

Nature, Necessity, and the Philosophy of Metaphor in Walden

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“*Y*ou will pardon some obscurities,” Thoreau asks his readers in *Walden*, “for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men’s, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature” (49). Thoreau’s claim that his “trade” involves “secrets” is itself cloaked in several obscurities. For one, what exactly does Thoreau mean by his “trade”? Being idle in the woods? Might he mean something so prosaic as his intermittent work hoeing beans at Walden Pond? After all, his request comes in the chapter “Economy” and follows from Thoreau’s similarly elliptical assurance, “I will hint at some of the enterprises I have cherished,” and the ethical maxim, “at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time” (49). Following such vaguely suggestive claims, Thoreau appears to situate the statement to readers about his “trade” in a seemingly entrepreneurial context. Indeed, not long after he insists on the vigor of his work ethic, he says, “How many mornings, summer and winter, before yet any neighbor was stirring about his business, have I been about mine!” (49). Thoreau’s “trade” is ostensibly predicated on the type of work ethic that Benjamin Franklin offers in the list of virtues in his *Autobiography*, such as “Lose no Time. Be always employ’d in something useful. Cut off all unnecessary Actions” (Franklin 65). In fact, later in life Thoreau apparently recommended Franklin’s autobiography to admirers seeking his advice (Conway 73). The language surrounding Thoreau’s economy invites such a comparison, as if, much like Franklin, Thoreau were charting a course of useful activities that lead to virtuous wealth (see Tichi 107-17).

If this one moment in *Walden* draws on the language of a Protestant, proto-capitalist work ethic, the rest of the book – and other contemporaneous writings by Thoreau, such as “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854) – provides ample reason to be suspicious of such a connection. For instance, Thoreau earlier says to his readers, “It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live [...]; always on the limits, trying to get into business and trying to get out of debt, a very ancient slough, called by the Latins *aes alienum*, another’s brass, for some of their coins were made of brass; still living, and dying, and buried by this other’s brass” (42). Rather than articulating the virtues of a work ethic tailor-made for an industrial economy – which by the mid-1830s had come to rely predominantly on slave labor in the South, low-paid, permanent factory populations in the urban centers of the North, and the growing normalcy of personal debt in the banking and financial sectors – the “economy” of Thoreau’s writing instead stands in wholesale opposition to its norms and ethics regarding work (Gutman 75-81, 129-32; Neufeldt 23-69; Nelson 61-65). Franklin’s aphorism, “Be always employ’d in something useful,” appears in *Walden* as unrelenting desperation. Yet if Thoreau objects to the economic arrangements of his day, why does his language in the chapter “Economy” draw so heavily on capitalist vocabulary? In describing his attempts to “hear what was in the wind,” for example, Thoreau says, “I well-nigh sunk all my capital in it” (49). He trades on the language of trade; he buys into the jargon of finance. If *Walden* offers a critique of the norms and ethics of an exploitative economy, why does Thoreau so readily appropriate its vocabulary? Why not say the thing more directly?

Thoreau offers an indirect explanation in the request that his readers pardon his obscurities. He explains that the work of *Walden* does not involve “voluntarily” withholding “secrets,” which implies that Thoreau would indeed be more direct if his “trade” allowed it. It would seem, then, that being obscure is an occupational hazard: the business of the book is “inseparable” from its “secrets” (49). This explanation, while a rhetorical invitation to be patient with the prose of *Walden*, still leaves unanswered the

questions: What is Thoreau's "business"? and Why are secrets and obscurity "inseparable" from the very work of *Walden*? The second question is the subject of this essay, which argues that the prose style of *Walden* – and the use of metaphor in particular – is a literary mechanism for considering one of Thoreau's chief philosophical concerns: the idea of necessity. Understanding the work of *Walden* requires us to recognize the purposes and effects of his prose style, which itself is closely linked with his repudiation of the philosophical category of necessity.

In the first section of this essay, I explain modern formulations of the idea of "necessity" by reference to the work of John Locke, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. The writings of Locke and Hume are especially important because their work provided the backdrop to Thoreau's early education at Harvard. To understand Thoreau's argument regarding necessity, one must first understand the alternative uses to which this idea is put by Locke and Hume. Kant's philosophy, in contrast, inaugurates a way of thinking that Thoreau adapts as a means for challenging the unquestioned, collective habits and assumptions of modern life. The next section of this essay argues that Thoreau further develops Kant's project of challenging the moral and social implications of the idea of necessity. Thoreau argues that his contemporaries' invocations of necessity unjustifiably sanction economic habits and social orders. This argument underwrites and philosophically justifies Thoreau's reformist call to recast the shape of a society increasingly subordinate to the demands of an industrial economy. In the third section of the essay, I show how Thoreau's prose conveys an even more radical philosophical position than Kant's break from Locke and Hume. Thoreau's use of metaphor, I argue, recuperates a method for knowing and experiencing the world that he insists has been lost within the collective assumptions and economic demands of an industrializing society.

Empiricism, Kant, and the Senses of Transcendentalism

Scholars have often noted that Transcendentalism in the United States positioned itself in opposition to both the Calvinist theology dominant in American religious thought (particularly the doctrine of humanity's total

depravity) and John Locke's empiricist theory of knowledge (Harding 51, 62; Cain 17). This dual opposition is clearest in the Transcendentalist notion of intuitive reason, which is the idea that the intuition of the self is the principal, legitimate foundation of the real and the good. While F.O. Matthiessen implies that the writers of what he calls the American Renaissance were responsible for this innovative break with Calvinism's doctrine of depravity and empiricism's rationality, the idea of intuitive reason wasn't in fact born in America. Samantha C. Harvey shows, for example, that Samuel Taylor Coleridge was particularly influential on Emerson, Frederick Henry Hedge, and the Vermont Transcendentalist, James Marsh, who wrote an introductory essay for the first American edition of Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* (Harvey 27). This book by Coleridge was important because of its inflection of the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, who argues that human beings have both an innate moral sense and a capacity for reason that transcends empirical knowledge. Coleridge, along with the Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle, introduced forms of Kantian philosophy to New England readers by the mid-1830s (Harvey 24). As these examples suggest, the nineteenth-century renaissance in American literary thought was in fact born through a transatlantic exchange of ideas that turned on the adaptation of many European philosophical themes.

Kant's idea of knowledge that transcends empirical sense impressions – which Coleridge adapted in books such as *Aids to Reflection* – seemed liberating to American thinkers such as Emerson and Hedge. When reading Kant, though, it is fair to say that one is hard-pressed to get the same sense of exhilarating liberation. For example, in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant explains that the “unity” of an intuition “may in a general way be called the pure concept of the understanding,” which in turn “introduces a transcendental content into its representations, by means of the synthetic unity of the manifold in intuition in general” (104, 105). The “subversion” in this “new doctrine,” as Emerson puts it, is lurking somewhere in Kant's philosophical system, but it surely required illumination by Carlyle and Coleridge to have an effect on most American readers (2:203).

What Kant is in fact suggesting about the possibilities of transcendental intuition went against the prevailing sentiments in the Harvard philosophy curriculum during the 1830s when Thoreau was an undergraduate. The Harvard curriculum taught Locke's epistemology and moral philosophy, and then its courses balanced out these ideas with the "common sense" Scottish philosophers (see Todd 67-84). In fact, Locke's work replaced certain Scottish philosophical texts in many courses in 1833-34, the academic year when Thoreau matriculated (Todd 69). As a result of these emphases on empiricist philosophy during Thoreau's undergraduate education, categories such as "experience," "causality," and "knowledge" principally had an empiricist cast (see Todd 71). The knowledge of the senses became the measure of what may be legitimately known. Thoreau and the older figures of Boston Transcendentalism would therefore have received a healthy dose of this "cold rationalism" (Harding 65).

In opposition to Locke's focus on the senses as the legitimate source of knowledge, the Kant-Coleridge affirmation of intuitive reason appealed to Thoreau during the late 1830s and 1840s.¹ In fact, as the next section explores in greater detail, Kant's formulation of the problems related to "necessity" became one of Thoreau's chief concerns in *Walden*. However, to understand fully what Thoreau means when he derides "a seeming fate, commonly called necessity" (*Walden* 41), one must first understand the philosophical legacy of this idea. According to Kant, one intuitively understands an object of consciousness as either "necessary" or "contingent" (105, 108). By "necessity," Kant means "the existence which is given through possibility itself" and the "existence of an object at all times" (109, 181). Through such categorical definitions, Kant describes objects, arrangements of objects, or even characteristics of entities that *must* exist, whether by natural law or by virtue of logic. According to this description, a lunar eclipse occurring according to the astronomical calendar is an "object" of necessity. Or, the characteristic of "omnipotence" is a necessary judgment about the idea of God (502). As our understanding perceives them, these things must always be so based on the laws of astronomy or the internal logic of the idea of a divine being.

While this category may seem vague and abstract, determining what ought to be described in the terms of “necessity” in fact determines whether one maintains that individuals have moral agency. David Hume’s broad application of the term leads him to have a largely deterministic view of human behavior. Hume argues that the “actions of the will” logically “arise from necessity,” which is to say that the will is not free but governed by unavoidable constraints (260). Hume argues that even “as all human laws are founded on rewards and punishments,” the individual always and inescapably faces external forces and motivations that “have an influence on the mind, and both produce the good and prevent the evil actions” (263). These external forces – for example, hunger, social acceptance, or a compulsory tax levied by a powerful authority – are such that “common sense requires it shou’d be esteem’d a cause, and be look’d upon as an instance of that necessity, I wou’d establish” (264). Every “act of the will,” according to Hume, has a cause that is either external to the individual or created by uncontrollable internal passions. Because there are always causes that inescapably govern behavior, Hume reasons, there is no private volition independent of the forces of motivation, habit, or compulsion. As a result, the individual’s actions arise from necessity – that is, behavior is the logical result of causes that are wholly independent of the choices of a conscious agent. Indeed, if Hume’s appraisal of the logical relationship between causality, necessity, and choice were correct, then there would seem to be little possibility of social reform.

Kant answers both Locke’s emphasis on the senses and Hume’s skepticism about the individual’s moral agency through an ingenious but abstract invocation of the idea of necessity. Kant claims that “concepts of objects in general [...] underlie empirical knowledge,” by which he means that our ability to gather knowledge from sense experiences is preconditioned “necessarily” by “*a priori* concepts” (118). Our behaviors and experiences are made possible, in other words, through the categories of reason that we can intuit and that constitute the world as we know it. The intelligibility of experience and thought rely on the existence of transcendental categories; the logical necessity of these categories in turn

attests to the human capacity for reason that is prior to experience and the empirical senses. Because such *a priori* concepts are logically required for us to make sense of the world, Kant argues, human beings must have certain innate capacities for reason and moral agency. As he puts it, "sensible impulses do not necessitate [the individual's] action, but there is in human beings a faculty of self-determination, independent of the necessitation through sensible impulses" (464). Kant claims that we are able to partition the will from "necessitation" through the "spontaneity" created by "reason" (463). The capacity for transcendental reason allows the human will to interrupt the chain of causes and the claims of necessity. Kant thus uses one type of necessity to loosen another. His assertion of the mind's necessary ability to think with transcendental reason weakens the claims of an external world of causes and effects upon the behavior of human beings.

Necessity, Freedom, and the Legacy of Kant in *Walden*

While Kant loosens Hume's definition of necessity, Thoreau goes a step further: he nearly unhinges it. If Hume argues societal motivations and the passions are on the order of necessity, Thoreau ridicules such an arrangement as an impoverishment of the imagination. Regarding the particular motivations behind the moral and economic choices of his contemporaries, for example, Thoreau says, "The better part of the man is soon ploughed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasure which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal" (41). Thoreau's description of the "necessity" of economic motivations as a "seeming fate" implies that these arrangements only have the *appearance* but not the *substance* of inevitable causes of behavior. Thoreau says that this imposter "necessity" leaves his contemporaries open to devastation, but the biblical allusion of the claim suggests as much about their souls as their wealth: their valuation of "treasure" and the "seeming fate" required to obtain it are both vulnerable to rust and corruption (Matthew 6:19-21). One may object that Thoreau's acerbic criticism seems to punish the plow but not the hand that guides it. In other

words, implicit in the passage's biblical allusion is the idea that day laborers ought to drop everything and pursue some higher-order "treasure." But why castigate the laborer for the economic conditions that pose as necessity and make such demands on one's time? Thoreau seems to be cognizant of this tension, for he also claims "laboring man" in fact "has no time to be any thing but a machine" (41). It is difficult to use one's capacity for private intuition when a system of low wages and long working hours occupies the operations of the day.

Thoreau explains his life at Walden Pond as a reinvestigation of this intersecting social and philosophical legacy. The experiment of *Walden*, as Thoreau puts it, is an attempt "to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them" (45). While Thoreau's learning includes such details as the "methods" of building shelter and hoeing beans, he also makes it clear that these activities do not exhaust the demands of life's "necessaries." As he further explains, "By the words, *necessary of life*, I mean whatever, of all that man obtains by his own exertions, has been from the first, or from long use has become, so important to human life that few, if any, whether from savageness, or poverty, or philosophy, ever attempt to do without it" (45). This explanation qualifies the demands of the necessary in both ephemeral and historically contingent ways. For one, this sentence presents the idea of objects-without-which-human-existence-would-not-be as a kind of atrocious set of philosophical "words." It is wordy, and clunky, and full of disruptive clauses, all of which have the effect of giving Thoreau's explanation of the words a kind of syntactical laboriousness. The very concept of the necessities of life is a ponderous set of accretions across time and space, grammar and vocabulary.

Thoreau's explanation further suggests that there is a history to the development of our criteria for what counts as necessary ("from long use has become"). He thus points out the *contingencies* of what counts as *necessity*, which is an important difference between Thoreau and Kant. Indeed, Thoreau later speaks of the "temporal necessities" that give rise to "a door, a window, a cellar, a garret" in modern architecture (70). The implication is that these in

fact have no "foundation [...] in the nature of man" but in the history of perceptions about what seems natural and necessary (70). Therefore, returning to Thoreau's earlier discussion of "*necessary for life*," the definition's circumlocutory form expresses what Thoreau also implies consistently throughout *Walden*, which is that necessity is "whatever" has become "so important to human life that few [...] ever attempt to do without it" (45). The casual term "whatever" presents necessity as paradoxically a kind of happenstance. This view presents our notions about what is inevitable or unavoidable again as a seeming fate, as if necessity were only *pretending* to be "an object at all times," to use Kant's phrasing (181). What's more, Thoreau allows that some (albeit "few") may circumvent any perceived inevitability. Specific examples of these merely ostensible "necessaries" from the "Economy" chapter alone include meat, clothing, wealth, warmth, shelter, and even society.

But surely food, clothing, warmth, and society *are* required for human life, right? Thoreau's experiment is to generate uncertainty about that very question – or, more precisely, about the methods by which one would answer such a question. The experiment of *Walden* creates fissures between moral agency and the perceived demands of necessity. For instance, Thoreau recalls an exchange regarding the tailoring of his clothing, in which a motherly tailoress tacitly assumes that the demands of society govern even the most mundane decisions. The tailoress's notion is a related form of Hume's argument that social motivation operates as a type of necessity. In contemplating the assumptions about clothing and society, Thoreau remarks, "I am for a moment absorbed in thought, emphasizing to myself each word separately that I come at the meaning of it, that I may find out by what degree of consanguinity *They* are related to *me*, and what authority they may have in an affair which affects me so nearly" (55). Thoreau's pause over the language he shares with his tailoress signals discord that he notably describes linguistically, as if their shared grammar about clothing weren't functioning properly. Indeed, Thoreau's contemplation of how "*They* are related to *me*" extends this discord from the gendered figure of the tailoress to a seemingly unsexed society. In fact, following the play on the etymology

of “consanguinity,” the moment with the tailoress signals that Thoreau’s experience of discord with the grammar of his society has the feel of a loss of blood. It is as if Thoreau had come to a mother only to learn that he was no longer part of the family.

At least that’s the feel of the disjunction. Thoreau worries over the “meaning” of the words he shares with others, but he also ponders “what authority they may have” in the clothes he wears. For Hume, the tailoress, and most of the citizens of Concord, the answer is that they have a good deal at stake in the affair. Thoreau does not at this point wholly reject these claims; he only becomes “absorbed in thought” about them. This questioning attitude is consistent with what Hadley Leach describes as the “aphoristic form” of Thoreau’s early essay “A Walk to Wachusett,” in which his prose offers “a means of speculating on the natural world that holds the relationship between particular facts and universal law in suspension, thereby cultivating a readerly disposition attentive to nature’s contingency to the human mind” (2). Thoreau’s slow, meticulous reading of the words he shares with others, of the relations of those family resemblances, and his expression of the doubts he shares about those words, are a model for reading – whether it is reading a neighbor, a bean field, or a book such as *Walden* (“Books,” he famously says, “must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written” – 108).

Thoreau’s method also unfastens the necessity of the meaning of certain words and concepts. As Richard Schneider says about *Walden*, “language is both a hard bottom and a slippery surface,” for the more Thoreau “tries to lead us to the hard bottom of truth with language, the more mysterious and distant that truth sometimes becomes” (Schneider 96). Such moments of uncertainty in *Walden* signal one of the principal differences between Thoreau and Kant, because the latter argues from his “transcendental deduction” that certain concepts and categories apply universally and with lucidity to all objects featured in our experience (Kant 112-71). Thoreau, in contrast, is less certain about sharing words with others, or deducing common meanings for his concepts, as is again evident in his quibbling over “good” and “liberty” as they pertain to the building

of a railroad (*Walden* 75-76). The meaning of these moral terms has become attached to "present economical and social arrangements," which are suspect and do not hold his interest (77). As a result, the form of reading that Thoreau both practices and pleads for in *Walden* pauses over words in order to tease out their grammatical relations. His pauses, parsing of words, and efforts to understand others are not attempts to know the pure meaning of certain concepts *a priori* as Kant's deduction attempts to do. Rather, the grammatical inquiries in *Walden* read "meaning" not only within a verbal system of syntax and morphology but also within the arrangements of a way of life.

Nature and Metaphor at Walden Pond

I have argued that Thoreau continues the Kantian project of loosening the claims of necessity upon the freedom of the will, particularly because such a project participates in the social and economic experiments that Thoreau undertakes in *Walden*. Stanley Cavell similarly aligns Thoreau's book with Kant's philosophy, although Cavell explains their alignment as analogous attempts to find "the *a priori* conditions of our knowing anything *überhaupt* [in general]" (95). Cavell shows convincingly that *Walden* is a book that asks us "to learn what finding is, what it means that we are looking for something we have lost" (98). Rather than describing this "lost" thing as *a priori* conditions for knowing, however, the figurative dimensions of Thoreau's prose suggest instead that he writes for an industrializing society to recuperate a lost or forgotten *method* for knowing. While Thoreau reconsiders the category of necessity on the grounds of its historical but unquestioned assumptions, the even more radically revisionist implications of *Walden* come in Thoreau's construal of the relationship between nature and metaphor. The context of this intervention is again the intellectual history established in large part by Locke's empiricist theory of knowledge.

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), Locke argues that human knowledge is founded exclusively on sensations. The human mind, according to Locke, enters the world without knowledge,

and the senses provide the only method for acquiring an identity, forming moral ideas and beliefs, and acquiring knowledge about an external world. The empiricist boundaries of this theory notably inform Locke's view of language: "if we would speak of Things as they are," he says, "we must allow, that all the Art of Rhetorick, besides Order and Clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of Words Eloquence hath invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *Ideas*, move the Passions, and thereby mislead the Judgment" (Locke 508). This is the confession of a philosopher's distrust in the full capacities of his own grammar. Locke banishes figurative language from his republic of serious discourse, because he feels that such words purportedly displace the mind from its lucid attention to empirical reality ("Things as they are"). Hard and unambiguous words can fine-tune our senses to the pitch of data surging toward our minds, or figurative words can move our emotions to sully our capacity for reasonable judgments.

Locke not only looks askance at metaphor as a type of "artificial and figurative application of Words," but he also asserts that metaphor thwarts one's understanding of "Things as they are." In *Walden*, Thoreau rejects such a theory of language (and its implicit view of the nature of the "Things" that exist) by persistent and unflinching use of metaphor. Thoreau of course uses other figurative literary devices in his writing: personification, simile, puns, and allusions, among others (see Slicer 179-97; Simmons 223-34; Bickman 18-29, 39-59; Meehan 299-329; Faflik 64-78; Grusin 32). His metaphors are particularly important, though, for what they imply about the relationship between "Things as they are" and the nature of language. In contrast to Locke's notion of the unambiguous sensations that constitute the certain foundation of knowledge, metaphor in *Walden* represents the character of human structures of thought. Our relation to the natural world, at least as Thoreau often depicts it, is one of metaphor – not verifiable, literal, or unambiguous observation. In Locke's view, the senses practiced in the rigor of empirical observation know reality-as-it-is and produce a sure foundation for "*Ideas*." In Thoreau's view, our relation to the world is never without ambiguity and, as such, our knowledge of the thing itself is

figurative, indirect, and connotative. Our capacity for knowledge cannot subsume or encompass the thing itself under our capacities for observation.

But Thoreau nonetheless practices observation. As a naturalist, Thoreau's observational methods take pains to affirm the independence of the natural world from the individual's consciousness: "Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion," he says, "till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call *reality*, and say, This is, and no mistake" (106). Thoreau in such passages seems like an empiricist, or in the least it is clear that he is no straightforward Kantian: he works to arrive at the thing-in-itself, which (pace Kant) he suggests is knowable. Yet Thoreau's method for arriving at this "hard bottom" is often through descriptions and observations framed in metaphor. Rather than privileging any one form of inquiry, Thoreau's exhortation wedges the observational and empirical activities of the naturalist with the careful craft and metaphorical figures of the poet. The process of working and wedging one's feet into what "is" (or the means for knowing that "which we can call *reality*") relies heavily on the elucidatory work of the figurative. To know the thing itself, the observer needs a good metaphor.

This wedding of the empirical and metaphorical becomes clearer in what Thoreau says after expressing the aspiration to find "a hard bottom and rocks in place." Thoreau follows this exhortation to discover "*reality*" with a passage that offers a metaphorical cast to the very presentation of an external real. He says, "If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career" (106). Thoreau uses the simile of a "cimeter" or scimitar to suggest that the fact is not merely, as Emerson says, "the data of the senses" (1:201); instead, for Thoreau, the object of observation cuts, divides, reflects, and may even undermine one's person ("conclude your mortal career"). Thoreau's metaphor of standing "face to face" also attributes a type of observational reciprocity to the fact: what we mean by "fact" cannot reasonably mean passive "data of the senses" because the fact has an active exchange with

the empirical gaze. By giving it a “face,” the thing observed stares back at the observer. It has a “face” to meet the faces that observers assume in empirical observation.

Metaphor therefore allows Thoreau to assert the reciprocity and independence of the natural world from human consciousness. This is consistent with his repeated assertions of the inability of human society to encompass the natural: “A huckleberry never reaches Boston,” he says, despite the fact that the berry is sold daily in the city’s markets (157). A metaphor, of course, is more specific than a symbol; it is a word or expression that applies its denotations and connotations to a separate and often drastically different entity (Abrams and Harpham 133-34). Attributing a “face” to a “fact” is a clear example of this type of metaphor. However, as with his huckleberries, Thoreau also speaks in a metaphorical way that directly contradicts the sentence’s literal meaning. Connotation and denotation are irrelevant in these cases, yet Thoreau’s counterfactual statement is nonetheless metaphorical in the sense that he asks his readers to reconsider – word by word, as it were – why it is that a huckleberry never reaches Boston when the berry *does* appear on Boston’s dinner tables. In the context of the claim, Thoreau means that Boston is too far removed from the huckleberry shrub, from the source of the real fruit. He also means that whatever “reaches” Boston’s markets isn’t actually a huckleberry but some ersatz or sterile version of the thing itself. He might also mean that, in contrast to the “face to face” confrontation with a fact that may end one’s mortal career, the thing itself never “reaches” Boston: it is a city of evasions and avoidances; reality beckons, but Boston never awakens from its deep sleep to observe the real (to borrow another one of Thoreau’s persistent metaphors). In such ways Thoreau’s phrase asks us to reconsider not just the meaning of our words but the accents of our reading: What do we mean by “huckleberry”? What’s the problem with “Boston”? Or should we instead emphasize the negation “never reaches”?

The example of Thoreau’s huckleberries ought to indicate that even delimiting the nature of metaphor is difficult. Is metaphor *only* the application of the connotations of a metaphorical word or “vehicle” to a

disparate "tenor," as I.A. Richards argues in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*? As Thoreau's huckleberries suggest, metaphor also often flies in the face of a term's literal denotations while at the same time making uncertain the exchange between a "vehicle" and "tenor." Sometimes metaphors cause us to pause and consider why it is that the metaphorical exchange makes sense; they ask us to investigate our grammar. In the use of metaphor, in other words, there's not always a clear correspondence in the figurative meaning being applied to a disparate term or object. It is therefore as difficult to delimit a theory of metaphor as it is to describe the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object. This ambiguity is telling, and it indicates the appeal of metaphor to a writer whose education was so heavily structured around empiricist thought.

In further contrast to philosophies that privilege direct sensations while rejecting the human capacity for intuitive reason, *Walden*'s metaphors also allow Thoreau to depict a certain distance between human cognition and its object; they depict the natural as having a reciprocating effect on the subject; they also, in contrast to Kant's philosophy, plot out ground for questioning the very idea that our relation to the world is principally one of "knowing." Each of these uses of metaphor appears in one of *Walden*'s most careful and complex passages, when Thoreau considers the prospect of one's own self becoming the object of knowledge:

I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. (131-32)

When taking one's self as the object of "sensible" consideration, Thoreau further complicates an empiricist theory of knowledge by depicting this very object as separate ("remote") from the thing itself. The self as "spectator" is "no more I than it is you," which is to say that the empirical self fails to achieve an understanding of itself. There is a limitation in the type of knowledge the purely "sensible" method demands and then obtains. To spectate or observe only, is to misunderstand or not understand fully: the "I" remains separate and the spectator "goes his way" dispassionately, not knowing what he has failed to know.

However, this passage also includes several metaphors for the "sensible" consideration of one's self. These metaphors illustrate certain deficiencies in the view of the spectator, but these metaphors also fill out the apertures in the spectator's strictly empirical view of things. In particular, Thoreau explains the "doubleness" that characterizes the distance between observation and self-knowledge through the "scene" and the "play." These two invocations of figurative language suggest first of all that the spectator requires a metaphorical translation of "life" and the "self" in order to take them as objects of observation. In other words, even the empiricist needs a metaphor to perform strictly empirical observation. The "human entity" becomes a "scene" for certain traits associated with humanity ("thoughts and affections"). Life itself for the spectator is thus a sort of "play" with prescribed parts or roles; his perception of "life" is a figurative scene for observation and nothing more. The point is that in the spectator's "scene" and "play," it becomes evident that Locke's complaint about figurative language elides its own reliance on the metaphorical translation of the observed object in preparation for "sensible" thought. The spectator needs to distance himself from the thing observed, and he unknowingly employs metaphors of distance and remoteness to assert this separation.

What's more, the spectator dismissively leaves the "scene," as if life were "a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned." Both "the imagination only" and the sentence's final clause indicate that the spectator has missed the point: life is a work of the imagination, and to dismiss such work as "only" fiction amounts to missing part of the thing

itself. As Thoreau earlier says, the capacity for abstraction and self-detachment unsettles our relationship to the external world, for when we are "beside ourselves" we "are not wholly involved in Nature" (131). Thoreau is not arguing that we ought to remove ourselves as a species in the natural world. To be "not wholly involved in Nature" is not a compliment. Rather, the spectator's metaphors of remoteness and distant observation are mechanisms of fragmented knowledge: the spectator performs the tragedy of not seeing what he has set out to see. In such passages, Thoreau identifies metaphor as a type of requisite sense, not unlike the other senses of observation, and the failure to recognize its importance or incorporate its methods amounts to "taking note" of life, but "sharing no experience" in it (131). It would seem that metaphor is one of the few necessities that Thoreau allows us.

Metaphor and the Work of *Walden*

Metaphor in *Walden* has several uses for Thoreau. It manifests and complements his opposition to the idea of necessity as a set of governing constraints on human behavior. By showing the versatility and ambiguities of the language we use to live, the form of Thoreau's prose asserts what the experiment of *Walden* attempts to illustrate, which is that life need not be hemmed in by unquestioned conventions. "So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life," he says, "and denying the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre" (45). Thoreau's figurative language allows for "many ways" of positioning one's self in relation to the world, and he thus repudiates his contemporaries' fondness for "reverencing" or sacralizing current social, economic, and political orders. By associating "necessity" with conventionality and "nature" with the variability and ambiguity of figurative meaning, Thoreau is loosening the grip of the urgent and the unavoidable. He is suggesting that the present moment is a ready stage for revolution.

The ambiguities and allusive qualities of metaphor also indicate the deficiencies of mechanical, automatic, and literalist accounts of life. While

Hume looks to the natural order of things to see a system of causes and effects that divest us of our free will, Thoreau views nature as a testament to the variability of the meanings we can produce in the world. This openness is the subtext for Thoreau's assertion, "Nature and human life are as various as our several constitutions" (44). If nature is the stage for behavior, it is not a force of necessities but possibilities. As a result, Thoreau claims that the industrialist, the conformist, and the strict empiricist have each in their own way "reduced" the complexities of the world to their single-minded imaginings of it (44).

Metaphor also allows Thoreau to attribute independence and reciprocity to both the objects that we observe and the natural world more generally. Scholars today would characterize this gesture as a rejection of anthropocentrism, but Thoreau simply saw it as an implication of his naturalist commitments. Human beings are "wholly involved in Nature," that is, unless they abstract themselves from it by speculative thought (131). The use of metaphor indicates the entwined, circuitous, and allusive relation between the subject of knowledge and its object. Metaphor in *Walden* thus attests to the participation of what we call "nature" in what we also call "reality" and "meaning." The observed fact in the world divides and illuminates even as we observe it; the fact contributes to the shape of whatever conclusions we come to in our mortal careers.

Related to Thoreau's social critique of the perceived necessities of an industrializing society, he also uses metaphor in *Walden* as a defense of figurative or literary forms of thinking. The meandering, inexplicit, and often not clearly utilitarian qualities of metaphorical language, according to Thoreau, perform a type of work that is indispensable in an effort to see the world. Ambiguities and obscurities demand attention; secrets require investigation. If we are to be brought back from the sleep of assuming current conditions must necessarily be so, then our faculties of keen attention need stirring. It's for this reason Thoreau says his "trade" involves secrets not willfully withheld but intrinsically required, for an important part of his "business" is to show the necessity of metaphor for cultivating an awakened relation to the world (49). Thoreau variously makes this point, and by the end

of *Walden* he turns to cartography: "Is not our own interior white on the chart?" (254). This particular metaphor exhibits our lack of self-understanding, but more generally it also signifies untried possibilities: "Nay, be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade but of thought" (255). The work of *Walden* is not to sanction an individualistic work ethic; instead, Thoreau's "trade" is to provoke his readers to complicate the established paths that their social order has plotted through the world and that they have taken to be constitutive of their certain fate.

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Note

¹ There's considerable debate whether to separate Thoreau from the philosophical emphases of American Transcendentalism and situate him instead in terms of naturalist and scientific history or the genre of travel writing. For example, many scholars argue Thoreau drifts from Boston Transcendentalism and Emerson's views in particular (see Moore 241-56; Ronan 133-65; Fink 125-49). As an implication of this school of thought, the dense philosophical concerns of the Transcendentalists somewhat fall out of Thoreau's field of vision, and instead Thoreau's interests in natural history and the sciences seemingly take precedence in *Walden* and the work he produced before it in the mid-1840s (McGregor 33-86; Keane 184-222). This line of argument about Thoreau's shifting emphases shows convincingly that *Walden* is not a thin veil for abstract philosophical speculation; the social and intellectual problems animating Thoreau's book derive from a wide variety of sources and public concerns, not simply the abstract thought of German, Scottish, or English philosophy. While this is undoubtedly true, Robert Sattelmeyer also shows that in late 1848 while Thoreau was at work at Walden Pond, he was reading Coleridge's *Theory of Life* as well as "a more purely philosophical treatise," J.B. Stallo's *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature*, which includes detailed summaries of "Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Oken, and Hegel" (Sattelmeyer 46). The naturalist and social reformer was still also a metaphysician.

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