

Thoreau's Periodic Sentences, Experiential Transcendentalism, and Scientific Method

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*T*horeau's aphorisms have long been celebrated, collected, and studied. Toward the end of his 1862 tribute to Thoreau, Emerson offers a few of his favorites culled from Thoreau's journals. Recently, Thomas Koenigs has argued that Thoreau cultivated a pithy aphoristic style to make his work quotable and appealing to his readers. And Richard Dillman draws on Thoreau's comments on writing to argue that he favored a plain versus an ornamental style, "simple, direct sentences versus sonorous periodic sentences" (*Essays* 68), and that he opposed "the periodic form inherited from the neoclassical period and the eighteenth century" (72). Who doesn't love Thoreau's great one-liners such as "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (*Walden* 8) and "Surely joy is the condition of life" ("The Natural History of Massachusetts" 5)? Sometimes, however, aphorisms are just not enough for Thoreau; sometimes he effectively unfolds ample periodic sentences that often are cures for desperation as they circle out toward completion. Consider the way he substantiates and clarifies his claim that the condition of life is joyous:

Think of the young fry that leap in ponds, the myriads of insects ushered into being on a summer evening, the incessant note of the hyla with which the woods ring in the spring, the nonchalance of a butterfly carrying accident and change painted in a thousand hues upon its wings, or the brook minnow stoutly stemming the current, the lustre of

whose scales worn bright by the attrition is reflected upon
the bank. (“Natural History” 5)

We readers on the bank of this periodic sentence are first treated to the sight of myriads of summer insects and the spring sounds of frogs, then realize that to shine in the lustre of the sentence and experience the joyous condition of life we need to give ourselves over to the “accident and change” borne on the wings of the butterfly and the “attrition” that has brightened the scales of the minnows. Only a periodic sentence has the amplitude to do justice to the holistic plentitude of natural phenomena (including us) on the brink of death.

First, my essay will discuss the nature and history of the periodic sentence and consider the origins of Thoreau’s attraction to this grammatical and rhetorical form, especially in natural history and in the epic tradition of Homer and Milton. Next, Thoreau’s use of this stylistic feature will be compared with that of some other American authors, from Puritans to his contemporaries. Finally, attention will be paid to the art and function of some periodic sentences in Thoreau’s *Wild Fruits* manuscript. Throughout I will argue that Thoreau’s syntactic periods manifest and provide scaffolding for both his experiential Transcendentalism and his scientific method, revealing them to be one and the same.

The link between Thoreau’s syntax and his science is foreshadowed in the history of the adjective “periodic.” Etymologically from the Greek noun “*periodos*” meaning “way round,” “circuit,” or “revolution,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) the first use of “periodic” in English was scientific: “Of, pertaining, or proper to the revolution of a heavenly body in its orbit, as *periodic motion, time*.” In Noah Webster’s 1828 *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, the first use cited is also scientific: “Performed in a circuit or in a regular revolution in a certain time, or in a series of successive circuits; as the periodic motion of the planets around the sun; the periodic motion of the moon around the earth.” The second OED definition cites the use of “periodic” that emerges in the nineteenth century in the field of chemistry

when Mendeleev formulated the "periodic law" that "the properties of chemical elements are periodic functions of their atomic weights," which the periodic table visualizes. There are parallels between this graphic illustration of elemental plentitude and Thoreau's periodic testimonies to unfolding natural phenomena. According to Thomas Bitterwolf, a University of Idaho Professor of Chemistry, the periodic table enabled chemists "to identify and predict patterns of behavior," and "to work by patterns rather than details." Periodic scaffolding also enabled Thoreau as a budding writer and scientist to move beyond the accumulation of details and find wisdom in the patterns he explored.

The third OED definition centers at last on language: "Of or pertaining to a rhetorical or grammatical period; characterized or expressed in periods." This is echoed in Webster's fifth definition: "Pertaining to a period; constituting a complete sentence." According to this broad definition, any sentence, however short or long, can be called "periodic." One finds, indeed, much fuzziness in applications of this adjective, leading Richard Lanham to declare that "'Periodic' is one of those traditional but confusing terms we ought to throw away but can't" (48). A periodic sentence commonly closes with its main import, a trait stressed in the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition: "A sentence in which the main clause or its predicate is withheld until the end, as in *Despite heavy winds, the plane landed safely.*" Rhetoricians tend to add that the typical periodic sentence, unlike that offered by the *American Heritage Dictionary*, is long, elaborate, and rooted in oratory; in fleshing out its third definition, the OED indicates that orations are the home-base of the periodic style.

George Williamson specifically traces the long, elaborate sentence structure to the orations of Cicero and to Cicero's imitators in Latin and later in English. According to Williamson, a group of scholars and writers calling themselves Anti-Ciceronian developed and promoted an alternative, plain style (11-31). This plain, pithy style is tied to the rise of modern science through the essays of Francis Bacon and the publications of the Royal Academy of Science (Williamson 150-85, 275-

300). It became tied to the rise of Anglo-American literature through the proclamation in the closing paragraph of Richard Mather's Preface to the 1640 *Bay Psalm Book* that "Gods Alter needs not our pollishings" (np) and the general desire of the New England Puritans to speak and record their history plainly. William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* has been heralded as a model of this plain style (Murphy xxii). Supposedly more natural and less artful than the periodic style, the plain style would seem to be the right style for such a scientifically-minded American writer as Thoreau, so it is not surprising that Richard Dillman, who has made the most extensive study of Thoreau's prose style, celebrates its plainness and pithiness.

Dillman fortifies his position through Thoreau's own words, as these from a 23 March 1842 journal entry: "Plain speech is always a desideratum"; "A plain sentence, where every word is rooted in the soil is indeed flowery and verdurous" (*Thoreau's Comments* 23, 31). Young Thoreau felt the need to remind himself of the virtues of plainness, of speaking and writing so as to be understood. Yet he complains in the Conclusion to *Walden*, "It is a ridiculous demand which England and America make, that you should speak so that they can understand you" (324) and defends the use of extravagant language to pay tribute to the extra-vagant nature of nature (324). Different circumstances mandate different styles, and care must be taken in the crafting of extravagant as well as short sentences. In an 18 August 1857 letter to Daniel Ricketson, Thoreau wrote, "If you indulge in long periods, you must be sure to have a snapper at the end" (qtd Dillman, *Thoreau's Comments* 34). For Thoreau, it seems a long periodic sentence was a kind of luxury that demanded special attention as one brought it round to its close. As we shall see, several of his long periods do have the snap he calls for here, though he also finds other ways to effect closure.

When Thoreau's sentences are long, argues Dillman, they are not artfully periodic but inductively cumulative (35-37); Lanham calls the cumulative style a "running" style and suggests that it is another more "natural" style in which experience shapes syntax rather than vice versa

(Lanham 48-78). As an example of this style, Dillman cites the following sentence from *Walden*:

What I have heard of Brahmins sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun; or hanging suspended, with their shoulders "until it becomes impossible for them to resume their natural position, while from the twist of the neck nothing but liquids can pass into the stomach"; or dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree; or measuring with their bodies, like caterpillars, the breadth of vast empires; or standing on one leg on the top of pillars, – even these forms of conscious penance are hardly more incredible and astonishing than the scenes which I daily witness. (4)

While the examples of torturous Hindu religious practices certainly do accumulate, Thoreau "comes round" to his major point at the end: he has witnessed almost equally torturous practices in the daily life of his fellow New Englanders. Thus this sentence has the shape and snap of a classic periodic.

There is room for disagreement in labeling sentence structures and, as George Williamson documents, hybrid forms are common. Perhaps he would label the above sentence a "loose periodic," a hybrid between the loose and periodic style Williamson associates with Sir Thomas Browne (50-51), whose work young Thoreau read while developing his own style (Paul 57). A clearer example of a loose periodic than the one cited above occurs a few paragraphs later in *Walden*, beginning with "It is very evident what mean and sneaking lives many of you live" and ending some 170 words, 21 commas, and 6 semi-colons later with "no matter how much or how little" (6-7), adding one example after another to Thoreau's jeremiad against the desperate economic measures of his neighbors. In a journal draft of a portion of this sentence, dashes rather than semi-colons prevail (2:187), making the structure even looser. The emerging Princeton edition of Thoreau's journals is manifesting how often he used the dash while working out his ideas and recording his experiences in this his most

immediate format, creating indeed a loose, running style, especially after 1850, when close observations become the norm for Thoreau.

Sometimes his journals do encapsulate the results of his observations in a periodic sentence, as in this 18 August 1852 entry:

Looking up the gleaming river reflecting the august sun
– The round-topped silvery *white* maples, the glossy-leaved swamp white oaks, the ethereal and buoyant salix purshiana – the first and last resting on the water & giving the river a full appearance, – & the hibiscus flowers adorning the shores – contrasting with the green across the river – close to the water's edge – the meadows just being shorn – all make a perfect august scene. (5:299)

Consider the drama lost if Thoreau had begun rather than ended with the main clause. The periodic structure allows Thoreau to assess the scenic qualities of the month that make it unique, to ponder a scene with depth and breadth that captures and brings closure to his experience. To engage (and sometimes trap) his audience and to scaffold his transcendental and scientific explorations of the world in his more polished works, Thoreau makes fuller use of periodic structures.

Such structures suit his focus as a writer at the earliest stage. "The Seasons," written when Thoreau was 11 or 12, shows his interest in exploring nature's periodic occurrences, an interest he would sustain and that would sustain him throughout his life. During his college years, he enthusiastically reviewed William Howitt's 1831 *The Book of the Seasons; or the Calendar of Nature*. His 1836 review is replete with periodic sentences, both of Howitt's and his own crafting. A sentence on how one becomes attached to the countryside meanders, for example, like a "slowly-winding stream" through an autumn nutting scene and a winter coasting scene, then follows a cart path through "great meadows" laden with grapes, blackberries, and cranberries, before circling around to the love of all travelers for their native lands (28). Thoreau found in the loose periodic a way of expressing how his own sentiments connected

with those of others who delighted in the patterns of nature. Thoreau's attraction to the periodic style seems thus in part to be rooted in his experience of the periods of nature itself and to the natural historians of these periods.

Other college essays reveal young Thoreau's exposure to and interest in a variety of styles. In an 1835 composition, he argues for stylistic simplicity, for the beauty of the "plainest dress," and against "superfluous ornament" ("November 17, 1835" 24-25). One could thus conclude (as does Dillman), that Thoreau belonged to the Anti-Ciceronian, plain style camp. Yet when he goes on to give examples of simplicity, he looks to Shakespeare, Milton, and Scripture (25-26) – presumably the King James Version, which offers some of the most elegant and moving periodic sentences in the English language (see for example, the unfolding of the entropic course of life in Ecclesiastes 12.1-6.) Later essays and lectures express admiration for diverse elaborate stylistic features, from the smooth conceits of Sir Walter Raleigh to the rough bombast of Thomas Carlyle.

A perusal of the prose of nineteenth-century professional scientists revealed little stylistic similarity to Thoreau's. As noted above, there is stylistic affinity between amateur (love-driven) natural history and Thoreau's work. William Bartram's *Travels* (1791) especially uses extended sentences to present full and vivid descriptions of the amazing phenomena he encounters, connecting a relaxed peripatetic scientific method with a periodic style. This style was a good fit for Thoreau's own peripatetic way of life and for his excursions from "A Walk to Wachusett" (1843) to "Walking" (1862). Still longer, looser sentences are found in Isaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* (1653): a description of minnows, for example, weighs in at more than 250 words, stitched together with numerous colons and semicolons (95-96). The influence of Walton's conversational and contemplative piscatorial prose on Thoreau is evident in the "Saturday" chapter of *A Week* in which he celebrates an old "Walton of this stream" (the Concord River) and the former variety and abundance of its fish (24). Thoreau grants that the interests of the

fishermen and natural historian are not the same, “but as fishing has been styled, ‘a contemplative man’s recreation,’ introducing him profitably to woods and water, so the fruit of the naturalist’s observations is not in new genera or species, but in new contemplations still, and science is only a more contemplative man’s recreation” (25). The science Thoreau liked to practice mirrored the writing that did nature justice.

In his conclusion to “The Natural History,” Thoreau links his science with the search for wisdom: “Wisdom does not inspect, but behold. We must look a long time before we can see” (28). Ancient wisdom writers were among the first naturalists, pondering the weirdness and wonders of nature. To pondering, Thoreau adds sensuous experience: “The true man of science will know nature by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel better than other men. His will be a deeper and finer experience” (28). That Thoreau is distinguishing his experiential science from the scientific method of professionals is evident: “It is with science as with ethics, we cannot know truth by contrivance and method; the Baconian is as false as any other, and with all the helps of machinery and arts, the most scientific will still be the healthiest and friendliest man, and possess a more perfect Indian wisdom” (28).

Though Thoreau as he grew older practiced science more professionally, he also sustained his interest in “Indian wisdom.” From “The Natural History” one can infer that “Indian wisdom” involves experiencing all the periods and patterns of nature, and of sustaining one’s life and the life of one’s people thereby. How could this become “more perfect”? Apparently not through “machinery and arts.” Perhaps then, through a spiritual understanding of what one scientifically experienced: Thoreau understood that the spiritual and scientific wisdom of Native Americans was one, as it was for him.

Thoreau’s enthusiasm for Homer, which developed during his college years (Seybold 24), suggests another source of Thoreau’s periods. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, Thoreau discusses Homer’s style in a manner that anticipates Eric Auerbach’s

"Odysseus's Scar," the first chapter of *Mimesis*. Auerbach argues that Homer's epics foreground the present, offering "an externalization of phenomena in terms perceptible to the senses" (6). Relationships among all "are brought to light in perfect fullness; so that a continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena passes by, and never is there a form left fragmentary or half-illuminated, never a lacuna, never a gap, never a glimpse of unplumbed depths" (6-7). In *A Week*, Thoreau similarly notes the continuous fullness, the 'present-ness' of Homer's delivery:

He does not leap in imagination from Asia to Greece,
through mid air, for there are very many Shady
mountains and resounding seas between.

If his messengers repair but to the tent of Achilles,
we do not wonder how they go there but accompany
them step by step along the shores of the resounding sea.
(94)

For Auerbach, lack of depth, background, and gaps in Homer's epics limit their interpretive possibilities (13), but for Thoreau the total attention to surface helped open his eyes to the full sacredness of the world, an awareness important to both his experiential transcendentalism and scientific method. "Homer," writes Thoreau, "conveys the least information, even the hour of the day, with such magnificence and vast expanse of natural imagery, as if it were a message from the gods" (92). The following simile is offered as proof:

While it was dawn, and sacred day was advancing,
For that space the weapons of both flew fast, and the people fell,
But when now the woodcutter was preparing his midday meal,
In the recesses of the mountain, and had wearied his hands
With cutting lofty trees, and satiety came to his mind,
And the desire of sweet food took possession of his thoughts,
Then the Danaans, by their valor, broke the phalanxes,
Shouting to their companions from their ranks. (92)

In its 1833 English translation by C.C. Felton, Thoreau's professor of Greek at Harvard (Seybold 24), this typical Homeric passage framing a

scene from a world at peace within a scene from the world at war is a periodic sentence, as are many of Thoreau's quotations from Homer; the periodic structure has the room necessary for unifying the worlds.

Perhaps this passage gave birth to the comparison Thoreau makes a few pages later in *A Week* between the work of a woodcutter and the work of a writer:

He will not idly dance at his work who has wood to cut and cord before night-fall in the short days of winter; but every stroke will be husbanded, and ring soberly through the wood; and so will the strokes of that scholar's pen, which at evening record the story of the day, ring soberly, yet cheerily, on the ear of the reader, long after the echoes of his axe have died away. (106)

Homer's woodcutter wields his axe while his warriors wield their spears; Thoreau's woodcutter wields his axe while his scholar wields his pen. Thoreau's periodic sentence, a prose version of the epic simile, makes his own work – the recording of his phenomenally rich day – a heroic venture that will reward the reader just as do the exploits of woodsmen and warriors.

Thoreau appreciates Homer's similes for their "naturalness" (92), and takes time to quote several that reveal and celebrate the interrelations among all phenomena, as does the famous comparison of the stars around the moon seen by a shepherd to the Trojans around their camp fires (93). The periodic scaffolding in Felton's translation shifts our vision from the war camp, up to the star- and moon-lit heavens, down to the mountains, down into the heart of the shepherd, and then back to the camp and out to the horses waiting for dawn. This vision of the cosmos is clearly anthropocentric: natural phenomena are depicted through human experience. Perhaps one of the attractions of Homer's style and world view for Thoreau was its contrast with the supposed theocentrism of Judeo-Christian scripture. Homer helped Thoreau realize the cosmos as his home.

Thoreau's periodic sentences do not often offer Homer's heaven-to-earth vertical perspective; sky-to-earth (or vice versa) provides him

ample room. At the close of his account of his Saddleback Mountain expedition in *A Week* he does take us from a near-to-heaven mountain top to the drizzly lowlands below in one long sentence (190). More typically he need look no higher than the top of a tree to find phenomena to bring to earth, as in this extended description of a squirrel-in-motion:

Or the larger red squirrel, or chickaree, sometimes called the Hudson Bay squirrel, *sciurus Hudsonius*, gave warning of our approach by that peculiar alarm of his, like the winding up of some strong clock, in the top of a pine tree, and dodged behind its stem, or leaped from tree to tree, with such caution and adroitness as if much depended on the fidelity of his scout, running along the white pine boughs sometimes twenty rods by our side, with such speed, and by such unerring routes as if it were some well-worn familiar path to him; and presently, when we have passed, he returns to his work of cutting off the pine cones, and letting them fall to the earth. (196)

Certainly information about this squirrel's activities could have been delivered in a series of short sentences, but only the periodic sentence conveys "the continuous rhythmic procession of phenomena" that Auerbach attributes to Homer (6) and that gives Thoreau and his readers the opportunity to participate in the procession.

Even more often Thoreau employs the surface-presenting style on the horizontal plain to create a fluid sequence of interconnected action, as in this periodic sentence, the third of eight in a row that carry us along Tuesday afternoon on the Merrimack River:

Thus we held on, sailing or dipping our way along with the paddle up this broad river, – smooth and placid, flowing over concealed rocks, where we could see the pickerel lying low in the transparent water, – eager to double some distant cape, to make some great bend as in the life of man, and see what new perspective would open; looking far into a new country, broad and serene,

the cottages of settlers seen afar for the first time, yet
with the moss of century on their roofs, and the third or
fourth generation in their shadow. (232)

The sentence structure here makes a kaleidoscope of the prospects of the pickerel and those of the Thoreau brothers, of the present journey and shadowy generations, of the far and the near. Thus Thoreau continues in the tradition of Homer, surfacing and scaffolding life in its phenomenal richness. His artful closure causes us to pause and contemplate this richness.

Thoreau's fondness for periodic structures and the world-view they undergird may also have been nurtured by John Milton, a sustainer of the Homeric epic tradition and, according to Williamson, a keen defender of the Ciceronian periodic style (209-11). While certainly at odds with Milton's theology, Thoreau seems to have been especially drawn to his powerful poetic vision that encompassed all periods of phenomenal existence in his *Paradise Lost*. The pivotal "Thursday" chapter of *A Week* shows the influence of this epic vision after recounting an episode from late seventeenth-century frontier history in which Hannah Dustan, who "had seen her infant's brains dashed out against an apple-tree" by a band of Indians, escapes their captivity by scalping them in their sleep (321-22). "The family of Hannah Dustan," concludes Thoreau, "all assembled alive once more, except the infant whose brains were dashed out against the apple-tree, and there have been many who in later times have lived to say that they have eaten of the fruit of that apple-tree" (323-24). In case we missed the linking of bloody frontier history with Milton's account of the Fall, Thoreau begins the next paragraph thus: "All this seems a long while ago, and yet it happened since Milton wrote his *Paradise Lost*" (324). Thoreau then claims that all periods of history and many cultures may be collapsed into one periodic sentence:

From Adam and Eve at one leap sheer down to the
deluge, and then through the ancient monarchies,
through Babylon and Thebes, Brahma and Abraham, to

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Greece and the Argonauts; whence we may start again with Orpheus and the Trojan war, the Pyramids and the Olympic games, and Homer and Athens for our stages; and after a breathing space at the building of Rome, continuing our journey down through Odin and Christ to – America. (325)

Elsewhere in his writing Thoreau is eager to divorce himself and America from the burden of a mythic past that includes a lost paradise. Here, however, he is ready to marry America's bloody history with the original fall into experience and all the subsequent stages on the human journey, and uses a periodic sentence to present this journey.

One reason Thoreau does this in *A Week* is to deepen this account of the 1839 summer-to-fall journey he took with his brother on the Concord and Merrimack rivers into an elegy for his brother John, whose death constituted Thoreau's own fall into sorrow. His subsequent writing manifests his attempt to overcome this sorrow while still embracing his brother and their journey together. The last paragraph-length sentence of this book, a beautifully crafted periodic, testifies to this effort:

We had made about fifty miles this day with sail and oar, and now, far in the evening, our boat was grating against the bulrushes of its native port, and its keel recognized the Concord mud, where some semblance of its outline was still preserved in the flattening flags which had scarce yet erected themselves since our departure; and we leaped gladly on the shore, drawing it up, and fastening it to the wild apple-tree, whose stem still bore the mark which its chain had worn in the chafing of the spring freshets. (393)

Like the Concord mud, this sentence preserves a memorable event and invites a return. The reader now realizes why Thoreau emphasized the wild apple tree in the Dustan story; by repeating this image, after they leap on shore to accept their fate, he ties his and his brother's boat to the myth of paradise lost. The wild apple-tree itself bears witness to the

scars that inevitably come with the flood of life. What but a periodic sentence could tie all this experience together into such a memorable close?

Early American Puritans, though celebrated for their plain style, also memorialized and sustained their experience through long periodics, from the “City upon a Hill” single-sentence paragraph with well over 500 words that closes John Winthrop’s 1630 “A Model Christian Charity,” to the epic opening of Cotton Mather’s 1702 *Magnalia Christi America*. The American Puritan work that Thoreau draws on most explicitly, Edward Johnson’s *Wonder-Working Providence*, has many loose periodics; the chapter rendering the heroic “planting” of Concord opens with a single-sentence paragraph of a good 400 words. The most glorious periodic sentence penned by an American Puritan, however, surely appears in Samuel Sewall’s 1697 *Phaenomena Quaedam Apocalyptica*. It provides fertile ground for comparison with Thoreau’s periodic style and vision:

As long as *Plum Island* shall faithfully keep the commanded Post; Notwithstanding all the hectoring Words and hard Blows of the proud and boisterous Ocean; as long as any Salmon, or Sturgeon shall swim in the Streams of *Merrimack*; or any Perch, or Pickeril, in *Crane-Pond*; As long as the Sea-Fowl shall know the time of their coming, and not neglect seasonably to visit the Places of Acquaintance: As long as any Cattel shall be fed with the Grass growing in the Meadows, which do humbly bow down themselves before *Turkie-Hill*; As long as any Sheep shall walk upon *Old Town Hills*, and shall from thence pleasantly look down upon the River *Parker*, and the fruitull *Marishes* lying beneath; As long as any free and harmless Doves shall find a White Oak, or other tree within the Township, to perch, or feed, or build a careless Nest upon; and shall voluntarily present themselves to perform the office of Gleaners after

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Barley-Harvest; As long as Nature shall not grow Old and dote; but shall constantly remember to give the rows of Indian Corn their education, by Pairs: So long shall Christians be born there; and being first made meet, shall from thence be Translated, to be made partakers of the Inheritance of the Saints in Light. (377)

In context, the rich humorous imagery of this sentence supports Sewall's argument that, contrary to the "hectoring Words" coming from across the Atlantic, New England's nature supports a flourishing colony of saints, and will continue to do so; thus it is a fit environment for the Kingdom of God, come the Apocalypse. Sewall orchestrates his rhetoric in defense of American nature (both wild and tame) to assure his audience (or at least himself) of the great future of his land. Only a well-crafted and delightfully detailed periodic sentence could achieve Sewall's goal of joining our natural and spiritual welfare.

By the time Thoreau and his brother took their voyage, Plum Island had become a "dreary" sandscape (*A Week* 199-200). Thoreau finds his reassuring natural environment in the back reaches of the Concord, around Bound Rock, and uses a periodic sentence to present his joy in it toward the outset of *A Week*:

Many waves are there agitated by the wind, keeping nature fresh, the spray blowing in your face, reeds and rushes waving, ducks by the hundred, all uneasy in the surf, in the raw wind, just ready to rise, and now going off with a clatter and whistling like riggers, straight from Labrador, flying against the stiff gale with reefed wings, or else circling round first, with all their paddles briskly moving, just over the surf, to reconnoiter you before they leave these parts; gulls wheeling overhead, muskrats swimming for dear life, wet and cold, with no fire to warm them by that you know of; their labored homes rising here and there like haystacks; and countless mice and moles, and winged titmice along the sunny windy

shore; cranberries tossed on the waves, and heaving up
on the beach, their little red skiffs beating among the
alders; – such healthy natural tumult as proves the last
day is not yet at hand. (7)

Whereas Sewall looked forward to the Apocalypse, Thoreau in his close slyly snaps at those who believe in an imminent end: he finds in the vibrancy of nature proof that all is well with the world, and invites “you” to adventure in it. Whereas Sewall offers an anthropocentric landscape in which all creatures serve humanity, in Thoreau’s world the muskrats struggle for their own “dear life,” and ducks and cranberries have their own adventures – it’s the wildness of the landscape, a wildness near at hand, that is reassuring. What Thoreau’s periodic sentence has in common with Sewall’s is how in taking their time to “come round” to their closing point they offer an inclusive tribute to a plenitude of natural phenomena, using the periodic structure to scaffold a mixture of experience and vision.

Among Thoreau’s contemporaries, I have found none with his enthusiasm for the periodic sentence. Naturally it is to Emerson that one would first look for stylistic influence and similarities. During the heyday of stylistics, comparisons were made between Emerson’s and Thoreau’s sentences. One computer study revealed that while Emerson’s may seem more difficult, Thoreau’s are on average longer! (Gougeon 56-57). Emerson in his tribute to Thoreau praised such short sentences as “The blue bird carries the sky on his back” and “Fire is the most tolerable third party” (430), but no long periodics. Another of Emerson’s disciples, Walt Whitman, certainly indulged in long sentences in his prose, the equivalent of the catalogues of his poetry that stylistically bring together all manner of experiences and people in a democratic embrace. However, both his poetry and his prose are too loose and open ended to be termed periodic. His signature punctuation mark in his prose as well as his poetry is the ellipsis, as we see in this excerpt from the Preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*:

On him [the American poet] rise solid growths that offset
the growths of pine and cedar and hemlock and liveoak

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and chestnut and cyprus and hickory and limetree and
cottonwood and tuliptree and cactus and wildvine and
tamarind and persimmon.... and tangles as tangled as any
canebrake or swamp.... and forests coated with
transparent ice and icicles hanging from the boughs and
cracking in the wind.... and sides and peaks of mountains
.... and pastures sweet and free as savannah or upland or
prairie.... (711)

The sentence, the list, continues.... The dots signify not ellipsis but inclusion and endless possibility, a Thoreauvian enthusiasm for the plenitude of phenomena worth celebrating. Yet the use of the dots rather than semi-colons makes it impossible to stop, create a running, wholly paratactic as opposed to a periodic style, with all its punctuated checks and balances as scaffolding.

Herman Melville's mature style comes closer to Thoreau's. Melville too was a reader of that seventeenth-century master of the loose periodic sentence, Sir Thomas Browne, along with many other writers with extravagant prose styles and visions, the reading of whom transformed him from a writer of popular travel adventures to an intellectual adventurer (Parker 623). Browne's metaphysical fusions of the visible and invisible worlds fueled and licensed Melville's ponderings, first in *Mardi* (1849), then in *Moby-Dick* (1851). Ishmael's musings are full of Browne-like rhetorical reaches and dives, none more famous than the long dense periodic probing the meaning of the whiteness of the whale that constitutes the second paragraph of Chapter 42. Periodic sentences in *Moby-Dick* do Thoreauvian justice to the glory of natural phenomena, but often with a heavier sociological burden or a more empathetic, humanistic tone. Consider Queequeg's request for a coffin as he thinks he is dying:

He called one [of the crew] to him in the grey morning
watch, when the day was just breaking, and taking his
hand, said while he was in Nantucket he had chanced to
see certain little canoes of dark wood, like the rich war-

wood of his native isle; and upon inquiry he had learned that all whalemens who died in Nantucket, were laid in those same dark canoes, and that the fancy of being so laid had much pleased him; for it was not unlike the custom of his own race, who, after embalming a dead warrior, stretched him out in his canoe, and so left him to be floated away to the archipelagoes; for not only do they believe that the stars are isles, but that far beyond all visible horizons, their own mild, uncontinented seas, interflow with the blue heavens, and so form the white breakers of the milky way. (364)

This periodic sentence moves horizontally across cultures, islands and seas, and vertically from the deck of the Pequod to the Milky Way as we learn of Queequeg's beliefs. Once again the periodic structure proves its ability to connect and engage.

Periodic and metaphysical scaffolding appealed to both Melville and Thoreau, enabling them to consider life and nature holistically. It supported Thoreau's version of Transcendentalism, which did not take him out of this world into some ideal realm, but rather prompted him to immerse himself in the world to understand its enduring, sustaining aesthetic and spiritual structure and value; the science he valued promoted similar sustaining wisdom. Periodic sentences are less common in his political lectures and essays, in his more socially focused composition such as *Cape Cod*, and his more outward-looking adventure writing, such as the essays collected in *Maine Woods*. Perhaps in order to reach his audience more quickly and to meet the demands of the journals in which he hoped to publish, he reined-in his style somewhat, made it "plainer" and more immediately accessible. It could also be argued that as his Transcendentalism waned so did his desire to express himself in periodic sentences. However, in some compositions he was tinkering with toward the end of his life, especially *Wild Fruits*, we find a fair number of periodics fusing transcendental experience and science.

As Bradley P. Dean notes in his Introduction, Thoreau's study of wild fruits was part of an enormous "Kalendar" of all periodic natural phenomena in and around Concord that Thoreau was creating, a work he thought of as a New Testament for New Englanders (xiii), awakening them to the good news of the abundance of their land available on a perennial basis. Thoreau's interest in what each season of the year offered is evident in his earliest reading and writing, but the specific inspiration for his "Kalendar" was, according to Dean, John Evelyn's 1664 *Kalendar-Hortense* (xi). Evelyn's almanac is loaded with long sentences offering catalogues of observations and advice. His focus, however, is on what should be cultivated and when, whereas Thoreau's is on what the wild offers year after year.

In some *Wild Fruit* passages we can see how in the last years of his life Thoreau crafted earlier journal entries into periodic sentences that give the reader a full experience of what may be experienced in nature. For example, Thoreau in one such sentence encourages us to survey the varieties and abundance of berries on the side of Conantum Hill:

First, if you searched low down in the shade under all, you found still fresh the great, light-blue earliest blueberries, bluets, in heavy clusters – most Olympian fruit of all – delicate-flavored, thin-skinned, and cool; *then*, next above, the still denser masses or clusters of the second low blueberry of various varieties, firm and sweet food; and rising above these, large blue and black huckleberries of various qualities; and over these ran rampant the low blackberry, weighing down the thicket with its wreaths of black fruit and binding it together in a trembling mass – while here and there the high blackberry, just beginning to be ripe, towered over the rest. (53)

Thoreau takes us from the low shady bluets to the high towering blackberries; in the 4 August 1856 journal essay upon which this sentence is based, the blackberries do their towering in a separate

sentence (J 8:444-45); Thoreau revised this so that we would pluck all the berries in one upward movement.

Having taken us up, Thoreau in the next sentence takes us back down:

Thus, as it were, the berries hung up lightly in masses or heaps, separated by their leaves and twigs so that the air could circulate through and preserve them; and you went daintily wading through this thicket, picking perhaps only the finest of the high blackberries, as big as the end of your thumb, however big that may be, or clutching here and there a handful of huckleberries for variety, but never suspecting the delicious, cool, blue-bloomed ones, which you were crushing with your feet under all. (53)

The 4 August 1856 journal entry lacks the first part of this sentence. Thoreau's revision gives it more verticality so that its "under all" close would have effect. Taken together the two periodic sentences ask "you" to not miss or destroy any of the offerings of our earthly paradise.

Thoreau's enthusiasm for the plenitude and variety of berries is unbounded, only to be matched by his enthusiasm for the plenitude and variety of wild apples. Toward the end of the section of *Wild Fruits* devoted to them, Thoreau suggests we "enumerate a few of these," and does so in a loose periodic mixing mythic and experiential knowledge – and classical, scientific, and fanciful terminology:

There is, first of all, the Wood Apple (*Malus sylvatica*); the Blue-Jay apple; the apple which grows in dells in the woods (*Malus sylvestrivallis*), also in hollow in pastures (*Malus campesrivallis*); the apple that grows in an old cellar hole (*Malus cellaris*); the Meadow Apple; the Partridge Apple; the Truant's Apple (*Malus cessatoris*), which no boy will ever go by without knocking off some, however *late* he may be; the Saunterer's Apple – you must lose yourself before you can find the way to that;

Walter Hesford, "Thoreau's Style, Thought, and Scientific Method"

the Beauty-of-the-air (*Malus decus-aeris*); December – eating; the Frozen-thawed (*Malus gelato-soluta*), good only in that state; the Concord Apple, possibly the same with the *Malus musketaquidensis*; the Assabet Apple; the Brindled Apple; Wine of New England; the Chickeree Apple; the Green Apple (*Malus viridis*), this has many synonyms: in an imperfect state it is the *Cholera morbifera aut dysenterifera, puerulis dilectissima*; the apple which Atalanta stopped to pick up; the Hedge Apple (*Malus sepium*); the Slug Apple (*Malus limacea*); the Railroad Apple, which perhaps came from a core thrown out of the cars; the apple whose fruit we tasted in our youth; our Particular Apple, not to be found in any catalogue, *Malus pedestrium-solatium*; also the apple where hangs the forgotten scythe; Iduna's Apple; the apple which Loki found in the wood; and a great many more I have on my list, too numerous to mention – all of them good. (89)

Whew! As Dean notes, the 23 and 29 May 1851 journal entries upon which this passage draws list many more species (318 n 89). What these entries lack are the final phrases and the final pronouncement. Thoreau's addition of "all of them good" creates a periodic sentence that saves the way we are to interpret all we have been given until the end.

Thoreau's pronouncement casts him in the role of God in Genesis Chapter One, proclaiming the goodness of all creation. Who doesn't find an apple worth plucking in this sometimes funny, sometimes elegiac list? (Growing up south of Boston, I particularly enjoyed the Blue Hills cellar hole apples; now out in Idaho, my wife and I relish the Railroad Apples we find along the Coeur d'Alenes' Rail-to-Trail Bike Path). Thoreau's apple catalogue spoofs commercial ones that treat the fruit as mere commodity, a treatment that threatens the very existence of the wild apples as well as the berries he loves; his discussions of both end with worries about their demise through

commercial overharvesting (57-59) or the preference for cultivated varieties of fruit (91-92). Thus Thoreau's pronouncement here is not just an offhand remark but one which articulates his faith as a committed transcendentalist and scientist in the value of preserving our natural world, a faith which he shares with us through the extravagance and snap of a long periodic sentence.

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