

“A Greater Vital Force”: Rhetorical Affinities between Thoreau and Darwin

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On 8 February 1860, after having discussed Darwin’s ideas in *On the Origin of Species* on several occasions in the weeks since the appearance of its first American edition, Thoreau got a copy and began reading it for himself. He had been prepared to sympathize with its argument because of his longstanding admiration for Darwin as a writer and his own recent work challenging current accepted theories claiming to solve the mystery of how plants spread from one environment to another. Thoreau may also have been drawn to Darwin’s new work by a sense of its affinity with his own, just delivered, lecture, “Wild Apples,” in which he had similarly offered an exploration of origins, tracing the history of the apple tree and stressing processes of change and transformation consonant with Darwin’s vision of the natural process of evolution.¹

Beginning in 1851 with his reading *The Voyage of the Beagle*, Thoreau had been impressed by Darwin’s ability to write in his own voice, with the easy, personal approach of casual conversation, and by his skill at sharing his clear pleasure in his subjects. While, as David Depew argues, the “I” of the *Origin* is less spontaneous and expressive than the “I” of *The Beagle*, Darwin’s now “painfully anxious” desire “to secure the good will of [his] readers” (238), may have seemed equally instructive to Thoreau both because it served to remind him of the value of taking a gentle, diplomatic approach to difficult ideas, and of the value also of creating a persona who sympathizes with a reader’s struggle. Indeed, Thoreau’s calling Darwin’s “development

theory” “flexible and accommodating,” can be regarded as applying to Darwin’s treatment of his reader as well as to the theory itself.²

In the following discussion, I explore what Thoreau seems most to have appreciated in Darwin’s methods of making his ideas accessible, especially his emphasis on the role language choices play not only in clarifying ideas but in manifesting the substance of his arguments. Important for Thoreau is the fact that Darwin’s rhetorical strategies go further than a bid simply to make his ideas palatable to a leery audience, and, instead, entertain the possibility that new ways of understanding depend on ideas’ being articulated in particular, carefully crafted language, at least during the period of introducing them. Darwin’s rhetorical self-consciousness suggests that he rejects the notion that he has discovered compelling facts that speak for themselves and, by contrast, wishes candidly to share the process needed to make those facts speak.

Certain passages in the opening chapters of the *Origin* where Darwin is concerned with making his reader feel welcome and at home in his arguments have a number of affinities with Thoreau’s style in “Wild Apples,” and the similarities in approach suggest that what differences there are between Thoreau and Darwin may lie less in their particular ideas about change in nature than in what they hope the ultimate effect of their writing will be. In contrast to Darwin’s goal of gradually convincing his readers of the truth of his argument on the origin of species, Thoreau’s is to linger within the process by which new points of view are acquired, and to keep the space open in which the reader actively experiences new ideas’ becoming intelligible. Thoreau prefers not to move beyond the moments that Darwin creates so vividly but ultimately treats as preliminary, those in which the invisible processes of transformation become almost palpable. The features of Darwin’s work that appear to be most striking to Thoreau are his clear love of, and skill at, observing, his ability to trace development without moving away from the phenomenon under study into abstraction; his ability to regard seeing as an active, willed process realized most effectively through vivid storytelling; and, crucially, his ability to see

and convey the vitality of nature, its aliveness and capacity for endless metamorphosis. For Thoreau, specific rhetorical choices are not designed to become a means of achieving a new, persuasive explanation but to become themselves embodiments of the way every aspect of the world including human language and thinking is alive and evolves.³ Thoreau had already explored his vision of the linked, dynamic processes of linguistic and physical metamorphosis in the picture he created of the sandbank in *Walden* and elsewhere. In "Wild Apples," he considers more deliberately the reader's need to be prepared for such a way of seeing.⁴

Darwin and Thoreau share a concern with the status of facts. Darwin famously remarked that science "consists in grouping facts so that great laws or conclusions may be drawn from them," and we will see in a moment the challenges posed by attempts at such grouping.⁵ In November 1851, Thoreau writes in his journal that it is a "rare qualification to be able to state a fact simply and adequately," adding how difficult it is

To digest some experience cleanly. [...] To conceive & suffer the truth to pass through us living & intact – even as a waterfowl an eel – thus peopling new waters. First of all a man must see before he can say. – Statements are made but partially – Things are said with reference to certain conventions or existing institutions. – not absolutely. (PJ 4:157-58)

Blurring the distinctions among fact, experience, and truth, as well as between processes of digestion and conception, Thoreau wishes that truth, in the form of facts, might pass through the observer without being destroyed, transformed, or re-arranged, and without reflecting the speaker's particular conventions or institutions. He seems confident that seeing and saying can be regarded as separate and sequential. In February 1860, soon after reading the *Origin*, Thoreau reverses his emphasis, and, far from desiring independent passage for facts, demands that they themselves become vehicles for "some humanity":

A fact barely stated is dry. It must be the vehicle for some humanity to interest us. It is like giving a man a stone when

he asks you for bread. Ultimately, the moral is all in all, and we don't mind it if inferior truth is sacrificed to superior, as when the moralist fables and makes animals speak and act like men. It must be warm, moist, incarnated, – have been breathed on at least. A man has not seen a thing who has not felt it. (*Journal* 13, 160)

Here, the recognition both of something's having the status of a fact and of being significant originate within the observer and depend on its being "incarnated" in human form. In what could be an echo of the last lines of the *Origin* in which Darwin speaks of "several powers, having been breathed into a few forms or into one" (376), Thoreau suggests that the ability to perceive the life in things depends on the continual recreation of that life in human terms.



Some of the liveliest and most Thoreauvian passages in the *Origin* occur in Darwin's recounting of the experiences in which he changed his own mind about the meaning of what he was seeing, but he begins the initial chapters by focusing on the reorienting steps his readers need to go through to assimilate the idea that nature constitutes not a fixed but an evolving order. To accomplish that, Darwin famously begins with the familiar fact that animals and plants have been altered by farmers since time immemorial.⁶ Although Darwin stresses the skill involved, he claims domestic breeding to have been an essentially intuitive rather than intellectual practice: "I cannot doubt that it has been followed almost unconsciously; it has consisted in always cultivating the best known variety, sowing its seeds, and when a slightly better variety has chanced to appear, selecting it and so onwards" (38). Plant and animal breeders, he implies, have worked continuously toward the goal of producing desired traits without any consciousness that the work could have consequences for a set of beliefs that they may also have been attached to, i.e., that the world was divinely created, or that similar but greater changes might also be possible through purely natural means, making even species themselves mutable. Darwin's Thoreauvian "detection of an analogy" between the domestic and the wild becomes an opportunity to show that his readers,

too, have half consciously known things that they can then be woken up to and gain explicit knowledge of.⁷

Since Thoreau had long wrestled with the antagonizing effect of his rhetorical style, and had already recognized the need for his lectures at least to be more accommodating of his audience's limitations,⁸ Darwin's considerate attention to his readers must have struck him as particularly appealing. Thoreau begins the revised, essay version of "Wild Apples" in a similarly conciliatory fashion, choosing also to ease into the subject of wild nature by first discussing the familiar history of the domesticated apple and by first emphasizing the long, intertwined history of apples and human beings. And, like Darwin, he then moves from "this most civilized of fruits" to its wild kin, sparking his readers' interest less by admonishing them than by inviting them to become connoisseurs of wild apples, in order to experience the intense pleasure of sensations newly accessible through the development of new faculties. In the process, Thoreau draws playful attention to the work he has to do to render wild apples desirable. To want to eat wild apples one must be convinced of the worth of learning to take pleasure in fruit that smells like squash bugs and of becoming sensitive enough to be able to experience the difference in flavor between an apple eaten inside and one eaten outdoors, where it was picked, "in a stinging atmosphere" (*Excursions* 281). Like much writing on matters of taste, generally, the value of his subject exists, in part, by grace of his amplifying language. He hints at his rhetorical trickery by describing his parallel, literal subterfuge in getting a friend to try a wild apple: "These are those crabbed apples with which I cheated my companion, and kept a smooth face that I might tempt him to eat. Now we greedily fill our pockets with them" (*Excursions* 288). Thoreau's language keeps a similarly smooth face with his readers as he describes the joys of finding apples half eaten by squirrels or snails.

After Darwin's initial invitation to think along with him, and the next chapter's detailed exploration of variations, he continues the project of reorienting his reader's thinking by addressing an idea crucial to his theory of natural selection – "the struggle for existence" – encouraging his readers

to see struggle where they may before have naively assumed a harmonious order. In the following two passages, Darwin makes clear how important the specific language that ideas are couched in is for that reorientation to happen. He begins by gently unsettling a Romantic perspective:

We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey; we do not always bear in mind, that though food may be now superabundant, it is not so at all seasons of each recurring year. (56-57)

This paragraph operates similarly to his initial analogy by connecting familiar with less familiar ideas, except that, here, he draws explicit attention to the ways holding onto a point of view can limit the ability to see. While he mocks the idea of taking the conditions of, say, a particular May morning and claiming them as representative of the unchanging essence of nature, he softens his point by using the pronoun “we” throughout, suggesting that he, like his reader, understandably “forgets” or does not always “bear in mind” circumstances that are not at a given moment apparent. He reorients ideas on every level; for example, not merely recognizing that birds are never idle and often suffer, but also that these “songsters” themselves inflict suffering – and that even their eating of seeds can and should be regarded as “destroying life.” His language implies that the wonder implied in “beholding” rather than simply seeing may render the harsher aspects of nature invisible.⁹

Darwin’s somewhat parodic use of poetic language here functions not merely to criticize a naïve point of view; instead, it demonstrates the crucial role particular choices in diction play in allowing an argument to take shape. The shift in thinking he wants to effect in his reader depends on his tone and on his controlling the definitions of his words in very particular ways, some of which, as he makes clear in the next paragraph, require his reader’s explicit assent:

I should premise that I use the term Struggle for Existence in a large and metaphorical sense, including dependence of one being on another; and including (which is more important) not only the life of the individual, but success in leaving progeny. Two canine animals in a time of dearth, may be truly said to struggle with each other which shall get food and live. But a plant on the edge of a desert is said to struggle for life against the drought, though more properly it should be said to be dependent on moisture [...]. The mistletoe is dependent on the apple and a few other trees, but can only in a far-fetched sense be said to struggle with these trees, for if too many of these parasites grow on the same tree, it will languish and die. But several seedling mistletoes, growing close together on the same branch, may more truly be said to struggle with each other. As the mistletoe is disseminated by birds, its existence depends on birds; and it may metaphorically be said to struggle with other fruit-bearing plants in order to tempt birds to devour and thus disseminate its seeds rather than those of other plants. In these several senses, which pass into each other, I use for convenience sake the general term of struggle for existence. (57)

In this famous passage, Darwin drops his ironic tone, and, instead, candidly addresses the difficulty of finding the right language to make palpable the interpretation he wants his reader to have. Establishing his way of seeing involves more than "bearing in mind" and "not forgetting"; he needs an umbrella term that can cover a range of instances and convey struggle as both the overarching and underlying condition of things. He claims his term is "metaphorical" but seems not to mean that it functions to describe one thing in terms of another, using it, instead, to acknowledge that what he is arguing cannot literally be seen, and that the evidence for it cannot begin to appear as such without the help of initially foreign or "farfetched" language.

Darwin begins with an observable struggle: the image of two dogs fighting, but the additional meanings he wants in the definition of his phrase now include the striving for continued existence through progeny in addition to the enduring of particular conditions (e.g., a drought). The meaning of the term “struggle for existence” must go beyond a creature’s instinct to preserve its own life. Just as regarding birds’ eating seeds as destroying life requires a slight shift in interpretative emphasis, “seeing” struggle in the image of two plants growing near one another on a branch involves a similar shift – to include now not only their competing for light and space but also their vying for the attention of birds, who in this new context become unwitting agents of continued life rather than destroyers of it. Darwin highlights the delicate balance he needs to strike in order to avoid excessive abstraction, and he draws attention to what he is doing by insisting that the shift happens in the language itself, repeating some version of *may be said* seven times. In this radical reorientation, he emphasizes new ways of interpreting the observable facts rather than any new discoveries.¹⁰

Darwin’s explicit attention to the linguistic shift involved in seeing struggle in what he says should “more properly [...] be said to be” dependence underlines his awareness of the constitutive quality of his language. It is through this particular process of articulation that Darwin magically makes the “several senses [of words] pass into each other,” a rhetorical sleight of hand that, once accomplished, allows his readers to see activity and relationship where before they may only have seen a static tableau of separate objects. While Darwin claims to use the phrase “struggle for existence” “for convenience sake,” his attention to the interpretative work required in articulating his point of view suggests that he, like Thoreau, does not believe that facts can be self-evident without having been co-constructed and assented to. Darwin’s allowing his reader to see him working up an idea and essaying how far it can be taken without becoming implausible is the kind of open and inclusive attitude toward ideas that Thoreau valued, in its speaking to the need for facts to be the vehicle for some humanity, and in its providing an example of the process of being rendered intelligible.

Following the reorientation in his readers' thinking, Darwin provides many instances in which new facts can then be discovered as well as newly interpreted. In the following example, Darwin, like Thoreau on a walk, describes himself as initially mystified by trees that have sprung up on newly-enclosed land:

When I ascertained that these young trees had not been sown or planted, I was so much surprised at their numbers that I went to *several points of view*, whence I could examine hundreds of acres of the unenclosed heath, and *literally* I could not see a single Scotch fir, except the old planted clumps. But on looking closely between the stems of the heath, I found a multitude of seedlings and little trees that had been perpetually browsed down by the cattle. In one square yard... I counted thirty-two little trees; and one of them, judging from the rings of growth, had during twenty six years tried to raise its head above the stems of the heath and had failed. No wonder that, as soon as the land was enclosed, it became thickly clothed with vigorously growing young firs. Yet the heath was so extremely barren and so extensive that no one would have imagined that cattle would have so closely and effectually searched it for food. (63-64, italics added).

Inspired by his own version of the riddle of seed dispersion, Darwin proceeds to look from "several points of view" both literally and figuratively, but sees nothing until he looks closely with the tree, as Thoreau would say, "already in [his] eye,"¹¹ at which moment he suddenly finds what he had missed before. Not only do phenomena require a mind prepared to see them, but their presence cannot be imagined, as he says, without looking from several points of view, including that of the browsing cattle. The heath turns out never to have been barren, but full of vital life continuously and effectively held in check until a shift of a single element chanced to create new opportunities. Even absent the cattle, the struggle for existence will continue unabated – the new trees have sprung up too close together for all to survive – but Darwin

has painted a picture not only of the harshness of continual checks but of extraordinary vitality and potential for change.

The scene Darwin sketches here bears an uncanny resemblance to a passage in “Wild Apples,” in which Thoreau describes the plight of wild apple trees that, because of the depredations of cows, remain almost invisible for years, and go initially unnoticed even by the Thoreauvian walker.¹² Like Darwin, Thoreau emphasizes the harsh conditions these apple trees face: only “one or two survive the drought and other accidents” and those that do have their “suffering” then begin in earnest, as the browsing cattle “cut them down a span” (*Excursions* 272).

In tracing the history of one of the few trees to survive, Thoreau might seem to be using the tree primarily as an allegory of triumph over adversity, but he is careful to suggest that, except for its having been able to persist and continue to grow, the tree itself has not actively devised the extraordinary changes in shape that eventually allow it to survive. While it may appear that the tree has performed feats of camouflage and escape from harm by growing horizontally when it is prevented from growing upward, in fact, its changes in form have been almost entirely accomplished by the browsing oxen, and it is only when its hedge-like shape has become so thick that its center is no longer exposed that a fruit-bearing stalk is able to “dart upwards with joy” (*Excursions* 274). What might, then, in a moment of equilibrium (on a May morning, perhaps) provide a tableau in which each thing appears in its place and cared for: nests for birds, and even, eventually, shade for cows, is, in fact, a narrative of continuous struggle, and only intermittent harmony and seeming reciprocity. These newly recognized facts of struggle can be “fabled” in order to get to a Darwinian “higher truth.” Thoreau makes “animals [and trees] speak and act like men” when the tree misquotes Emerson’s poem “The Rhodora” in a bid for kinship and sympathy, saying: “The same cause that brought you here brought me.” In substituting the word “cause” for Emerson’s “Power,” Thoreau may be playing with the occasion of the poem: “On being asked, whence is the flower?” and suggesting that it is better answered by looking to physical causes than to unseen powers (*Excursions* 273).¹³

Nevertheless, for Thoreau, recognizing its history of physical struggle is only one aspect of understanding wild apples. Thoreau's following of the previously domestic apple out into the woods becomes a way of exploring its linguistic as well as its physical history. In a passage equal in self-consciousness to Darwin's attempts to make the idea of struggle vivid and compelling, Thoreau uses the wild apple's "savory" taste to explore how changes in the meaning of the word help illuminate the evolution of the fruit itself. Making present and past meanings "pass" into one another involves candidly showing the degree to which meanings are always intended in the act of seeing and how those intentions can be detected in the language used to articulate them. More extravagant than Darwin, Thoreau traces how the words themselves seem able to lead the mind employing them, through their own various and autonomous resonances, into new territory.¹⁴ In the following passage Thoreau, like Darwin, shows the work involved in constructing a particular picture through his language, but then also stresses the ways certain word choices simultaneously follow the observer's intentions and also create unexpected but equally plausible associations:

As for those [apples] I speak of, I pluck them as a wild fruit [... the tree] frequented only by the woodpecker and the squirrel, deserted now by the owner, who has not faith enough to look under the boughs. From the appearance of the tree-top, at a little distance, you would expect nothing but lichens to drop from it, but your faith is rewarded by finding the ground strewn with spirited fruit, – some of it, perhaps, collected at squirrel-holes, and with the marks of their teeth by which they carried them, some containing a cricket or two silently feeding within, and some, especially in damp days, a shell-less snail. The very sticks and stones lodged in the tree-top might have convinced you of the savoriness of the fruit which has been so eagerly sought after in past years. (*Excursions* 277-78)

Thoreau uses the word faith here, as he does elsewhere,¹⁵ to mean persistence and willingness to look, since his faith is in finding a physical thing – literal fruit hidden under leaf litter – but his repetition of the word in the phrase “his faith will be rewarded” along with various forms of the word “spirit,” both here and in what follows on this passage, all suggest that his seemingly straightforward use of the word has brought in its train a history that includes a willingness to believe in things unseen. In this context then, the word “savory” suggests holy as much as that the apples are good tasting, though perhaps not sweet. The phrase “Spirited fruit” has similarly complex resonances – that the apples of this tree are survivors, enterprising, and lively and also, possibly, that they are imbued with spirit. Like Darwin, Thoreau is careful to draw attention to his own role in creating what we see, beginning with his act of plucking them “as a wild fruit” – *as if* this tree had not originally been planted but since abandoned by a farmer, and *as if* its fruit were filled with spirit. Though clearly “intending” the spiritedness he finds, Thoreau, nevertheless, feels reciprocally inspired by it as though his consciousness had momentarily become that of a pagan poet suckled in a creed outworn, able to taste the “wild flavors of the muse, vivacious and inspiring” (*Excursions* 277).¹⁶ Fermented by the *genius loci*, the apples’ spiritedness intoxicates Thoreau with meanings as well as flavor, making the tree’s physical history ultimately only one element of its story.

Here, as elsewhere, Thoreau uses etymologies to suggest how changes in the world and in consciousness are charted in the evolving meanings of the words themselves. As Tristan Wolff argues, Thoreau is less interested in pursuing an elusive pre-history, a golden time of language or in discovering the transcendental essence of words, as he is in focusing on change itself.¹⁷ In Thoreau’s inclusion of folklore, mythology, and the various rituals, spiritual and practical, in the history of cultivating apples, he is less trying to convert his reader to a particular understanding of them as he is acting as a guide on a path that leads to a full experience of how inextricable the physical history of any phenomenon is from its interpretation in language. Not only are the apples that he initially thought the tree was too old to bear still there, but older meanings are too. Neither superseded nor discredited; they are still available, suggesting

that there is no physical history without an informing cultural and linguistic one. Knowing that history keeps the past in the present, providing additional and potentially renewable ways of understanding.¹⁸



"Wild Apples" culminates in the rhetorical flourish of Thoreau's giving names to the apples he walks past, names that contrast starkly with the commercial ones he began the essay by scorning. The sections on naming come out of his 1851 journal and were written at the same time that Thoreau was crafting the essay "Walking"; they are animated by the wish he expresses there that his words be "so true and fresh and natural they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring [...]" (*Excursions* 208).

Thoreau also says in "Walking" that "at present our only true names are nicknames" (*Excursions* 212), and in "Wild Apples" the names he prefers are, in contrast to the commercial "None-Suches" and "Seek no Furthers," the equivalent of nick names – ones that are earned rather than arbitrarily imposed, and that can be changed with "each new exploit" (*Excursions* 212). Thoreau stresses the contextual and relational, naming them "the Meadow Apple, the Partridge Apple [and] the Beauty of the Air" (*Excursions* 284). This last constitutes a particularly clever reworking of the commercial habit of hyperbole, with the apple, the supposed "beauty" in the name, becoming indistinguishable from the air it hangs in. This renaming is carried out with the same degree of self-consciousness as Darwin's reshaping of a scene through language, with the same effect of emphasizing relationship and process.¹⁹ When the names Thoreau gives refer to a person (as the names of so many commercially grown apples do) they are not of individuals through whom those apples are then to be forever known,²⁰ but of unnamed people and creatures who become part of the apple's world temporarily. The "truant's apple" belongs to anyone who leaves off what he or she should be doing and instead seeks out the apple, likewise the walker's and the saunterer's apple. Thoreau's names avoid the trap of nominalism and can instead be read as instructions on how to get to know the apples rather than simply as a way of identifying

them, just as he says that if an apple is going to be “labeled” the label should be: “To be eaten in the wind” (*Excursions* 280). Thoreau’s insistence on the necessity of continually rethinking how words might be brought closer to manifesting nature comes through in the simultaneously impersonal and intimate names he devises here. In his journal he writes: “a more intimate knowledge, a deeper experience will surely originate a word.” And, the day after delivering “Wild Apples” as a lecture for the second time: “the one who loves and understands a thing best will incline to use the personal pronouns in speaking of it” (*Journal* 13, 145). Like Darwin, Thoreau is convinced that language needs to be approached dynamically. For neither of them is rhetoric ever merely a matter of persuasion: at its best, it is able to bring something newly into visibility and consciousness.



The melancholy long withdrawing roar that “Wild Apples” ends with undoes its light touch by allowing Thoreau’s voice to disappear into a bleak prophecy from *The Book of Joel* that warns of the withering of many kinds of trees including the apple as a consequence of the withering of “joy away from the sons of men” (*Excursions* 289). The quotation goes further than Thoreau’s own argument; while he expresses the fear that the wild apple tree will soon be extinct, the *Book of Joel* warns of the same fate for all fruit trees. The health of nature generally, Thoreau implies, depends on the joy with which it is sought out and acknowledged.

The essay’s bleak conclusion anticipates Darwin’s own feeling, expressed in his autobiography, that, as a result of tireless work over many years, his mind became merely “a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts” and that as a consequence he lost his taste for the poetry he had formerly enjoyed (*Autobiography* 139). Gillian Beer argues that Darwin’s loss of aesthetic pleasure in poetry stemmed in part from his continually having to revise *The Origin* after its first edition and to “pare away at the exuberantly metaphorical drive of its language” (562).²¹ The original creativity and imagination involved in the task of grouping facts so that general laws might be drawn from them, and in the challenge

of articulating that process so that others could come to see the same view, were lost in the more single-minded project of defending the theory and accumulating support for it. The image of his mind's becoming a machine suggests that that work, though hard, no longer required his imaginative participation. Perhaps similarly weary, Thoreau's decision to end as he does suggests that, despite Darwin's example in *The Origin*, he cannot keep himself, finally, from reminding his readers of the stakes involved in their following his lead and committing themselves to the work necessary to cultivate joy through a vision of nature that is alive and evolving in all its aspects.

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Notes

¹ The first American edition of *On the Origin of Species* appeared in December 1859. For both the lecture version of "Wild Apples" and for the revised essay, published posthumously in *The Atlantic* in 1862, Thoreau drew on his journals, particularly from the years 1850-52 and from 1857 on. According to Bradley Dean, Thoreau added seventeen paragraphs to the beginning and eight to the end for the published version, as well as making numerous smaller revisions (*Wild Fruits* 285).

² On 18 October 1860, Thoreau writes: "the development theory implies a greater vital force in nature, because it is more flexible and accommodating, and equivalent to a sort of constant *new creation*" (*Journal* 14, 147).

³ As John Hildebidle shows, Thoreau's impatience with Darwin's emphasis on explanation began with his reading of *The Voyage of the Beagle* (146).

⁴ Thoreau's appreciation for Darwin's ability to capture "the vital force" of nature helps account for his not having been as struck as others were by the seeming bleakness of Darwin's vision. As Laura Dassow Walls argues, Darwin's emphasis on war, struggle, and continual checks is starkly different from the more harmonious outlook of one of Thoreau's chief influences, Alexander Humboldt. Notwithstanding that harshness,

however, Darwin's view shares with Humboldt's a confidence in nature's enormous vitality and its active rather than passive character (*Seeing New Worlds*, 196).

⁵ Quoted in Robert D. Richardson (376).

⁶ It is a matter of debate whether Darwin himself came to understand his theory better through the steps he constructs for his reader; Darwin was following Bacon's advice to present new scientific ideas by recapitulating the process of discovering them, even if it meant creating a plausible though not, in fact, true scenario of his own original process. However canny his motivations, Darwin nevertheless demonstrates a genuine sensitivity to the role analogy and figurative language generally play in the process by which ideas are rendered accessible and hence ultimately persuasive.

⁷ Darwin sounds like Thoreau himself: "A man receives only what he is ready to receive. We hear and apprehend only what we already half-know" (*Journal* 13, 77).

⁸ As Stephen Fink argues, "lecturing taught Thoreau the need for the *mutual* involvement of the speaker and the hearer" (271).

⁹ Thoreau's own Romantic perspective is apparent in his insistence that "Wisdom does not inspect but behold" (*Excursions* 28).

¹⁰ John Beatty's argument about the difficulties Darwin faced in overcoming the obstacle of the definition of the term "species" reveals Darwin's use of strategies similar to those I am exploring here. Beatty describes Darwin as "distinguishing between what his fellow naturalists *called* 'species' and the non-evolutionary beliefs in which they *defined* 'species.'" This strategy is similar to Darwin's point that the work breeders do already accepts the possibility of the transmutation of species. Beatty shows how Darwin, faced with recalcitrant and theory-laden terminology, tried to find ways to work within the language rules of the naturalists he wished to reach, but also to stretch and reshape that language (266).

¹¹ Thoreau is also specifically thinking of a tree here, though he is speaking of perception generally: "The scarlet oak must, in a sense, be in your eye when you go forth. We cannot see anything until we are possessed of the idea of it" (*Journal* 11:285).

¹² In an 1853 journal entry, Thoreau had already begun to describe the role cows play in dispersing apple seeds and then in checking the growth of the trees they unwittingly helped plant (PJ 6, 142-143). He greatly expands on the episode in the essay.

¹³ The last line of Emerson's poem is: "The self-same Power that brought me there brought you."

¹⁴ See Michael West's discussion of Thoreau's "verbal vitalism," especially the "experimental impulse" of Thoreau's punning (214).

¹⁵ See, especially, the conclusion of *The Succession of Forest Trees*, where he says, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed – a, to me, equally mysterious origin for it." (*Excursions* 181).

¹⁶ The very feeling Wordsworth longs for futilely in "The world is too much with us," his famous attempt to leave his culturally shaped consciousness behind, if only for a moment.

¹⁷ See also Walls: "The Thoreauvian wild relocated the regenerative life principle from a remote place lost in primal origins to an ongoing process occurring underfoot" (*Thoreau's Sense of Place* 24). Thoreau prefers the idea of "a continual new creation" to a history that relegates all meaningful drama to the original garden/orchard.

¹⁸ In contrast with my argument, Robert Milder argues that in Thoreau's late years "the stances of the naturalist, the moralist, and the poet were all available to him" but none "seemed aesthetically and spiritually sufficient in itself, and Thoreau was at a loss how to join them" (179). He finds "Wild Apples" "the least representative" of the late essays, and with his own overall argument that "the high idea of Transcendentalism" and Thoreau's interests in science were impossible to meld.

¹⁹ In a similar vein to my argument about Thoreau's attitude toward names, John Angus Campbell goes further than most scholars writing about Darwin's rhetoric in claiming that Darwin's language is in keeping with the realism of Scottish Common Sense philosophy and uses positivist language only as a "protective coloration." He argues that, following the

Scottish philosophers, “Darwin saw nature itself as expressive. Human language [...] was a continuation of the natural expressiveness of all sentient life” (79). The historian of science Robert Richards ends his book *The Romantic Conception of Life* with an epilogue on Darwin insisting that Darwin inherited from the German Romantic tradition a sense of “the idea resident in nature.” These ideas go further than my argument about his language and set up the possibility of other connections between Thoreau and Darwin, as well as unsettling conventional readings of Darwin’s attitudes generally.

²⁰ Thoreau’s frustration over the problem of names drives him to say in his journal: “no human system is a true one and a name is at most a mere convenience and carries no information with it” (606). The meaning changes here if the word *system* rather than *human* is emphasized. No human *system* is a true one, and language in so far as it functions as a classifying system is a nominalist grid or net placed over nature. Here as elsewhere he prefers names that are connected to the land – “Spruce swamp” or “the Ermine Weazel [sic] Woods” (PJ 6, 192) and that imitate the sounds animals make – phoebe or peewee rather than Swainson’s Thrush.

²¹ John Angus Campbell argues that Darwin was “a brilliant scientist but neither iconoclast nor martyr.” He believes that Darwin felt forced to deny his philosophy of language and as a consequence “lost his ability to delight in what he beheld” (84).

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