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“Only That Day Dawns to Which We are Awake”

Thoreau’s *Walden*, Alienated Labor, and Utopian Thinking in the Twenty-First Century

*Jacob Sloan*

In “A New Reading of *Capital*,” Fredric Jameson maintains that “Utopia . . . is the radical disturbance in our sense of history and the disruption whereby we approach a thought of the radical or absolute break with our own present and our own system” (13). Utopian thinking, that is, though it may be bound up inexorably with failure, with impossibility, acts as a “radical disturbance” in our reified, our governed and limited, method of thinking about what is and what must eventually come about. According to Jameson, then, it is not necessary that such images of utopia be in any way certain or inevitable, but rather that these images allow the individual, if only for a moment, to “approach” the “thought of the radical or absolute break with” his or her “own present” and its “own system”; utopian thinking provides the individual with a space, no matter how fitfully rendered, outside of the total system, outside of the prescribed manner of thinking about, of experiencing, and of interacting with the world. In allowing the individual to imagine such a “radical break” with the present socio-economic “system” and all of its values, utopian thinking not only posits a space which could exist outside of inequality, alienation, and scarcity; it also, by representing that which is absent from the present and its system, provides the individual with the ability to critique a present which has become reified,
which has become ostensibly natural, inevitable, and thus immutable. For as Ernst Bloch reminds, “the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present” (12), a critique of what is, which functions by imagining what could be and what ought to be.

Because of its continued presence in high school and college classrooms, Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* remains one of the most engaging and relevant representations of the construction of such a utopia and of the method of utopian thinking more broadly. For Thoreau’s time at Walden Pond, with its ostensible disconnection from industrial society and its political, social, ethical, and epistemological values, with its attempted spatial rejection of the various forms of oppression and alienation inherent in such a mode of production, awarded him the ability to think of a “radical break with” his “own present,” one of increasing industrialization and the advent of capitalist modernity, and, to borrow from Heidegger, this society’s dominant mode of “revealing,” of experiencing, observing, understanding, and interacting with the natural and social world. Most certainly, such a moment apart, no matter how fitful, awarded to Thoreau the ability to better explore his own social system, the mode of capitalist production in which he found himself, and its ideological values. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes a new and qualitatively better outside, while still situated within the determination of the inside; he presents a radically new way—without the proliferation of alienated labor and human and natural exploitation—of living within and thinking about the world itself.

In order to fully understand the utopian impulse at work in *Walden*, however, and in order to apply such a method of thinking to our own late capitalist period, Thoreau’s text must be understood as both a product of and a response to the early stages of the emergence and ascendancy of capitalist modernity, of industrialization and all of its corresponding values and modes of social intercourse. As Marx maintains in *The German Ideology*, the replacement of one mode of production with another always results in a corresponding shift in social, political, ethical, and even epistemological values and practices. That is, with this productive shift, this moment of revolution, “in place of an earlier form of intercourse, which has become a fetter, a new one is put, corresponding to the more developed productive forces and, hence, to the advanced mode of the self-activity of individuals” (87). With the advent of modern technology, then, and with the profound shift in the mode of production itself, an entirely new form of “intercourse,” whether social or ethical, political or poetic, was established in Thoreau’s lifetime. Most certainly, according to Heidegger, the
emergence of modern technological processes, of industrialization—of the railroad, for Thoreau—ushered in with it an entirely new mode of “revealing,” of observing, experiencing, and interacting not only with the natural world but also with society itself.

As Heidegger maintains in “The Question Concerning Technology,” “Technology is” what may be thought of as “a way of revealing” (103). Technology, that is, as Heidegger so conceives of it, reveals the world itself, including its inhabitants and resources, to the individual in a particular manner; it alters his or her way of experiencing and observing that by which he or she remains surrounded. This epoch of modern technology, of the increasing permeation of industrialization into the productive process and into social life more generally, reveals the world in a certain manner; it carries with it prescribed ways of experiencing, observing, and interacting with nature. According to Heidegger, the form of “revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such” (104). Modern technological processes, then, grounded of course in industrial capitalism and its various superstructural expressions, prescribe to the individual a way of looking at the natural and social world as a mere means to an end, as a thing to be “challenged” and harnessed, to be mastered. It must be remembered that Thoreau himself is responding directly to the prescribed mode of “revealing,” of social and economic “intercourse,” put forward by such an epoch. What marks Thoreau’s thought in Walden as utopian, then, is his desire to break radically from such a mode of “revealing,” from such a systemically prescribed and reinforced way of experiencing the world and, more importantly, its inhabitants within this dynamic stage of capitalist development. For through such a mode of “revealing,” Heidegger maintains, even human beings come to be seen as instruments, as mere things which must be mastered and manipulated.

Such a method of “revealing,” of course, may most obviously be observed in Marx’s theorization of alienated labor in his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844; here, Marx, writing in much the same world-historical moment as Thoreau, maintains that, under capitalism, men and women come to be seen and treated as mere instruments within the process of production. According to Marx, “labor,” for this worker-commodity, remains “external to the worker, i.e. it does not belong to his [or her] essential being; . . . in his [or her] work, therefore,” the laborer “does not affirm . . . but denies” him or herself. Thus, the worker, revealed as a mere instrument by first stage capitalist
industrialization, remains not “content but unhappy.” For in this productive process, the individual “does not develop freely his [or her] physical or mental energy but mortifies [the] body and ruins [the] mind” (74).

Most certainly, Thoreau’s retreat to Walden Pond represents a “radical break” with the modern “mode of revealing” and with the alienation and exploitation which it prescribes and by which it functions. In Walden, Thoreau imagines a moment in which individuals will be able to break from the modern mode of “revealing,” and—instead of selling themselves to the alienating occupations which sustain industrial capitalism—in which individuals will be awarded the opportunity to “develop freely” their “physical” and “mental energy.” Thus, by creating for himself a space away from industrialization and the alienated labor which it produces and by which it is continually produced, Thoreau becomes able to critique a system, a determining capitalist totality, of which he remains a part. In addition, he becomes, even in the fragile and ultimately failed state of apartness awarded to him by Walden Pond, able to imagine an outside to the inside; he becomes able to visualize and concretize a “radical or absolute break with” his “own present,” and thus to imagine a disalienated and dereified world to come. For the “millions,” Thoreau explains, “are awake enough for physical labor, but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life.” According to Thoreau, “To be awake is to be alive,” and yet he has “never yet met a man who was quite awake” (2001). Thoreau’s excursion to Walden Pond, then, and the utopian ruminations which come from it, directly negates the alienation, the “mode of revealing,” of thinking about others and about nature as mere instruments, inherent in the industrial capitalist mode of production.

For Thoreau, it is the societal system itself—that is, the anti-Walden, the inside as opposed to some sort of radically disconnected and negative outside—which keeps men and women from being properly “awake,” from “effective intellectual exertion,” from a “poetic or divine life.” Certainly, such an assertion and accusation of “never” being “quite awake” could be merely ascribed to the individual, to the realm of uninhibited individual choice, but Thoreau situates his criticisms within modernity itself, within the newly developed industrial capitalist system and its mode of “revealing,” of structuring, determining, and thus limiting thought and activity. Such a response to this “mode of revealing,” of course, with its alienated labor, with its almost absolute reification of the human and the natural, may most clearly be observed in Thoreau’s discussion of the railroad and the alienation into which it forces individuals. “We,” Thoreau
explains in an oft-quoted passage, “do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us.” According to Thoreau, “those sleepers . . . that underlie the railroad” are human individuals themselves: “Each one is a man, an Irish-man, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you” (2002). The train, the archetypical symbol of early modernity, of early capitalist mechanization and industrialization, Thoreau argues, carries men and women with speed; however, such constructions are themselves predicated upon the mastery of men, the alienation of human labor. The railroad, and industrial capitalism itself, in its ever-increasing demand for more and more labor, claims the abilities of individuals, keeping them from “effective intellectual exertion,” from the “poetic or divine life.” For “if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail,” Thoreau continues, “others have the misfortune to be ridden upon,” to be exploited and alienated, to be removed from humanity and reason, from poetry and divinity, from thought itself, in order to maintain the current system of speed, of rapid extrinsic “improvement” (2003).

“As for work,” Thoreau maintains, “we haven't any of any consequence” (2003). The industrial capitalist “mode of revealing,” that is, which is imputed to and imposed upon human individuals, results fundamentally in a disregard for actual thought, for intellectuality and ethico-philosophical exploration. According to Thoreau, speaking from his societally disconnected space at Walden Pond, the “work” which the system itself requires for its continued functioning forces individuals to become alienated, to disconnect themselves from their own humanity and their own reason. Modernity itself, from which Thoreau remains disconnected for a moment, requires such sacrifices in its continued functioning; it depends upon a “mode of revealing” in which all existing entities, be they nature or human beings, are reified and ordered, are reduced to mere instruments.

In such a mode of production, thought, the free development of the individual mind, aside from its instrumental application within the system itself, becomes something which is greatly devalued. Because of the demand of industrialized capitalism, the individual is no longer expected to devote his or her time to self-improvement, to moral and intellectual exploration, to the “poetic” and “divine” life; all of these concerns have themselves been devalued by the industrial moment and the “mode of revealing,” of “intercourse,” which it prescribes in order to sustain itself. Though the industrial outside demands the labor of individuals, and though it creates a spectacle of development, of
dynamic growth and prosperity, “with all its so called internal improvements,” according to Thoreau, it produces improvements which, in fact, remain only “external and superficial” (2002). These improvements, Thoreau maintains, may advance the image of improvement, of “internal” development, but they remain extrinsic to the individual; they do not “develop freely his [or her] physical or mental energy but,” with the alienation and unhappiness which they produce and require, merely mortify and ruin the human mind and body.

Thoreau’s retreat to Walden Pond, however, speaks to the creation of a utopia in which human energy exists not as some mere instrument, allocated to produce only “external and superficial” improvements, but rather in which human energy is allowed, once again, to produce “internal” improvement, to “develop freely” the human mind and body, to be utilized not in the creation of machines but rather in the creation of the “poetic” and “divine.” Walden, then, outlines an entirely new space, a utopian space, in which the “mode of revealing” imposed upon individuals by an increasingly industrial form of capitalism is transgressed: a space in which the human energy expended in the creation of “external and superficial” development becomes immediately personal, qualitative, and thus disalienated. For at Walden Pond, Thoreau’s own utopia, untouched as it appears to be by the mode of production and its determining structure, human energy is not harnessed and exploited in the development of the extrinsic, but rather is used in the further development of the intrinsic, of the “greatest gains and values” which exist, in the capitalist mode of production, as those which are “farthest from being appreciated” (2010).

As Louis Althusser reminds in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in the system of capitalism, the “ultimate condition of production is . . . the reproduction of the conditions of production” (1483); the underlying “structure” of capitalism, that is, remains predicated upon “a process of perpetual breakdown: so we have here a machine which . . . must, to remain in existence, constantly repair itself by enlarging itself and its field of control” (Jameson, “A New Reading” 6). Such a continuing process, of course, depends directly upon the exploitation of the energy, the labor, of human beings. At Walden Pond, however, detached as it appears to be from the structure of an early industrial capitalism and thus from the “reproduction of the conditions of production,” Thoreau locates a space in which he is not forced to employ his energy in the maintenance and enlargement of the industrial capitalist structure, of the railroad and the telegraph machine; rather, Thoreau’s labor at Walden Pond remains under his own control, free from the determining instance of the
structure which forces the individual to alienate him or herself from his or her labor. Thus, at Walden Pond, Thoreau locates a space in which he becomes able to utilize his own energies not to further industrial development, but rather to “affirm” himself and his own desires.

“I went to the woods,” Thoreau explains, “because I wished to live deliberately” (2001). That is, instead of being forced to employ his faculties in the service of another, in the service of the “superficial” developments of industrialization, Thoreau locates at Walden Pond a utopian space in which he may “live deliberately,” in which he is awarded the ability to allocate his own energy and labor according to his own desires and needs. Rather than merely working for the industrial mode of “revealing,” rather than merely reproducing the conditions of the capitalist mode of production, then, Thoreau maintains that, at Walden Pond, the individual becomes able to grow into “a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within” him or herself, “opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought” (2026).

Though his implicit valorization of Columbus must be ignored, Thoreau maintains that in the utopian space, in the space disconnected from the modern mode of “revealing,” from the alienating socio-economic “intercourse” imposed by an increasingly industrial form of capitalism, the individual is not bound by the wage: the individual is not forced to sell his or her labor to the capitalist system, and thus to alienate him or herself from this labor and its products. Instead, a space like the one about which Thoreau writes at Walden Pond awards to the individual the opportunity to invest his or her labor within the discovery and the betterment of him or herself, to neither mortify the body nor ruin the mind, but rather to “develop freely his [or her] physical or mental energy.” For, Thoreau explains, all individuals “are sculptors and painters”; however, “our material,” ought not to be that which is imposed upon us by industrial capitalism and its mode of “revealing,” but rather “our own flesh and blood and bones” (2013), our own selves.

According to Thoreau, individuals must not allow their energy to be harnessed in the service of the “reproduction” of some exploitative socio-economic system and its dehumanizing “mode of revealing.” For in a utopia like Walden, labor exists not as that which belongs to and is used in the service of another; instead, labor is intrinsic. In Thoreau’s rendering of utopia, then, labor is rescued from alienation: it is awarded, once again, to the human being and is allowed to be “deliberately” invested within “divine” and “poetic” development, by this individual. Life, in Thoreau’s image of utopia, is not determined by
the industrial process; it is neither driven by the expansion of the railroad nor the further proliferation of the telegraph, but rather it is lived “deliberately.” In a utopia such as Walden, it is the individual, and not the mode of production and its forms of “intercourse,” who decides how he or she is to spend his or her life. “If the bell rings,” Thoreau wonders, “why should we run?” (2005).

For Walden itself occupies a space seemingly without the bounds of capitalist determination, and Thoreau renders it as such. Thus, the living of life in Walden, in this space typifying a “radical or absolute break with” the “system” of industrial capitalism, is not determined by the productive process: it does not respond to the “bell” that “rings,” but rather to the deliberate decisions made by the individual. Here, labor is no longer alienated. It is no longer driven by, and exercised in order to sustain, the ringing “bell,” the demands of the industrial capitalist mode of production. Instead, labor, here, belongs to the individual.

In Walden, Thoreau develops a space in which labor is no longer alienated, in which individuals, rather than having their actions determined by larger and exploitative structural totality, by the ringing of the “bell,” work and “live deliberately.” Rather than being determined by the “reproduction” and the enlargement of the current system, by what Marcuse terms the “reality principle” (141)—by the dominant mode of “revealing” inherent in industrial capitalism, which seems to have become the only reality possible—labor in Thoreau’s utopian space appears as that which belongs to and is determined by the individual and the fulfillment of his or her wants and needs, by the free development of his or her “physical” and “mental energy.” Thus, in this space, human energy is once again liberated and becomes that which may be used in the pursuance of the development of the “poetic” and “divine,” of “effective intellectual exertion.”

Most certainly, then, in Walden, Thoreau presents to his reader a utopian space in which labor, in which human energy, belongs to and is determined by neither the economic system nor its form of “intercourse,” but rather by the individual him or herself. In this imagined space, then, even if physically impossible, Thoreau becomes able not only to critique the profoundly exploitative mode of “revealing,” of socio-economic “intercourse,” imposed upon the individual living within the industrial capitalist mode of production, but also to imagine a new “present,” a new mode of life itself, in which labor is not alienated from the individual, is not determined by the capitalist system and its continual need for its “reproduction,” but remains a part of him or her. The utopian space about which Thoreau writes in Walden, then, allows not only for the criticism of that which exists, but also the imagining of a radically different mode
of life which ought to exist instead. For as Adorno reminds in “Something’s Missing,” his dialogue with Bloch, utopias like Thoreau’s act not only as “determined negation[s] of that which merely is”; they also, always, “point at the same time to what should be” (12).

However, Thoreau’s *Walden* is not only a response to the alienation of labor inherent in the industrial capitalist mode of production. For Marx himself further defines the epoch in which Thoreau’s text is situated as a moment in which “[n]ature” itself “becomes . . . simply an object for mankind, purely a matter of utility.” In this moment, Marx continues, the “natural world itself ceases to be recognized as a power in its own right.” Rather than being observed as itself a living entity, then, nature becomes, in Thoreau’s epoch, that which is merely to be challenged and harnessed by the human individual. Even “the theoretical knowledge of the natural world’s ‘independent laws,’ Marx explains, ‘appears,’ in this moment, ‘only as a stratagem designed to subdue it to human requirements, whether as the object of consumption or as the means of production’” (*Grundrisse* 94). Therefore, it must be noted that Thoreau’s experiences on Walden Pond not only negate the alienated and inconsequential labor which the emerging mode of industrial capitalist production requires, but also that they respond directly to this historical moment in which nature itself becomes merely something to be subdued, a reified object to be placed in the service of the socio-economic system itself.

*Walden*, therefore, not only establishes a utopian space in which alienated labor may be critiqued and abolished, but also a space in which the industrial capitalist “intercourse” concerning nature—which Heidegger characterizes as a form of “challenging,” as a way of seeing and experiencing the natural world, despite its living dynamism, as a mere object which must be mastered and ripped apart—may be undermined. “The earth,” Thoreau argues, “is not a mere fragment of dead history . . . to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly”; for Thoreau, thinking outside of the reification of nature inherent in industrial capitalism, nature is not some object to be trampled and pulled from at will. Rather, nature itself, he continues, is “living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit—not a fossil of earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic” (2019). For Thoreau, nature itself remains not a thing to be harnessed and mastered, not a mere resource to be subdued, but the master of all life, the beneficent host from which all parasites, human and animal, feed. Thoreau, then, dereifies nature itself, exposing it not as something which is waiting to
be harnessed or challenged, but rather as the dynamic and lively master in its own right.

In his textual rendering of utopia, Thoreau, countering the mode of “revealing” put forth by the increasingly industrialized mode of capitalist production in which he finds himself, theorizes the creation of a new relationship between the individual and the natural world. Describing his dwelling, Thoreau explains that, while living on Walden Pond, removed, even if only slightly, from industrial capitalism and its values, he “was not so much within doors as behind a door.” Here, Thoreau situates himself not over, but within the dynamic natural world; he is not its master but an observer living both with and within nature, “suddenly neighbor to the birds; not by having imprisoned one, but having caged [himself] near them” (1998). In this utopian space, in this concretization of the “radical . . . break with” the “present” and its socio-economic “system,” it is no longer necessary for the individual to stand above the natural world, acting as its master. Rather than merely reflecting or even negating the manner in which nature is revealed by industrial capitalism, Thoreau posits an entirely new space, a radically different mode of life, in which the human individual does not attempt to enslave the natural world, but rather to make his or her home within nature’s dynamism, within its beauty, without having to either alter or subdue its functioning.

The tranquility and apartness of Walden Pond, rather obviously, awards to Thoreau a moment of clarity, a moment in which alternatives may be considered, in which an outside may be constructed, and thus in which the criticism of what exists may be reasserted. As has been suggested, Thoreau’s Walden functions fundamentally as a utopian text, as a textual rendering of a space which remains both geographically apart and radically different from the industrialized mode of production which actually colors Thoreau’s historical moment. Thus, Thoreau’s textual, and somewhat fictional, representation of his time at Walden Pond must be characterized not only as a separation, but also as a reconstruction of an entirely new, yet seemingly impossible, space untouched by the exploitative structure of industrial capitalism and its mode of “revealing.” Thoreau’s Walden illustrates and concretizes the possibility of a “radical or absolute break” with what exists, and also the ability to imagine the habitation of a radically different, a freer and more deliberate, space in which the individual is not mindlessly forced hither and thither by the ringing “bell” of industrial capitalism. Thoreau’s time at Walden Pond, then, represents a utopian refusal to accept what exists and—while still situated within an increasingly persuasive
Thus, despite the obvious historical apartness of Thoreau’s text, *Walden* presents to the twenty-first century reader—occupying a seemingly perpetual “present” of exploitation, of alienation, and of environmental degradation—the power which utopian thinking, which the imagining of an idealized apart or post-present, lends to critique and to socio-economic and political resistance. For according to Jameson, the postmodern individual remains shackled by the seemingly immutable and inevitable character of the late capitalist mode of production; the mode of production appears not to be that which may be transgressed or destroyed but rather a “perpetual present” (*Postmodernism* 169). In this postmodern moment, all forms of resistance have been “somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system of which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it” (48).

Twenty-first century late capitalism, then, presents to the individual that it remains the only possible reality. In a moment in which difference and radical otherness, of the construction of a different system, have been rejected altogether, in a moment which may be characterized by the profound “waning or disappearance of otherness,” Thoreau’s utopian thinking reasserts itself mightily, signaling not the acceptance of what is, but rather the imagining of what ought to exist (Jameson, “A New Reading” 12).

In this period of late capitalism, the whole of existence, of thought and life, becomes subsumed by the primacy of what exists empirically, of what Marcuse has termed the “reality principle.” According to Marcuse, all thought in this moment “is channeled into the domain of the reality principle and brought into line with its requirements” (141). Here, thought which transgresses the bounds of “reality,” of the “perpetual present” which exits, is labelled impossible. In late capitalism, Adorno explains, “the capability to imagine the totality as something that could” and ought “to be completely different” has become a seeming impossibility. Rather, “people” appear to be merely “sworn to the world as it is and” to “have” a “blocked consciousness vis-à-vis possibility” (4).

By rereading Thoreau’s rejection of the “reality principle,” of a seemingly natural and inevitable societal structure, in the twenty-first century, however, the possibility for imagining an entirely new present, an entirely new mode of life, is reinvigorated. In *Walden*, Thoreau rejects the alienated labor and the mastery of nature which, in the era of late capitalism, have reasserted themselves as life’s natural and inevitable components. Thoreau’s concerns with the
alienation of labor and with environmental degradation have certainly been forced to their respective crises in the late capitalist moment, and they remain relevant concerns for all contemporary readers. Certainly, this seems to suggest a direct affinity between these two supposedly different historical epochs, the industrial and the postmodern. However, Terry Eagleton reminds that such a sense of historical sameness, such a direct comparison, as capitalism has persisted, remains warranted:

The final limit on capitalism . . . is capital itself, the constant reproduction of which is a frontier beyond which it cannot stray. There is thus something curiously static and repetitive about this most dynamic of all historical regimes. The fact that its underlying logic remains pretty constant is one reason why the Marxist critique of it remains largely valid. Only if the system were genuinely able to break beyond its own bounds, inaugurating something unimaginably new, would this cease to be the case. But capitalism is incapable of inventing a future which does not ritually reproduce its present. (10)

_Walden_, though, reasserts an imaginable and incredibly concrete break with such modes of domination and exploitation, with such a system, thus reintroducing to the modern reader the possibility of amending, of critiquing, and of overcoming the “present” and its “reality.” For the reader living beneath the determining structure of late capitalism, Thoreau’s text allows for “the return of the repressed image of liberation” to consciousness (Marcuse 145).

Marcuse, writing in _Eros and Civilization_, identifies such utopian thinking itself as the “refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle,” as the “refusal to forget,” even in the ultimately determining realm of what is, “what _can be_” (149). Thoreau’s trip to Walden Pond, by removing him as far as possible from the socio-economic totality and its life-governing principles, enables him to refuse “to accept” what is, to refuse to acquiesce to the demands of society, and also, in the very same moment, to imagine “what can be.” In his excursion, Thoreau becomes able to reassert his ability to think and thus his ability to criticize the oppressive and alienating mode of production about him. _Walden_, then, holds what are assumed to be the very bounds of “reality,” of possibility, to the light of criticism; it reveals the supposedly natural and inevitable constraints of life to be those which must and are able to be resisted and overcome. In the “perpetual present” of late capitalism, within the ostensibly inescapable “reality” of what is, a reading of Thoreau’s _Walden_ reasserts the possibility of imagining an entirely
new and different mode of life—free from alienation, exploitation, and human and environmental degradation—toward which all must strive.

In addition, Thoreau’s rendering of utopia not only as some sort of future of difference but as a geographic space lends itself perfectly to the postmodern mode of cognition: a mode in which “our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages are . . . dominated,” first and foremost, “by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism” (Jameson, Postmodernism 16). For, according to Bloch, though “Thomas Moore designated utopia as a place, an island in the distant South Seas,” this “designation underwent changes later so that it left space and entered time.” “Indeed,” Bloch continues, “the utopians, especially those in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transposed the wishland more into the future” than into any geographic space. Thoreau’s Walden, of course, attempts just the opposite; for therein, he posits not necessarily a time of utopia, but rather a space, a geographical location, which breaks from the supposedly natural and inexorable system of industrial capitalism (3). “Where I lived,” Thoreau explains, “was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers.” Rather than directly occupying some sort of temporal future, Thoreau’s utopian image of “what can be” asserts itself in a specific geographical and spatial location; he describes his time at Walden Pond not as a when but rather as a “where,” as a concrete space “far from the noise and disturbance” (2000). In the era of late capitalism, then, in which spacial cognition has come to replace temporal cognition, Thoreau’s concrete and geographical rendering of utopia, of “what can be,” appears more relevant than ever, and thus a reading of Walden allows for the reassertion of the concept of a utopian space, of the creation, even in the “perpetual present” of late capitalism, of a utopian “where” as opposed to a utopian when.

“Only that day dawns,” Thoreau explains, “to which we are awake” (2034). For in order to bring about “what can be” as opposed to the “perpetual present” of what is, the individual must become awakened to his or her ability to transgress the “reality principle,” the mode of “revealing” and “intercourse,” presented as natural and inevitable, which the capitalist mode of production, whether industrial or multination, imposes. By positing a utopian space which may function without the bounds of capitalistic determination, without the bounds of alienated labor and natural exploitation, Thoreau’s Walden awards to the modern reader the ability to imagine a “radical or absolute break with” the “present” and its determining “system.” For herein, Thoreau posits a utopian enclave, an ideal world, in which labor is not alienated from but determined by the individual,
in which human energy is not expended in the industrial capitalist mode of “revealing,” but rather utilized in the free development of the individual. In the era of late capitalism, in which the “present” and its “system” has become so reified, so apparently inescapable, Thoreau’s Walden reasserts the individual’s ability “to pass judgment on the abstract quality of life in the present and to keep alive the idea of a concrete future” (Jameson, Marxism and Form 416).

Most certainly, Thoreau’s own present, like our own, must have appeared to him as something ostensibly inescapable; yet, in Walden, he creates a space which enables him to “see how the . . . world around him,” the capitalist mode of production, “is . . . not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and the state of society” (Marx, German Ideology 62). In his constructed space, largely textual, of ecological utopianism, Thoreau becomes able to critique his own present and to imagine some sort of “radical or absolute break” with it; here, he is able to reaffirm not the space which actually exists but rather the space which ought to exist and can be brought about. Such an affirmation of “what can be,” as opposed to the image of existence which is asserted and maintained by the “reality principle,” remains integral in the project of overcoming our own “perpetual present” of late capitalism, with its apparent inevitability.

In positing a utopian space, a space of radical difference, of radical freedom, Thoreau’s Walden speaks directly to the individual living within the era of late capitalism, always reaffirming the fact that, even in the seemingly “perpetual present,” radically different spaces and societies must be imagined and pursued. As Thoreau explains, “Only that day dawns to which we are awake,” and thus “what can be” may only be brought about by reawaking the utopian ability to imagine a new and radically different life, to imagine a “radical or absolute” break with a seemingly “perpetual present.” In this ability to imagine difference, to imagine a better future or a better space, hope itself remains concentrated.
Works Cited


