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# The “Crusade” as a Metaphor for the Anti-Civilization Movement in Thoreau’s “Walking”\*

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## 1. Introduction

In “Walking” (1862),<sup>1</sup> an essay first published in 1862, the year of his death, Henry David Thoreau describes a walk as “a sort of crusade,” an image primarily related to his understanding of a walk into “the West” as “but another name for the Wild” (75). The essay has been widely acknowledged to be about a mystic sauntering into the wild, understood as “a religious quest and a means of intellectual and physical reawakening” (Robinson 153), “the sacred excursion or crusade” in which Thoreau seeks to recover “the essential primitive wildness in himself,” (Richardson 224-25), and “a kind of pilgrimage to the Holy Land” (Buell 329). Many critics have discussed Thoreau’s inclination to walk to the west in context of his quest for freedom and the wilderness.<sup>2</sup> There have been, however, few attempts to analyze how the ambiguous image of a “crusade,” in its relation to walking into the west, functions in the essay. “Crusade,” defined in the *OED* as “a military expedition undertaken by the Christians of Europe in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries to recover the Holy Land from the

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\* This article is the revised version of a paper submitted to the Kyushu American Literature Prize Contest and acclaimed as “fine work” by the selection committee at the annual conference of the Kyushu American Literature Society (KALS) at Kagoshima University on May 9th, 2015. I am grateful to the members of the selection committee for their invaluable comments and suggestions when intimating me of the result of the contest.

Mohammedans,” seems to be rhetorically utilized by Thoreau as a walk toward the Holy Land, never to return to society. This heroic image of walking as a “crusade” is evoked by Thoreau’s severe criticism of the degenerate civilization of his time. Considering his anti-civilization stance, combined with his definition of the “crusade,” this paper will discuss how the idea of the “crusade” is used as a metaphor in “Walking.”

## 2. Genius Westward: Sauntering into the Wild

“Walking” begins with the author’s etymological definition of the word “saunterer” as those who go to the Holy Land. Thoreau insists that a walker should have “a genius . . . for *sauntering*,” and calls such walkers “the family of the Walkers,” or an “ancient and honorable class” who share “a direct dispensation from Heaven” (59-60 italics in the original). Although the definition sounds like a “somewhat parodic description of aristocratic principles of heredity” (Fresonke 136), Thoreau metaphorically emphasizes a walk as “a sort of crusade, preached by some Peter the Hermit in us, to go forth and reconquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels” (60).

Thoreau has a strong impulse to walk into the west; his direction is specified as “the southwest or west” whenever he walks (69). He was inclined to walk westward because he was opposed to the way people of his time spent their lives in eastern, civilized societies. Thoreau hated that his townsmen were confined to the highway, that his neighbors confined themselves to shops and offices, and that womankind was confined to the house (61-62).<sup>3</sup> Thoreau repeated that people are enclosed by the routine of domestic and social life in a landscape deformed by “all man’s improvements” (64). He was greatly disappointed that the lives of many men are only “a sort of locomotiveness,” and that the majority are tamed “like dogs and sheep” to be “submissive members of society” (82-83). In this view, Thoreau anxiously desired to be “free from all worldly engagements” (61), and walked in the opposite direction of civilized societies. The west is “another name for the Wild” (75), whereas the east represents the landscape of civilization. Thoreau saunters into “the Wild,” in pursuit of a culture that “imports

much muck from the meadows,” and of the wild soil in which a man would not be “cultivated” (84-85).

It should be pointed out here that his westward walk might appear to be in concert with the philosophy that propelled the westward migration of the nation of his time. “Manifest destiny,” a phrase first used by John O’Sullivan, is a term that appealed greatly to a public that considered westward expansion prearranged by Heaven (Merk 24). Thoreau’s criticism of the American westward movement is clear in his letter to Harrison G. O. Blake in 1853: “It is perfectly heathenish—a filibustering *toward* heaven by the great western route. No, they may go their way to their manifest destiny which I trust is not mine” (*Letters* 82, italics in the original). Thoreau undoubtedly criticizes the nation’s conquering of the west, which is justified under the name of “manifest destiny,” and calls it “heathenish.” This image of the “heathen” corresponds precisely with what Thoreau calls “the Infidels” (60) in this essay. In this view, Thoreau’s west is “not an affirmation of the westward march of civilization” (Richardson 288). Instead, his westward walk is in stark contrast to the movement of pioneers of the frontier into the west. The significance of the west is elaborately reversed by Thoreau, as a sarcastic insinuation against “manifest destiny.” He emphasizes his desire to escape from the east, which represents materialistic civilization, and adores the west that symbolizes the genuine wilderness.

Unlike those who migrated west in order to civilize it, Thoreau envisions a “crusade” to the west and into the wilderness in order to escape civilization. He attributes this westward “crusade” to the potential function of “genius . . . for *sauntering*” (59). “Genius,” implicitly defined by Ralph Waldo Emerson as “a higher spirit” (“The Over-Soul” 218), is interpreted in “Walking” as an “instinct,” or a “needle” (69) that leads the walker to the right route, that is, “the Wild.” In “Higher Laws” in *Walden*, Thoreau echoes the significance of genius as suggesting the “road” one takes in life: “If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true . . . as he grows more resolute and faithful, his road lies” (216). Thoreau’s valuation of genius in *Walden* is adapted to the guiding of saunterers in “Walking,” as a justification for choosing the way out of civilization and into the wilderness. Thoreau

criticizes people of his time as “faint-hearted crusaders . . . who undertake no persevering, never-ending enterprises” (60), and implies that they should become genuine “crusaders” who would remove the fetters of civilization. With his severe criticism of the social framework of his time, Thoreau’s definition of “crusade” implicitly works as a discipline of walking into “the Wild.”

### 3. Conquering “the Marrow” of Nature: The Swamp as “A Sacred Place”

Throughout “Walking,” the wild is coherently contrasted with civilization and tameness, and equated with the good. Thoreau’s admiration of the wilderness is comprehensive: “[I]n Wildness is the preservation of the World” (75). In his defense of the wild, Thoreau presents the swamp as the most prominent symbol of non-civilization.

Thoreau’s sanctification of the swamp expresses both his thirst for the wilderness and his opposition to civilization. Thoreau admires the swamp as “a sacred place, *a sanctum, sanctorum*,” and goes so far as to express his desire to dwell there: “. . . if it were proposed to me to dwell in the neighborhood of the most beautiful garden that ever human art contrived or else of a Dismal Swamp, I should certainly decide for the swamp” (77-78 italics in the original). Thoreau imagines dwelling in the swamp and hopes that the swamp would have “no access” to citizens (77). Considering that the swamp is essentially too primitive for humans to build a living foundation in and not a suitable place to be populated, his sanctification of this wildest nature ironically suggests how intense his criticism of civilized societies is. Daniel B. Botkin argues that Thoreau’s desire to dwell in a Dismal Swamp would seem to be a “complete rejection of civilization: a decision to sacrifice civilization to preserve nature, perhaps, or a desire to live in uncivilized nature,” but Thoreau’s love of swamps was “not a personal commitment to life solely within the depths of wilderness.” Botkin continues that Thoreau believed the swamp to be “important to civilization,” and that Thoreau admired “a combination of civilized—settled—countryside and some access to wilderness” (23). Considering the fact, however, that Thoreau

dared to speculate about dwelling in "the marrow" (78) of nature with "no access" to citizens, it would be more accurate to surmise that Thoreau distinctly and intentionally rejected civilization, in favor of pursuing primitiveness and barrenness. While Shannon L. Mariotti points out that Thoreau liked the swamp because it is undesirable and inaccessible to citizens who desire the kind of firm foundations that Thoreau eschewed (152), it was, rather, the swamp's wilderness that attracted him to dwelling there. The swamp, expressed as "the marrow" of nature, carries the preferable image of the essence and "strength" of the natural world, contrasted with the degenerate, tamed lives of industrialized societies.

The significant point to consider here is Thoreau's imagination of dwelling in the primitive site as an antipode of civilization. His explicit statement of living in the wildest swamp rhetorically illustrates his intense motivation to occupy or dominate that site, while accentuating the site's actual imperviousness to any form of establishing life. If dwelling in the "sacred place" means to live a solitary life and be immersed in the wild, then it also potentially means to conquer, in a spiritual and personal sense, the "sacred" site of nature. Frederick Garber argues that Thoreau's aspiration to dwell in the swamp is connected with his impulse to devour a woodchuck raw in the beginning of "Higher Laws" in *Walden*. Garber, who considers the walk "a movement out toward nature's own marrow, the sacred place where he can dis-cover what is most truly his," observes that Thoreau's wish to live in the swamp is no less "a sacramental act" than his urge toward the woodchuck, which shows "the desire to partake of the flesh of the totemic animal and therefore of his wildness" (49). In Garber's view, Thoreau's motivation to dwell in the swamp is related to his impulse toward the woodchuck, in the sense that both are "sacramental" when Thoreau attempts to probe into the wilderness of his own inner self, corresponding to the wilderness represented by nature. It would make more sense to argue, however, that the unrealistic idea of his building a house in the swamp is an implied heroic performance of Thoreau as the crusader recovering the Holy Land. Indeed, Thoreau's pursuit of the wild life in the swamp, which symbolizes his extreme rejection of civilization, can be applied to his imaginative project of recovering the "sacred place." In this view, Thoreau's occupation of the swamp is an act of preserving "the marrow"

of the wilderness from civilization, which parallels the crusades regaining the Holy Land from the Mohammedans.

It should be also noted that the strategic implication of Thoreau occupying the swamp is suggestive of Thoreau's military quality.<sup>4</sup> Emerson once remarked on what kind of person Thoreau was: "There was somewhat military in his nature not to be subdued, always manly and able, but rarely tender, as if he did not feel himself except in opposition" ("Thoreau" 322). Although Emerson might have overstated here, Thoreau's military quality not only manifests in his term "crusade," but also overlaps with his own chivalric image as a crusader who challenges civilization, exaggerating the swamp as the "sacred place" in which he would dwell. The walk, advocated as "a sort of crusade" into the west, or "the Wild," is thus committed to his attempt to regain "the marrow" of nature.

#### **4. The Transcendental Image of the Holy Land to Be Recovered**

Toward the end of the essay, Thoreau describes the sunset in which he saw "the boundary of Elysium" and was bathed in "such a golden flood" (92). This image of the "golden flood" represents the ultimate limits of sauntering, as the destination at which the Holy Land is located: "So we saunter toward the Holy Land, till one day the sun shall shine more brightly than ever he has done, shall perchance shine into our minds and hearts, and light up our whole lives with a great awakening light . . ." (92). The Holy Land primarily corresponds to "the kingdom of God" for Thoreau: "Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed . . . the kingdom of God is in the midst of you'" (Luke 17: 20-21). Thoreau seems to interpret "the kingdom of God" as the Holy Land in a more spiritual sense as a transcendentalist, in which "crusaders" are under "the immaterial heaven" and awake to their intellect and spirituality. Emerson describes this "kingdom of God" as the natural world in which people become "a transparent eyeball" or "the Universal Being," based upon genius (*Nature* 39). Thoreau elaborates this becoming "a transparent eyeball" as the experience of crusaders. He explores this Holy Land by imagining it with "a great awakening

light,” which is suggestive of the transparent universe that has “the light of higher laws” (*Nature* 54), the laws of God, illuminated under “the immaterial heaven” (73). This Holy Land is manifested as the ultimate contrast to the degenerate sphere of civilization. To recover this Holy Land implies the regaining of the natural world, where the people of his time could be awakened to the divinity within and be in touch with God.

Robinson is persuasive when he suggests that “the saunterer’s fundamental intentions” are to “regain and maintain the state of alertness or wakefulness that Thoreau had described in *Walden*, the ‘morning’ condition in which the senses, the body, and the intellect are integrated and empowered” (153). This point of view could be extended to the consideration that Thoreau, in *Walden*, accounts for the awakening of his own inner life in his introverted way, whereas he intends to encourage the civilized person to become a “crusader” who would be awake to their own imagination, intellect, and spirituality in an extroverted way in “Walking.” Thoreau advocates for the “crusade,” keeping in mind that the crusader never returns home: “If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again, —if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk” (60). Thoreau calls for each individual to be a walker, that is, a crusader, who would walk out of their lives. It should be noted here that Thoreau’s advocacy for becoming a walker is far from its literal meaning of abandoning entire families and lives; instead, it works as a metaphor for an individual awakening to their spirituality and living in accord with “the Wild,” in a spiritual sense. The Holy Land from the transcendentalist’s viewpoint, as discussed earlier, is described as the final destination of the crusader. If the crusades are “a series of wars, waged by men who wore on their garments the badge of the Cross as a pledge binding them to rescue the Holy Land . . . from the grasp of the unbeliever” (Cox 1), Thoreau’s crusaders are meant to regenerate their own Holy Land in the mind, in correspondence with Nature. Thoreau, hostile towards the civilization of his time, uses the image of a “crusade” as a metaphor for exploring Nature and the individual.

## 5. Conclusion

In “Walking,” Thoreau presents walking as a “crusade” in a metaphorical sense, in which “crusaders” recapture the Holy Land from “the Infidels,” who are, in Thoreau’s words, “champions of civilization” (59-60). Thoreau advocates for the “crusade” from the perspective of a transcendentalist, in which sauntering is specifically sublimated into the expedition into Nature, and then toward the “kingdom of God,” where the crusaders free the divinity of the individual. This spiritual quest can be fulfilled through the guide of genius and rejection of the debilitating effects of civilization.

From this, it can be observed that Thoreau’s term “crusade” derives from his repugnance of civilized ways of living. Indeed, the “crusade” as a one-way expedition is ironic enough to imply a challenge to civilized societies and is suggestive of the spiritual battle with civilization. In “Walking,” the term “crusade” functions metaphorically as the cause of a journey into the Holy Land, which empowers the advancement of the people of his time into a future where they are elevated by “higher laws.” This “crusade” is manifestly intended to be a justification of the march into the Holy Land in the mind of the individual, the pilgrimage to the divinity within.

### Notes

1. Thoreau had lectured on his original manuscripts, which are referred to in this essay ten times in total, during the period between 1851 and 1860. The title was “Walking, or the Wild” in most lectures, but in others, it was simply “Walking” or “The Wild” (Dean and Hoag 361-62). According to Walter Harding, the lecture was one of Thoreau’s favorites, and he added to it each time. The manuscript became large enough to break into two essays; “the first section on the joys of walking and the second on ‘the wild.’” Just before his death, however, Thoreau put the two back together, and it was published in the June 1862 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, as “Walking, or the Wild” (286). The essay is based upon Thoreau’s walk in Concord and considered one of his major essays.
2. For example, Jack Schwartzman associates Thoreau’s west with “the magnetism of the West, and the intoxication of wildness,” and with walking freely (152).

This view, expressed by Schwartzman, seems to be fairly common. John Aldrich Christie, in "The Western Impulse," also associates the significance of Thoreau's west with "the woodchuck he found in his own backyard" and with "the sturdiest test of man's freedom" (117). Christie remarkably analyzes Thoreau's west from such viewpoints as the contrast between the Old World and the New World, the similarity of Thoreau's west and Whitman's, and the influence Thoreau received from his numerous readings about the West. As Thoreau employs the west in a quite metaphorical way, there seems to be room for more work on this issue.

3. The social realm of Thoreau's time was divided into the two spheres of home and world; while the home was the domain of women's domesticity, the world was the arena of men, spending much of their time in business, public life, the marketplace, and competitive trade (Rotundo 22-23). Thoreau must have been quite aware of these divisions here, and he seems to distinguish between the confinement of "the home" and "the world."
4. This attitude of Thoreau's can also be observed in his description of "a panorama of the Rhine" of "the Middle Ages," in which he imagines "Crusaders departing for the Holy Land" among the ruins of bridges and castles ("Walking" 74). In his earlier work, "Resistance to Civil Government," as well, Thoreau alludes to the "visions of knights and castles" in "the light of the middle ages" (82). This "military" quality of Thoreau's is crucially reflected by his resistance to society and government.

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