

Laura Dassow Walls. "The Sphinx at the Crossroads: Transcendentalism Meets the Anthropocene." *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, vol. 67 no. 3, 2021, p. 697-730.

"*We must think*", begins Laura Dassow Walls quoting Donna Haraway's exhortation in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). It is the humanists the Walls refers to who must *rethink*, rather, all those "outdated tools" (697) and critical methods that have long been built (arguably without much controversy) on the bedrocks offered by anthropocentric convictions.

Recent climate, ecological, and health events have begun to ruffle those foundations and in doing so are unsettling the "arrangements that have defined the very essence of the human" (699). Coming to grips with this identity stir-up, Walls sees a need to reconsider the validity of long-held narratives created around notions such as humanity, nature, and modernity. It becomes clear that the Emersonian "Nature" can no longer be nonchalantly considered eternally sustainable. The changes we have been increasingly witnessing are making us question the once deeply set belief that this "Nature" exists to support, or serve even, a humanity that occurs beyond it. Similarly, humans cannot keep being conceived as cleaved from nature. And, as Walls mentions, we need to come to terms with the consequences of our inaction as much as our defining the modern world by excluding nature from it.

And thus begins the author's attempt to "reorient the old polarity between 'man' and 'nature'" (698). Walls' article intends to be a reflective essay aiming to question her own familiar discourses in the ongoing Anthropocene era. These are, in the author's view, connected by inheritance to the Transcendentalist thinkers. Her and Haraway's conviction that theirs are not thoughts that can still be thought (702) uncannily recalls Emerson's own plea for an "original relation to the universe" during what he reckoned was a "retrospective" age in his opening to "Nature" (Emerson, 1836, 181). However, Walls does not intend to abandon nor denounce the Transcendentalists. Rather, recognizing and embracing the connections between us (their successors) and them, the author wishes to think for our future generations, much like Emerson, Thoreau, and the rest did for us.

Declaring the end of the modern world (701) as it was philosophically shaped by our predecessors, Walls insinuates that its downfall was caused by the exclusion of nature as well as the distance humanity has taken from what Modernists understood to be a separate 'natural world'. The idea of human supremacy over nature has been far from contested by humanists; Walls calls this their "precious inheritance" (699), one that maps a "noble mission" (699) for humanity to surpass the natural world capitalizing on the former's supposedly unique possession of mind in addition to matter.

This principle, Walls claims, has engendered the modern American attitude. But the cracks have already started appearing on this edifice. Working with Emerson's poem "The Sphinx" (published five years after his famous "Nature"), Walls suggests that Earth, or rather her emergence as "Gaia" more specifically (707), is a present-day equivalent of the sphinx. Her version, though, does not describe it as a creature challenging travellers with riddles. Instead, the author suggests that it might function as a symbol and way toward a "dialogic quest for meaning" (706). This sphinx should not be seen as an opponent to overcome, but as a "condition of our being" (707). In

other words, this nature, this Gaia is as much a part of us as humans as we are part of her. For Walls, Gaia is the image of a “forgotten transcendence” that impels us to think “beyond the human” (724), possibly leading to a new, less anthropocentric mindset. Delving more into this subject, Walls considers several bifurcations to support her argument; from the traditionally Western divide between *nature* and *human* to a distinguishing between primary and secondary qualities of subjects. The latter she regards as “the modernizing wedge that first drove apart the two cultures, science vs. the humanities” (714). There is an insightful parallel drawn here with Emerson’s dividing definition of the “me” and “not me” in his “Nature” essay. However, considering the full length of the article, the analysis does seem short to justify the epigraph by Latour that accompanies it, or even yet its subtitle, both of which emphasize the necessity for humanities to understand the sciences.

Thus, while the link between literature and science in Walls’s essay is not always prevalent, the article is indeed insightful in the ways it illustrates how the environmental crises we are facing today have been rooted in literary and philosophical movements, also exemplifying how these canonical thinkers may be re-read (or, better even, read *with*).

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