetry" in order to "enter this [very] zone of the pastoral", meaning "the vision of humanity undivided from nature" (2012).[1] Nevertheless, Corey is himself with several other famous literary critics, or more specifically ecocritics, "part of this [ ] movement that seeks to define a pastoral that has avoided the traps of idealisation [or pastoral sentimentalism] in seeking a discourse that can both celebrate and take some responsibility for nature without false consciousness" or, in other words, a more ecocentric repossession of pastoral that Terry Gifford defines as "post-pastoral".[2] In this paper, my purpose is to analyse US post-pastoral non-fiction, mainly memoirs and essays that include a pastoral retreat in the natural landscape, to demonstrate the importance of relating humans to the natural landscape but also to the technological and toxic landscapes. In order to do so, I intend to use the concept of the toxic sublime and to revalue it as a new perspective in the study of the relationship between American literature and our physical environment.

According to Jennifer A. Peeples, the "toxic sublime" refers to "the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe".[3] As an alternative to the "technological sublime"—which creates awe through the contemplation of human efforts to master the environment—it does not shun from considering the negative and noxious aspects of such endeavour, as in Edward Burtynsky's "Manufactured Landscapes", for example, which

[1] Joshua Corey, 'A Long Foreground: Exploring the Postmodern Pastoral', Joshua Corey & G.C. Waldrep (eds.) *The Arcadia Project* (Boise: Ashatha Press, 2012), p. 5.
[2] Terry Gifford, *Pastoral* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 146-148.
[3] Jennifer A. Peeples, 'Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes', *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (December 2011), p. 375.

Peeples considers as a manifestation of sublime aesthetics which may be used as a valuable trope in the study of the interface between art and our physical environment.[4] However, such considerations could be extended to the recent history of American literature. Indeed, if toxicity, or more exactly nuclear energy, had been the scope of environmentalism after the Second World War, it definitely drew the literary critics' attention after the publication of Rachel Carson's natural science book *Silent Spring* in 1962. Through her thorough analysis of the negative impact of pesticides on the environment and thus on human health, Carson announced the beginning of a national and soon-to-be global environmental crisis. Consequently, several critics attempted to theorise the tendency among US fiction writers from the 1980s onwards to represent the new reality of toxic danger. From Cynthia Deitering's "toxic consciousness" to deal with the "concern with the pervasive problem of toxic waste"[5] to Lawrence Buell's "toxic discourse" as a "literary mode that gives voice to "anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency"[6] and Heather Houser's very recent concept of "ecosickness" to describe fiction that illustrates sickness or "pervasive dysfunction" that "cannot be confined to a single system and links up the biomedical, environmental, social, and ehticopolitical" and "shows the imbrication of human and environment"[7], toxicity has been variously considered in the field of ecocriticism. However, with respect to Carson's founding text of the environmental movement and more specifically her literary "Fable for Tomorrow", one cannot but notice that she relates her alarming thesis to positive notions of beauty. Indeed, Carson depicts landscapes as intoxicated "places of beauty" that no longer symbolise human abilities to dominate the environment but rather their lack of control over it since it is covered by an invisible "lethal film" made of "systemic insecticides" that converts natural species into carcinogenic poison.[8] She seems to acknowledge the magnificence of the natural landscape, the existence of beauty while recognising the lethal danger of its toxicity. Instead of urging the reader or beholder to fall in the "traps of idealisation" of natural beauty and to feel awe when contemplating every human effort to master the environment, the aesthetics of the toxic sublime makes us become aware of the unseen

[4] Peeples, 'Toxic Sublime', pp. 379-380.
[5] Cynthia Deitering, 'The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s', Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 196.
[6] Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2016), p. 21.
[7] ibid., p. 11.
[8] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), pp. 45-46.

or intangible environmental problems caused by such efforts and, consequently, to reconsider the landscape from an ecocriticial perspective.

In American pastoral literature, representations of technological modifications of the natural landscape can be found in canon texts such as in Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Indeed, Thoreau describes a natural scenery that he sees through his window during one sunny afternoon and suddenly hears the sound of 'the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country'.[9] This train, symbolising the rising of industrialism, then becomes a preoccupation for the author, as he will subsequently refer to it and its sound. At first, the references to the machine might be reminiscent of Leo Marx's concept of the "machine in the garden" which he defines as the 'tension' or the 'noise' often caused by the 'train whistle' symbolising industrialism in the natural landscape or 'a reality alien to the pastoral dream' that 'arouses a sense of dislocation, conflict, and anxiety' and 'clash[es] through harmony'[10], as shown in the following passage in which Thoreau compares the locomotive to a man-made apocalyptic "iron horse":

> […] when I hear the iron horse make the hills echo with his snort like thunder, shaking the earth with his feet, and breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils (what kind of winged horse or fiery dragon they will put into the new Mythology I [do not] know), it seems as if the earth had got a race now worthy to inhabit it. If all were as it seems, and men made the elements their servants for noble ends![11]

However, Thoreau recognises the utility and place of man's modifications of the landscape and of the 'elements' as 'servants for noble ends' and 'worthy to inhabit [the earth]'. In fact, as Nicolas Brinded writes, this latter extract shows that Thoreau does not reject technology or industrialism but, to the contrary, acknowledges that 'the natural sublime [is] making way for the technological sublime' as 'he is attempting to place' the train 'within the philosophical framework of the sublime, where the train is able to stand side by side with nature because they share the same ineffable qualities'.[12] Thoreau does not regard technology as horrid because, as his mentor

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[9] Thoreau, Henry D., *Walden and 'Civil Disobedience'* (New York: Signet Classics, 2012), p. 94.
[10] Marx, *The Machine*, pp. 15-17.
[11] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 95.
[12] Nicolas Brinded, 'The myth making of nation building: *Walden* and the technological sublime', *Myth and Nation*, Vol. 23 (Spring 2015), pp. 1,9.

Ralph Waldo Emerson explains, "there is nothing inherently ugly about factories and railroads", they are not "anti-poetic" but "what is ugly is the dislocation and detachment from 'the Whole' of [Nature]".[13] This detachment, Thoreau thought, was the consequence of a more abstract but yet pervasive and dangerous effect of progress.

Indeed, if the railroads, trains or factories do not disturb the sublime landscape, it is "the commerce" that they symbolise which "Thoreau finds distasteful".[14] As the "new market economy" is making its way in the American landscape, Thoreau criticises abstractions such as "fame" or the accumulation of money and material possessions, of "luxuries", as being the determining factors of human comfort and advocates that 'superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only' while urging people to 'sell [their] clothes and keep [their] thoughts' because 'money is not required to buy one necessary of the soul'.[15] To some extent, Thoreau describes a form of consumerism as 'toxic' for the human self, while a life in harmony with the necessary of the soul provided by a pastoral retreat in nature could contribute to self-improvement. In other words, although it has been argued that many American Transcendentalists were idealists who may have at some point fallen in the trap of idealisation of nature, some passages in Thoreau's memoir allow the reader to develop a new and perhaps more realistic perspective on nature as undivided from humanity. Similarly to Cynthia Deitering's analysis of Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* in which she argues that the "toxic consciousness"—the general awareness of the existence of toxicity and toxic waste in the landscape—is to be associated with the protagonist's idea of "consumer consciousness", such consideration of Thoreau's text emphasises that the term toxicity in the concept of the toxic sublime can also metaphorically refer to the "poisoned" nature of our relationship to and perception of specific places, objects, or situations, which was caused by progress and technology.[16]

But Thoreau's pastoral philosophy as presented in *Walden* serves as a foundational matrix for a tradition of memoir or, more largely, of non-fiction writing which presents an interest in reframing the relationship between the natural and

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[13] Marx, *The Machine*, p. 241.
[14] Brinded, 'The myth making of nation building', p. 12.
[15] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 267.
[16] Deitering, 'The Postnatural Novel', p. 197.

technological landscapes. I will now discuss two of what could be called post-Thoreauvian authors, whose writings display two focuses of my research that are closely related to the study of the natural and technological landscapes: the multi-sensorial approach to landscapes and virtual reality.

First of all, although there is no dearth of writings on Thoreau's philosophy of nature, still, very little attention has so far been paid to his relationship to the senses as vehicles of understanding. Indeed, Thoreau's multi-sensorial approach to the landscape in *Walden* could be interpreted as a way of apprehending our physical environment through human experience. Besides the obvious use of his hearing and sight, Thoreau's other senses such as taste and smell are active as he experiences his surroundings. For example, he seems to get a better understanding of our physical world as he is "refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past [him], and [] smell[s] the stores which go dispensing their odors all the way from Long Wharf to Lake Champlain, reminding [him] of foreign parts, of coral reefs, and Indian oceans, and tropical climes, and the extent of the globe".[17] The odors connects him to the natural world as it reminds him of "coral reefs" and "oceans" but also to society as they come from a market. This consideration of human senses could confirm my supervisor, Professor Michel Delville's thesis that "'lower' senses of smell, taste and–to a lesser extent–touch were regulated to the lowest position in the hierarchy, excluded from the realm of aesthetic judgement" while, in fact, they "enrich and complexify human perception".[18] The lower senses may thus allow humans to understand things that go beyond his vision or hearing, and are, according to Thoreau and other post-Thoreauvian authors such as the conservationist Aldo Leopold, often stimulated in nature.

In one of his reflexions on hunting, Leopold acknowledges that his dog is his master because of the acuteness of its sense of smell, as illustrated by the following passage:

> My dog, […], thinks I have much to learn about partridges, and, being a professional naturalist, I agree. He persists in tutoring me, with calm patience of a professor of logic, in the art of drawing deductions from an educated nose. I delight seeing him deduce a conclusion, in the form of a point, from data that

[17] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 90.

[18] Sascha Bru, Ben De Bruyn and Michel Delville (eds.), *Literature Now: Key Terms and Methods for Literary History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 87-88/

> are obvious to him, but speculative to my unaided eye. Perhaps he hopes his dull pupil will one day learn to smell.[19]

In this extract from his most famous pastoral non-fiction book *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Leopold values the dog's faculties of perception and empirical knowledge and considers himself as his 'pupil'. Indeed, the dog is described as 'a professor of logic' who is able to 'draw[ ] deductions' with his 'educated nose'. Through the examination of empirical 'data', the dog manages to 'deduce a conclusion' as his skills at 'smelling' allow him to understand, to see things the hunter's 'unaided eye' cannot see. Although Leopold is a scientist, he admits that those who best comprehend our physical environment are those who were born in and remained connected with it. In other words, the hunter is an outsider in the environment that the dog masters, and progress might be a compelling factor that has contributed to man's disconnection from the landscape.

Indeed, Leopold stresses that 'the modern dogma is comfort at any cost' as it is man's obsession to secure himself a comfortable life.[20] 'We all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness', he writes, the 'deer strives with his supple legs' but 'the most of us with machines, votes and dollars'.[21] In his Thoreauvian critique of modernity and market economy, Leopold promote the multi-sensorial experience to understand the wildness of nature, which he defines as 'the fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals' that the 'high priests of progress' could never grasp. [22] Indeed, besides the machines such as the 'jeep and the airplane' which 'eliminate the opportunity for isolation in nature', human perception is also restricted by other manifestations of progress such as technological 'gadgets'.[23] According to Leopold, humans who are over-equipped with gadgets or "supercivilized" during pastoral retreats such as hunting, have lost "the capacity for isolation, perception and husbandry", they no longer have the "philosophical eye", the

[19] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 67.
[20] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 76.
[21] ibid., p. 141.
[22] ibid., p. 107.
[23] Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, p. 289.

multi-sensorial perception of wildness, of the world's energy, which may define life on earth.

One may argue that such criticism on progress is no longer topical considering the new technologies that keep being developed. Nevertheless, in his very recent memoir, modern advocate of Thoreau's philosophy Ken Ilgunas establishes a unique relationship with landscapes to such an extent that he somehow reinvents the pastoral mode and sublime aesthetics. Revolted by the American capitalist and consumerist system which imprisons young students in a secure life in which they study to have a job that is only going to full the purpose of buying them things they do not need but, more importantly, paying their student debts, Ilgunas decides to go to work in Alaska to achieve his freedom from debts as early as possible. But this journey allows him to compare the natural landscape to what he describes as the 'horrid landscape of subdivisions, chemical plants, and abandoned warehouses' and to embark in adventures that used to only "take place in virtual video game worlds on television screens or, at best, within the borders of football fields and hockey rinks".[24] In the Alaskan landscape, Ilgunas has the opportunity to contemplate an aurora, which he describes as a "desert storm, a million individual particles of light whipping over dunes in patterns that no human mind could comprehend or computer-generate".[25] It is one of these "glories" that the "foul cloud of [modern] civilization hid from [our] view" that we do not even miss because "we can only miss what we once possessed".[26] In this extract, technology and the virtual worlds of video games function as simulacra of our physical environment and, as a result, do not include the essential information provided by actual places. In a later passage, the author emphasises the relevance of this information as he writes that "we need need", the "need to be forced to go outside", "to depend on one another", "to grow a garden, fix a roof, to interact with neighbours" and that "nature has been all around [him] as a boy" but he "was completely oblivious to it all" as he "was playing video games".[27] Consequently, the aurora was not only a discovery that can only be found in the Alaskan wilderness but a

[24] Ken Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels: On the Open Road from Debt to Freedom* (Las Vegas: Amazon Publishing, 2013), p. 20.
[25] ibid., p. 73.
[26] ibid., p. 72.
[27] ibid., p. 120.

symbol of the beauty of nature that still exists all around us, even in the most civilised areas, but that toxic technologies have concealed. To some extent, video games and virtual reality are proofs of man's attempts to reproduce and thus to master the environment, which we tend to appreciate and contemplate as part of the technological landscape although they may deprive us of a thorough understanding of our physical environment provided by, in Ilgunas's words, "sensations".[28] In other words, they may represent a new age of what American environmentalist Bill McKibben referred to as "the age of missing information" marked by the moment when society moved "from natural sources of information toward electronic ones" such as television "and the culture it anchors", which have "alter[ed] [human] perception" and "drown[ed] out the subtle and vital information contact with the real world once provided".[29] Although it has already been argued that video games and virtual reality may promote an anti-social behaviour, they might also alienate humans from our physical environment and therefore, prevent them from perceiving, apprehending and perhaps indirectly preserving it.

To conclude, these non-fiction texts illustrate a critical stance towards the impact of capitalism, consumerism, technology and progress on our relationship with our physical environment. In other words, such examples point to different but related ways of examining distinct forms of toxicity that characterise this relationship. They also prompt us to examine the problematic nature of technology and progress dealing with elusive and paradoxical nature of the technological sublime. In the age of the Anthropocene and in our highly polluted, broadcasted and virtualised world, the concept of the toxic sublime opens the way for a new perspective in the ecocritical study of post-pastoral literature.

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[28] Ilgunas, *Walden on Wheels*, p. 121.

[29] Bill McKibben, *The Age of Missing Information* (New York: Random House Trade Paperback Edition, 2006), pp. 10, 22-23.