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"I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in." – John Muir, Journal (1913)

In the summer of 1994, a friend and I took a month off from mowing lawns and delivering newspapers to retrace Henry David Thoreau's trail through the Maine woods. Neither of us had read Thoreau, and as Old Town natives, neither of us had much desire to read about the land we grew up on. Instead, we took a literary shortcut and used *The Wildest Country: A Guide to Thoreau's Maine* by J. Parker Huber. In this practical guidebook we found maps and directions without having to get too tangled up in the gravity of real literature. It was summer, after all, and we had beer to drink and rivers to paddle and black flies to fight off. Literature could wait until the fall.

Only ten years after this expedition did I actually read *The Maine Woods*. By this time I'd plowed through most everything in the informal cannon of American nature writing, from *Walden* to *Arctic Dreams* to *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, yet I hadn't read the one text that was closest to home. Then, last year while teaching in Strasbourg, France, I saw a copy of *Les forêts du Maine*, or *The Maine Woods*, in the university bookstore. It was like spotting an old friend far from home and being reminded of good times. I leafed through the book in a surge of sentimentality, savouring the place names, recognising a few passages that Huber had cited, studying the maps of my forested homeland. I wanted to stop everyone in the bookstore and say, "See this place? This is where I'm from! This is my home!"

My sighting of this French translation served as the catalyst for me to finally read *The Maine Woods*. I returned home from France, checked out a copy from the Unity College library, and spent several weeks catching up on what I should have read years ago. Then I began wondering about the French translation. I hadn't bought it at the time because of a shortage of euros and because I'd wanted to only read French authors while in France, but now I was curious. What would compel a French reader to sit down with a book chalk full of obscure place-names and slow-moving landscape descriptions? Moreover, why would a talented French translator spend several years translating a book that most Americans – and Mainers! – haven't even read?

If you haven't followed the trends of literary theory during the last few decades, or if you aren't familiar with *les versions françaises* from Rue d'Ulm press, you may be asking the same questions: why would a French publication company and two fine translators spend their energies on *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and *The Maine Woods*? Both are eloquently written American literary classics, but neither is a best-seller, and neither is likely to gain wide reading audiences in France. So why these texts and not Philip Roth or Paul Auster or more Danielle Steele? Why not stick with what will sell?

The answer is twofold. First, the publication company and the translators, and second, current developments in the world of literary criticism. Both answers are related to some extent, but they are also distinctly separate.

The translators of both books attended the prestigious *École normale supérieure* in Paris, where they mastered English and went on to become leaders in the field of scholarly translation. An ancient tradition of *l'École normale supérieure* involves inviting well-established alumni to translate and publish a text that has influenced and shaped them over their years of vigorous study. These texts are characterised as being essential to a particular literary tradition yet often neglected, never translated, or inaccessible. With the help of Rue d'Ulm press, the translators are able to offer the Francophone world access to important texts that would otherwise remain unobtainable to non-English readers.

It is not insignificant that two of Rue d'Ulm's recently translated texts take place in Maine. Nor is it without significance that both fit snugly within what is called the American nature writing tradition.

The genre of nature writing, as you may have noticed, has experienced a boom in recent years. Consider the piles of recently published nature writing anthologies, the 'sense of place' compilations, the ever-expanding *Nature* sections in local bookstores, the slew of nature writing workshops and seminars across the country. It's as though writers and publishers have taken it upon themselves to become the ethnologists of the natural world, rushing to preserve that which is rapidly diminishing.

In response to this burgeoning genre of nature writing and its growing public popularity, literary scholars have begun investigating the extent to which nature writing serves as a surrogate for actual experience in nature. In other words, how does a reading experience shape our perceptions of wilderness differently from a real wilderness experience? Are we able to appreciate and understand the natural world simply by reading John Muir, or can this only be accomplished by lacing up our boots and *going out* with John Muir? Is it enough to read Edward Abbey, or must we crawl through the desert on bloody hands and knees to experience the true American West? And is it necessary to wade through tidal pools and peep under piles of seaweed when a careful study of Rachel Carson's *The Sea Around Us* may leave us with a similar understanding of ocean ecosystems?

For those of you who have spent considerable time exploring, studying or working in nature, these questions may seem foolish. How can a mere text substitute for the tangible authenticity of the natural world? How can a secondary

source possibly serve as a surrogate for the primary source? Why would any youth *go in* with Thoreau's *Maine Woods* when she can go out in the woods for herself? Authentic experience can never be lived vicariously, you may argue, no matter how eloquent the prose.

Yet prose there is, and abundant at that. It may seem odd that while nature itself is being rapidly cut down, strip mined, paved over, sprawled upon, drilled, developed, polluted, genetically manipulated and consumed in every way, it nonetheless inspires such an outpouring of texts. The opportunities for vicarious experience certainly seem, in many cases and for many people, to outweigh the accessibility of the real thing.

This is where ecological criticism, or ecocriticism as it is commonly known, steps in. Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment and is academia's response to the expanding genre of nature writing. "Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective" writes Cheryll Glotfelty in the *The Ecocriticism Reader*, "and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies."

Ecocritics argue that past scholarship, while claiming to "respond to contemporary pressures" often ignored one of the most pressing contemporary issues of our era, namely, the environmental crisis. Thus, ecocritics aim to apply ecological concepts to the reading, teaching, and writing of literature. While the goal of the writer, as Barry Lopez says, "is to nourish the readers' awareness of the world", the goal of the ecocritic is to ensure that nourishing, ecologically-minded literature is accessible to all.

So, you may be wondering, is ecocriticism being taken seriously by academia, or are ecocritics largely perceived as tree-hugging scholars looking for excuses to take their classes outdoors? As with all academic sub-disciplines, ecocriticism does indeed have its share of critics who say it is 'soft', 'flaky', or 'eco-centric.' However, many scholars also agree that ecocriticism is currently producing some of the most lively, original, and insightful scholarship in the humanities.

The journal *ISLE (Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment)* is at the head of ecocritical scholarship and claims to "reflect the rapid growth of ecological literary criticism and environmental scholarship in related disciplines in the United States and around the world in recent years, which in turn reflects the steady increase in the production of environmental literature over the past several decades and the increased visibility of such writing in college classrooms." *ISLE* is the official journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), which boasts thousands of members worldwide and sponsors annual conferences at major universities. More concretely, however, nearly all universities and colleges in the U.S. have begun offering courses that explore the complex relationship between culture and nature. If you see courses at your local university entitled *Wallace Stegner and the American West*, *Contemporary Nature Writing*, or *The Thoreauvian Literary Tradition*, it is likely that the influence of ecocriticism has something to do with their presence.

But back to our translations. You may have noticed in *ISLE's* mission statement a mention of "the world". Yes, people out there in that world are writing about the environment as well, not only because they love their land, but also because the environmental crisis is not endemic to the United States. Australia, Japan, and Canada have particularly strong ecocritical communities, and the influence is spreading. What was once criticised for being an Anglo-centric sub-discipline has now matured into a rich melting pot of literary criticism. Increasingly, environmental literature from different countries is being translated into English, foreign scholars are contributing to *ISLE*, and ecocritics are taking their studies abroad. Just the other day, for example, I received an invitation to an ecocriticism conference in Africa.

My guess, however, is that Cécile Roudeau and François Specq didn't decide to translate Jewett and Thoreau simply based on relatively recent trends in the literary world. Conversely, I suspect that their admiration and attachment to their respective texts is more profound than any body of theory or criticism, and that each text rather chose them from early on in their studies. I say this not only because of the elegance of each translation but also because of the extensive and thoughtful essays concluding the translations.

Whether or not you read French, it is heartening to know that the literature of Maine is being considered in other parts of the world. Nature is central to the image of Maine for many people, and, likewise, Maine literature is central to the American nature writing tradition. The recent translations of *Les forêts du Maine* and *Le pays des sapins pointus* are testament to Maine's unique place in this growing literary tradition, and my hope is that Mainers will soon have access to literature from other parts of the world as well. If ecocriticism continues to expand, I expect that it won't be long before you hear of the Quebecois writer Pierre Morency, the French writer Maurice Genevoix, or the Italian poet Andrea Zanzotto.

Until then, however, consider the closing words to the introduction to Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*: "Do not jump into your automobile next June and rush out to the canyon country hoping to see some of that which I have attempted to evoke in these pages. In the first place, you can't see anything from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe. Probably not. In the second place most of what I write about in the book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You're holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock. Don't drop it on your foot — throw it at something big and glassy. What do you have to lose?"