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*Man Thinking about Nature:  
The Evolution of the Poet's Form and Function  
in the Journal of Henry David Thoreau 1837-1852*

SH Bagley  
21 April 2006



I have adhered to the OC Honor Code in the writing of this essay.

SHB

I think I could write a poem to be called "Concord." For argument I should have the River, the Woods, the Ponds, the Hills, the Fields, the Swamps and Meadows, the Streets and Buildings, and the Villagers. Then Morning, Noon, and Evening, Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, Night, Indian Summer, and the Mountains in the Horizon.<sup>1</sup>

The real question at hand with the study of any work of prose literature is not related at all to the textual contents—the who, the what and the how that comprise its narrative—but the *why*. The attempt to understand the reasons behind the events described is often undergone in conjunction with a degree of considering the author's own role or purpose in the given written endeavor. These considerations are framed in their relationship to the reader, forcing the reader to become an active participant in something which amounts to an interaction with a text. This three-step process is, at bottom, the process by which an academic studies a written work. It describes the fundamental relation of author-to-text-to-reader, and leads to one idea: at bottom, the purpose for studying a literary work is not merely to reflect upon the text itself, but the text in relation to whoever is studying it. When a reader considers the text in relation to himself, what the reader is implicitly doing is examining himself in relation to a larger meaning, a meaning which is derived from recognition of this larger system created in the relationship between text and reader.

This relationship is seen in full force in the *Journal* of Henry David Thoreau, a thirty-year chronicle of a writer trying to discover his purpose and place as a writer. This paper will consider the following questions in order to examine the text-author-reader relationship in the *Journal*: why did Thoreau write a journal in the first place? At what

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<sup>1</sup> H. D. Thoreau, *Journal* vol. I, p. 282

point in its existence did it morph from journal to *Journal*?<sup>2</sup> Was that only in retrospect? Why should we study this text? To what degree can we actually attribute to Thoreau the intention of turning his private work into a massive piece of literature? What, for that matter, *is* literature?

The vision of literary study as a relationship between author, reader and text elevates it to the mere study of books to a deeper study of the self, through relation to those things exterior to the self in question. The study of a text is a search for meaning, and often results in a greater self-understanding by the reader, because meaning is relative to he who perceives it. What I intend to consider is how this study of relation is exemplified in the *Journal* of Henry Thoreau. The text in question is not a unified body like *Walden*. Its existence as a cohesive entity is perhaps an aberration; to consider it as such, given that it was written over thirty years, would be a gross error. Therefore, this paper will consider the *Journal* as an item in flux, and given my preoccupation with the fundamental nature of literary study, will narrow its analysis to the evolution of Thoreau's meditations on what the Poet is or should be. My analysis will center on numerous excerpts from the first fifteen years of his *Journal*, 1837-1852, the years which demonstrate the clearest evolutionary stages of Thoreau's technique and ideology.

Critically, my approach will be similar to that of the genetic critics; my consideration of Thoreau's theory of writing places the idea of writing as the object to be tracked considered as it changes from manifestation to manifestation.

Simply put, I assert this: Thoreau's theories on the function and place of the Writer in the world are analogous to he who would walk through the woods; His essay,

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction here, more than a capitalization and italicization, denotes a sudden imposition of critical and literary value. When will *my* journal be studied, picked apart, analyzed for dominant imagistic trends about which I might not have even been aware?

“Walking,” serves as an ideal metaphor for the journey of the writer. Walking, just as is writing, was to Thoreau an active consideration of the self and the self’s relation to the divine world around it.

More than simply a consideration of one author’s project, ultimately by turning my attention to this particular aspect of Thoreau’s writings, I hope to consider the broader problem of why we study literature at all. Thoreau’s theories are merely the beginning. Just as he, in his *Journal*, was trying to find his place in the world, so do all authors and all readers. Reading, writing, studying—these acts are merely ciphers, just as for Transcendentalists, walking in and interacting with nature were merely ways to get in touch with the wanderer’s own soul. Thoreau believed that the writer’s purpose was to actively map out his own journey of self-discovery, so that a reader, undergoing a similar process, would have a trail to follow.

An important question to ask is why anyone would consider Thoreau’s private writings fit for study at all. The *Journal* was Thoreau’s private workbook, into which was written commentary that was, as can be expected in one’s private workbook, not for public consumption. This content is found often enough right next to content which would be lifted from their private repository and reworked for public consumption. The majority of the text, however, demonstrates neither clear mission nor clear answers. It is Thoreau talking to Thoreau about the things on Thoreau’s mind.

I believe that the inherently private nature of the *Journal* adds to it a frankness, an honesty, which a reader would not necessarily find in Thoreau’s published works, the form of which are necessarily somewhat dependent upon their inherent need to relate to a

reader exterior from Thoreau's own mind. The *Journal* was written primarily for one reader and one reader alone: its writer.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the considerations found therein are necessarily self-reflexive. The questions posed in its pages are posed to their writer, about their writer. The self-questioning nature of a text-to-reader relationship is actively demonstrated by a text whose primary relationship is to itself.

The reader of these texts finds himself in a position unique to this particular textual experience. In the study of a work of fiction, it is generally assumed that a certain degree of the text is inspired by the interiority of its author, but necessarily distanced therefrom by the cipher of its fictionalization. This is not the case in the *Journal*—its contents are in no way fiction, and their form follows no specific narrative structure. They are entries which build upon themselves as Thoreau's own consciousness evolves, and follow a structure governed only by the passage of time and increased practice of their author in the techniques of self-expression-to-self. Therefore they necessarily become meditative, self-reflexive and self-aware above all, and ultimately confront questions of the nature of the self because that is the only topic on which Thoreau can adequately meditate. The entire fifteen-year period in question becomes a portrait of the evolution of Thoreau's self-awareness in relation to the objects of his observations. The question constantly in the author's mind is how he comes to see these things, and what that particular sight serves to do. He comes to question his actions and the world around him the way a reader would question a text.

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<sup>3</sup> Though this is the case, Thoreau did choose to rework numerous passages in his private journal into essays, lectures and novels. The excerpts were naturally reworked to separate them from their original context, and not presented to their intended audience as a part of his journal.



Thoreau's philosophy, his take on Transcendentalism, is based upon Emersonian doctrine; it was, after all Emerson who first introduced Thoreau to Transcendentalism. Thoreau was most inspired by Emerson's assertion that the Poet was "the Namer, or Language-maker."<sup>4</sup> This assertion creates the transcendental Poet as one who manages to walk the line between Nature and Society—the Poet is a being living in the Natural World who, at least through his words, continues to relate to and interact with the others. The Poet was the Transcendental equivalent of a preacher, whose purpose it was to articulate what Emerson names Beauty, his analog to communion with God. It was the act of writing about Nature, and about the communion with it, that made it real, made it relative to the rest of the world. It's as though writing it down brought Nature's Beauty into the human world. Emerson claimed that a Poet was a liberating god: "They are free, and they make free."<sup>5</sup>

The notion of *making* free is a fundamental aspect of Thoreau's own work. On one level this sentence articulates the idea that Poets do liberate their readers—their status as liberating Gods presupposes someone that is liberated by their efforts, an audience, necessarily effected by the act of reading. The Poet is free of society's fetters, social constraints, petty interactions with superficial people; and the poet makes free by the power of his work over its reader. Thus, when Thoreau, in the first sentence of "Walking," evokes his intention to speak a word for Nature, Absolute Freedom and Wildness, it can be seen that these three things, all placed on the same level, are in fact not only equal in import but also exactly the same. When a Poet makes free, he is literally *creating* Nature. Nature is recreated in the text: that's the value of a Poet.

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<sup>4</sup> Emerson, p. 187

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 194

Emerson's words were essential for his beginning, but only as a framework. They started Thoreau's project off, but ultimately it became something different: an active engagement with the world as a text, and the reader became a man walking through that world, to better understand his own place in it.

The *Journal's* self-reflexive quality and underpinning question of the relation of its writer to the world around him crave a critical model. This model can be found in Thoreau's essay, "Walking," one of the final essays Thoreau was to write. Its clear understanding of what it means to take a walk represents a summary understanding of his project as a Transcendentalist, and should therefore necessarily be considered not only as my own artificially-imposed model for the sake of this essay, but also the most accurate portrait of what he was trying to impart to his readers throughout his years as a writer. In brief, the essay states that a walk in Nature, performed in the fashion of the Transcendentalists, is no mere stroll. It is in fact an active, cognitive, self-reflexive saunter which creates between walker and nature a relation identical to the relation between reader and text. The walker observes, considers and studies nature in order to see himself in comparison thereto, a vision which delineates both what the world exterior to the walker is and what, therefore, the interior world of the walker is, and how these two aspects affect one another.

Thoreau's walks eventually became more than a simple Transcendental exercise performed at the bequest of Emerson, just as the writings eventually became more than just studies of Goethe or Wordsworth and a student's meditation on deep thought. The walks became an act of meditation, of true communion with Nature, and the *Journal* mirrored that same transformation, to become a catalogue of Thoreau's every communion



with Nature, painting the world as a series of phenomena, a constant stream of divine Beauty. The excursion becomes “a succession of confrontations with nature, from each of which the observer is expected to extract as much as he can,”<sup>6</sup> which is, in turn, assumed to present the Transcendentalist with as much otherness as possible. The more Thoreau considers Nature, the more he is in fact considering himself, his self.

To walk is to view, to immerse oneself in the world of Nature. Thoreau believes that a good book can lead to such an immersion, and specifies as much in the essay. Such a book “is something natural, and as unexpectedly and unaccountably fair and perfect, as a wild-flower discovered on the prairies of the West, or the jungles of the East.”<sup>7</sup> The book is *natural*, characteristic of the same simple, elemental divinity found in the woods. The best kind of book establishes a connection between reader and text not unlike the most perfect of visions in Nature; it reminds a reader of the greater power working on the other side of the tapestry, that side of the world which is the complement to the material and tactile aspect of it with which people interact, the metaphysical underpinnings unifying everything with a spiritual force.

Just as a walk in nature, the act of writing is a process of discovery—a journey through a given thought or idea, in which Thoreau examines each detail of it as meticulously as possible, to better understand the way it works and the way he relates to it. The act of writing, the use of language, becomes for Thoreau analogous to his scientific examinations and catalogues of Concord’s flora. Language serves not only as a signifier for a particular object, “tree,” for instance, but as a deeply involved and complicated series of symbols, metaphors and referrals. His records therefore are

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<sup>6</sup> Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism*, p. 205

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

transfigured: in a way not only is he writing words down, but symbolically elevating natural objects into supernatural symbols, celestial or divine representations existing in the mind.

“We hug the earth—how rarely we mount!” he says. Climb a tree, he says. Get higher—see the world a different way. This exhortation is a call to recognize the elevating nature of language. If reading is one form of self-recognition, then writing is a different, if not even more metaphysical, technique: reading, sauntering, is an interaction with the spiritual world, whereas to write is to create such a world. The word is a symbol, just as an object is a symbol, for a metaphysical antecedent. To write is to connect yourself even more intimately with Nature by way of a manipulation thereof. This is where the status of the Poet as ‘Namer’ and ‘Language-maker’ is so elevated: to name is to define and therefore create, by manifest awareness of the relationship of thing to that which names it. A name is a recognition of a linguistic connection.

At the close of the essay, the idea of Thoreau’s ‘border life’ first appears. He states that he lives ‘on the confines of a world, into which I make occasional and transient forays only.’<sup>8</sup> The world of which he speaks is not the world of Nature, but of Society. Thoreau feels, because of his walks, connected enough to Nature that to end a walk is not to return home but to leave home. The Walker<sup>9</sup> is one who can be transported “to another land than is described in their owners’ deeds,” removed entirely from the physical sphere, or that physical sphere, just by leaving the confines of the cultivated world. It’s this transportation that’s most important to the Walking-as-writing model: the transportation created by a total removal from Society is, in the larger context of Thoreau’s project,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> the capital letter is Thoreau’s.

analogous or perhaps *equal* to the mental transcendence which occurs when one is a reader “in a high sense” or a Poet in the Transcendental use of the word.

It is this aspect of the essay that one must take away from the model that I’m proposing as key to Thoreau’s project. Walking as Thoreau would demand of the reader means an active meditation and a constant interaction with the world around the walker—a give-and-take between the woods and he who would walk through them. Interacting with a text requires a similar give-and-take. Analysis, even creation of a text, requires that the author or thinker be keenly aware of his own influences, his own prejudices, his own constraints when beginning to analyze or write. The goal of a textual interaction is the same as a walk in the woods: discovery. About the text (the woods) and about oneself. Thoreau viewed himself in relation to Nature just as he viewed himself in relation to that which he read and that which he wrote. Writing is an active consideration not just of what you want to convey to the reader, but who you are and how you present ideas, your language, your Nature to the world outside yourself.

## *The Critics*

Thoreauvian critics formed the basis of an analytical perspective from which to approach the text. Primarily, they are Scott Slovic, H. Daniel Peck, Sharon Cameron and Larry Buell. Their inclusion in these pages is key because of the way our approaches differ. Where they each attempt to analyze the entire text as a unified body, ignoring, by and large, the constant evolution inherent in the thirty years of its continuation, I make the text's evolution my primary focus. The critics in question each attempt to attribute to the *Journal* a single driving theme, which given the inherent qualities of the text as a work constantly in flux is impossible. I cannot condone a single, reductive reading of the entire *Journal*, because it is not a work written for that purpose. Their unspoken assertion is that the *Journal* can be analyzed the way a unified, crafted, published work can be. This assertion makes little sense. It neglects to consider the ways in which the project—assuming there *is* a project—and its purpose—assuming there *is* a purpose—changed over time. A diary, according to genetic theory, “cannot be understood as a trajectory governed by a project.”<sup>10</sup>

The theories of Peck and Slovic are best considered one alongside the other. They both deal with the *Journal* as a record of Thoreau's ongoing self-perception as a being in a greater context, but in divergent ways. Peck's primary assertion was that Thoreau's *Journal*, in sum, was a “book of memory,”<sup>11</sup> pointing to Thoreau's assertion that his journal should be a “record of all your joy, your ecstasy.”<sup>12</sup> Peck asserts that the visions that Thoreau catalogued were deliberately selected ‘phenomena,’ whose summary elevated Concord as a physical manifestation of Thoreau's metaphysical perception. The

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<sup>10</sup> Lejeune, p. 207

<sup>11</sup> Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work*, p. 43

<sup>12</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, v. IV, p. 223

town was *rewritten* to serve Thoreau's authorial intent. He would assert that the *Journal* build to a single purpose, perhaps best exemplified by Thoreau's entry on 4 September, 1841, in which the desire to write "a poem to be called "Concord,"" is voiced.<sup>13</sup> This poem creates a divine, poetic representation of the entirety of Thoreau's surroundings. The function of the *Journal* according to Peck's assertion is not to elevate Thoreau's interiority, rather demonstrates the elevation of the world around him.

Slovic presents a similarly perceived awareness of the Natural World's divinity but does it in such a way that emphasizes Thoreau's active role in the manifestation of this divinity. To Slovic, the *Journal* is "an exploration of Thoreau's mental processes, processes which coincide intermittently with those of the outside world."<sup>14</sup> He presents Thoreau's persistent engagement with his function as a poet in context with the *Journal's* ongoing catalogue and posits that viewed together these two seemingly disparate elements combine to create Nature as a mirror through which Thoreau considers himself—perhaps his *self*—and the *Journal* as a record of that self-examination.

Thoreau's mind is a context for Nature—by perceiving it, he gives it a place—just as Nature is a context for his mind, by being outside of Thoreau's mental processes. Slovic's analysis, it follows, necessarily also acknowledges the idea of Thoreau's 'border life,' as is discussed in "Walking:" that curious position in which Thoreau finds himself of being simultaneously of Society and Nature. The *Journal* is also persistently liminal, being a catalogue of the relationship between the Self and the Not-Self. This dichotomy, Slovic concludes, ultimately is summarized in the notion that Thoreau's *Journal* served as an ongoing consideration of its author's place in the world.

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<sup>13</sup> Thoreau, *Journal* vol. 1, p. 282

<sup>14</sup> Slovic, *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, p. 21



Cameron presents the *Journal* as an internalization of Nature, one to which Thoreau arrives by freeing himself from engagement with the world of Society entirely: Thoreau immersed himself in Nature in order to identify where Nature stops and he begins. The *Journal*'s relation to Thoreau follows his relation to Nature: it functions as an extension of his life, a textualization of his life. Cameron's assertions on the function of the *Journal* move toward claiming that it is in fact a self-portrait, or perhaps a picture of the workings of Thoreau's mind—an analysis which suggests even more active portrait of Thoreau's interiority than that of Slovic's own theory. She asserts that ultimately Thoreau is not discussing any nature other than his own, human nature, by considering it in the context of its surroundings. Thoreau's perception, his active choice in what he perceives and the way he imparts this perception to the page, are an externalization of his mentality onto the world around him<sup>15</sup> That process is a recognition of his own otherness.

So long as the perceiver is self-aware there can be no true unity. Thoreau's mind is *always* there to perceive Nature around him. Cameron's theory of what the *Journal* is serves as an answer to that problem by marrying that which is perceived—Nature—to he who perceives—Thoreau—therefore making the crucial element of the *Journal* the ongoing dialogue between the two separate entities.

This is not only an answer to a reductive summary of Thoreau's entire *Journal* but also an answer significant to the over-arching question of this thesis: writers write and students study literature because through these acts they are able to see their selves in sharper relief. The rest of this paper will be spent considering how Thoreau's project to that end—that is, the ongoing evaluation of his place as a writer, perceiver, cataloguer, walker, manifests and changes between 1837 and 1852.

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<sup>15</sup> Cameron, p. 38-39



### *The Journal*

The critics previously discussed approach the *Journal* as a thematically unified endeavor, which lends the reader's response to it a false sense of purpose specifically with regards to a message or theme of the work. There's no overarching theme save that of Thoreau's own self-consideration throughout his entire writing career. In a text such as this one, the reader must consider, rather than the end product, the way in which the text evolved as Thoreau wrote it. My analysis of this evolution will focus on Thoreau's thoughts on Poetry and the Poet, tracking not only what these considerations mean on their own but also how they develop and change as Thoreau's *Journal* progresses. I wonder, in what way does this attitude evolve, and what ultimately does that say about the place of the writer in the Natural world? What does that say about students of literature in general?

The critics' analyses are not false, but their approach presupposes a degree of unify throughout the entire text which simply could not be there. Their analyses dance around the issue of the *Journal*'s evolution, either not dealing directly with the changing faces of the text or writing those changes off as the byproduct of some memorialization of the passage of time. What the *Journal* is, ultimately, is an ongoing meditation on the relationship of language to Nature, and through that, a meditation on the relationship between human agent—locutor, writer, reader, thinker—and the wider metaphysical world. These considerations will amount to the rest of this paper, referring to the “Walking” model already described as well as critical works throughout.

At the beginning of the text, Thoreau was just out of college, working with Emerson, a man whom he greatly admired. Thoreau's *Journal* grew from studious and self-conscious to lyrical and transcendent over the course of its genesis, and it is that genesis with which, ultimately, I am concerned. Looking specifically at the first couple of entries, one thing becomes clear: The notion of journaling hadn't really occurred to Thoreau yet as something altogether *key*. The first entry, 22 October 1837<sup>16</sup>, is very simple. In its entirety it reads as follows:

Oct 22, 1837: "What are you doing now?" He asked. "Do you keep a journal?" So I make my first entry today.<sup>17</sup>

One cannot consider this anything other than what it is: an introduction. It speaks to Thoreau's directionlessness: it only makes sense that he would start the journal by Emerson's request. Its first entry is simply that—a statement of a beginning. Too often critics present Thoreau's *Journal* as a single, unified body, as one would consider a novel. Though later on, Thoreau develops the style, subject matter and representative mode of the work, for its first three years, the entries were more often than not aphoristic, boiled-down meditations on a single subject. The thing was a book of individual ideas, a catalogue of definitions of these ideas. That's how the project started—the identification and establishment of Transcendentalist principles as they applied to Thoreau's life.

Key to the first number of months of Thoreau's journal is the process by which he comes to consider these principles. There appears to be no overarching structure or clear intention in the earliest entries of the *Journal*. If there were such an organizing principle, it would follow that Thoreau would not necessarily write a single aphorism on a given

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<sup>16</sup> Thoreau is, at this point, twenty years old.

<sup>17</sup> The *Journal of Thoreau*, volume 1, p. 3

subject—Truth, for example—twice in eight days; instead he would more likely have combined the entries.

The entries on Truth are given only that single word for a heading. On November 5<sup>th</sup> Thoreau writes “Truth strikes us from behind, and in the dark, as well as from before and in broad daylight.” Eight days later, “Truth is ever returning into herself. I glimpse one feature to-day, another to-morrow; and the next day they are blended.”<sup>18</sup> These entries, on their own, are not considered anything but part of the bigger picture by the critics—but on their own they serve their own function, as the first example of Thoreau’s active, ongoing process of thought and rethought, evolutionary simply by the active tendency to return to a given idea and mull it over again and again. Especially early on, Thoreau is concerned with perfectly defining his system.

These examples of the two early definitions of Truth demonstrate a key aspect of Thoreau’s earliest entries: they attempt to lay the groundwork, the definitions, for the system of perception that Thoreau simultaneously constructs and actively considers. The young Thoreau had just set down to start working on his journal, and the early entries reflect, if nothing else, a studious self-awareness. The “lifework” that Peck sees has not yet come about, because the life at work here is just beginning—no picture of the future was possible, but there’s little doubt that Thoreau knew that a beginning should serve just that way—as a beginning for something larger. The earliest entries are almost the most ambitious: who in their right mind would attempt to define Truth not only once but twice? Why would you need to define Truth twice except for a realization of a need for greater depth? Is not the purpose of journaling a self-reflective discourse on Truth?

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 9

Truth, in 1837, was everywhere, to Thoreau. These two entries define Truth as a ubiquitous thing, striking both at night and in the daytime, from before and from behind. Truth is also ever-evolving. Truth is something in which Thoreau finds himself immersed. Or, at least, it's that in which he *claims* to be immersed. Slovic suggests that Thoreau's early entries found Thoreau "posturing, merely posing as a writer, [...] only to deceive himself," if only to eventually become that which he pretends to be.<sup>19</sup> Slovic's assertion suggests, also, that Thoreau was testing the boundaries of his nascent Transcendentalist self, trying to establish his voice as a writer. Why else would he so transparently, deliberately, meditate on the grandest of philosophical problems?

Like any student of literary study, the twenty-year-old Thoreau used his writing at least on one level to figure out where he stood in the field. If this idea and the 'lifework' assertion share one thing, it's that the 'posturing' is just as much a transcription of his life through his work, but a different stage of it. If the *Journal* functions as an illustration of the mind of its writer, then the 'posing' can only be the shaky start of an unsure student, laying down the terms for what would become a grand project. Slovic's inability to consider the 'posing' as anything but that points to his own inability to recognize the stages in Thoreau's development. Any author's works cannot be considered as a unit without a clear picture of the functions of their disparate parts.

On the fifth of March, 1838 Thoreau's self-questioning begins in earnest. Four months into his journal and he expresses a key question: what is the point of the journaling? He laments:

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<sup>19</sup> Slovic, p. 58

What is now scribbled in the heat of the moment one can contemplate with somewhat of satisfaction, but alas! To-morrow—aye, to-night, it is stale, flat, unprofitable,—in fine, is not, only its shell remains, like some red parboiled lobster-shell which, kicked aside never so often, still stares you in the path.<sup>20</sup>

The title of this section is ‘WHAT TO DO,’ and, phrased as such, has numerous possible meanings. What is this passage expressing? As the entries are written, aphoristic and superficially ‘deep’ as they might seem to their author, no doubt they are granted more value or merit than they deserve. Thoreau is lamenting his own superficiality: these entries are useless, and it says nothing. The realization of that fact, though, is useful in one respect: he recognizes the text’s inherent call for value more than he was putting into it. His failure in that regard, rather than the entry’s inherent usefulness as demonstrative of where his journal could go, is what sticks with him. Read either way, the early sentiment is expressive of a desire to make something greater with his *Journal*, rather than just record his aphorisms as they come to him.

Two days later the solution to his text’s supposed uselessness comes to him: Thoreau defines Composition as not an analysis of thought, but a representation of it. The act of writing must, “keeping the pen even and parallel with the current, make an accurate transcript of [thoughts].”<sup>21</sup> This is an idea which ultimately stayed with Thoreau for his entire project—his *Journal* was at that point created not as a book analyzing a problem, idea or theme (as was *Walden* or any other work written with the intent to explore a single idea) but instead as an ongoing picture of Thoreau’s mind. The text here for the first time demonstrates Thoreau’s ultimate goal: to create for the reader a perfect, unadulterated image of the writer’s mental landscape. The reliance on *impulse*, too, is key

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<sup>20</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, volume 1, p. 34

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 35



to note, because the very word supposes a removal of the Societal middleman that interprets, clouds, the meaning of a text. Why write a text bogged down with elaborate mental rationalizations, asks Thoreau, when the text can become as simple and straightforward a picture of thoughts by representing them as honestly as possible? Thoughts, composition, truth, all then become all the more *natural*, something in which the man attuned to Nature is immersed. The poet, Thoreau begins to see, plays a unique roll in this immersion.

The earliest definition of the Poet that Thoreau commits to his journal portrays the poet as simultaneously of and above Nature: Supernatural. In touch with the world around him but, because of the leap between a given concept and the articulation of that concept, the poet is necessarily removed therefrom. Nature, he writes, “will not speak through but along with him. His voice will not proceed from her midst, but, breathing on her, will make her the expression of his thought.”<sup>22</sup> The poet, here categorized as *not* the voice of Nature? In “Walking,” Thoreau very explicitly states the opposite: his voice is the voice of Nature. This passage would suggest the opposite—Nature as representative of his mind. The natural world would therefore be relegated to a cipher, a series of live-in metaphors that mirror the thought of whoever would interact with them. Is this so bad? Is this such a belittling, though? This sentiment is a clear reference to the Transcendentalists’ claiming of Kant’s *a priori* perceptive mode—here reflected in Thoreau’s understanding that whatever he evokes from the Natural World will not flow therefrom but be, instead, the result of some process on his part. The Poet in that respect is beginning to take shape as one who is intimately tied to Nature—as Thoreau’s project

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 74



develops the kinship between poetic expression and natural phenomena become increasingly tied.

Thoreau's first meditation on the Poet is crucial to consider, because looking at the progression of his theories is dependent upon an understanding about what he believed he represented at the beginning of his work. Granted, before this entry had been created, Thoreau had been writing in his journal for a year and a half. During that time, though, the vast majority of his entries seemed to talk around the exact intent of his endeavor, and the entry on the Poet serves to initially galvanize Thoreau into considering his journal a book with a specific concern. A book of meditations it very well could have turned out to be, had Thoreau not become so immersed in the world that Emerson showed him. By the time the entry on March 3, 1839 is written, Thoreau's mission becomes clear to him, clear enough that a definition is warranted. The Poet is, at least at the beginning of Thoreau's career, one for whom Nature is a mode of expression. However, the Poet is also "Nature's brother," thinking from another, separate world. That Thoreau already recognized a mutuality, in which "each publishes the other's truth," serves to foreshadow the deepening relationship with Nature that Thoreau was beginning to experience. To identify the Poet with Nature is not to suggest a relationship of definition—the Poet, Thoreau knew even then, was clearly not of Nature—but instead, even at this juncture in his life, to begin to express the liminality between Society and Nature that Thoreau would call his 'border life,' in "Walking."

This relationship is fleshed out when considered in conjunction with some early meditations on what Poetry is. The final entry in the *Journal* to be superseded by a heading, "Poetry" of January 26<sup>th</sup>, 1840, features an odd definition, in that it begins by

delineating what a definition of Poetry is not. Poetry cannot be defined without the use of itself. It is a more natural, purer use of language, one which Thoreau sees as freed from the constructed world and a more basic, elemental utterance than prose ever could be. Poetry is “all that we do not know,”<sup>23</sup> he writes. This only makes sense if we consider knowledge to be constructed: it is something accumulated, taught, propagated by the world of man. Book-learning, the product of an educational system with which Thoreau was disenchanted. To suggest that Poetry can only be comprehended as something which is not at all of our frame of reference is more or less to say that as long as the reader is still caught up in Society he will not understand what it is to read or write poetry. This sentiment refers directly back to the idea in “Walking” that the only way to go on a walk is to have removed your ties to society completely: “if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man; then you are ready for a walk.”<sup>24</sup> Poetry is only accessible to those who have been liberated.

To write it, then—did Thoreau see that as a freedom? A freedom from what? Society, surely. More than that, though, poetry is liberty from all bounds. After the first three years or so of his project, Thoreau’s focus began to shift, and took on a new, deeper direction. Thoreau’s early musings— from 1837 to roughly three years later—were geared to try to figure out what he was doing, specifically what he was doing as a Transcendentalist. They were, metaphorically speaking, intended to orient himself in the field. The subsequent entries, once the definitions of his project were all laid out, took on the task of studying this new philosophical landscape in which he found himself. Even before he builds his cabin on the pond his mind was breaking away from Society and its

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<sup>23</sup> HDT, *Journal* v1 p. 114

<sup>24</sup> Thoreau, “Walking”

construction. Poetry, and the Poet, are uniquely removed from this constructed world, as their interests lie in a discourse of the mind.

Thoreau was beginning to become caught up in this removal from all things material, all things that distinguish himself from the natural world around him. To be a poet is to take a walk, but not in the active sense of the verb, 'take.' One must not reach out, metaphorically speaking, and grab that attempt at communing with Nature. In the essay, Thoreau warns against objectification of the woods, and in poetry, the same idea applies. One must not take a walk into the woods thinking to oneself about the destination—the woods—because to place the woods in that sort of mental frame of reference prevents the walker's mind from freedom. Thinking of the woods as 'woods' holds their otherness in relief, identifying them as not-Society, which prevents their existence to be freed from society's influence. Linguistically, closer in relation to the nature of poetry, to apply the human term 'woods' to the woods does a similar disservice to the natural world. Thoreau's goal in poetry is to break out of society's shackles by way of eliminating its relation to language itself.

A word, he says, in an entry from July 27, 1840, "is wiser than any man, than any series of words." This entry is absolutely essential to understanding the redefined direction of his *Journal* after its first three years. It continues:

In its present received sense it may be false, but in its inner sense by decent and analogy it approves itself. Language is the most perfect work of art in the world. The chisel of a thousand years retouches it.<sup>25</sup>

What is in this sentiment that throws the relationship of man to language to Nature in such sharp relief? Language is elevated to an art. How does Thoreau conceive of

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, *Journal*, volume 1, p. 172

language? Symbols. Words, really, are just euphemisms for Natural concepts. This is a sentiment right out of Emerson's "The Poet," and it is an idea which profoundly influenced Thoreau's later entries. This entry points to Thoreau's new inward direction; rather than understand the relationship of his externality to the world, the recognition of language as separate from him, older, and deeper, and profoundly natural, points to a self-questioning direction. No longer is he orienting himself, writing off aphorisms about Truth or Beauty or Facts. Instead, these concepts good and internalized, his new question becomes how are each of these things represented in the world? The apparent conclusion that words are natural creations, part of nature, is key for him, because no longer is any poet separated from Nature at all—language, his art, is an extension of the supernatural sphere that Transcendentalism attempts to comprehend. Words, here, like people, have both an outer and an inner sense. The distinction between its received sense and its inner sense demonstrates the idea that each act of transfer between interlocutors is a sort of translation. Natural concepts—"tree," are understood to be themselves. What is a tree but a tree? The word, "tree," stands for the thing, but to each person engaging that word, it means something different. Therefore the "received sense" of the tree is inherently different from the original intent of the word. Translation—perhaps, translocation—is a *change*.

Any time language is used, any time a word is written, it becomes a symbol for something else. In that way, Thoreau's cataloguing of what Peck refers to as "phenomena," echoing Thoreau's own terminology, then, is a reimagining of the world in Thoreau's own desired image. What does Peck mean by "phenomenon"? In his estimation, the word refers to the "active reconciliation of the creative eye with the independent

status of the world.”<sup>26</sup> In plain language, a phenomenon is perceived when a natural act is elevated by way of interpretation. It is a marriage of Thoreau’s own *a priori* picture of the world and the world around him. To Peck this is a key aspect of Thoreau’s *Journal*—Thoreau’s ongoing representation of phenomena on the page points to a specifically collective agenda. Thoreau, according to Peck, was collecting these phenomena in order to continually consider the boundaries between object and mind, and the merging of the two. The *Journal*, in that respect, becomes a constant stream of interpretation, of, in a way, translation—from Thing (tree) to word (‘tree’) to mental image of the tree. In that genesis of a mental image is the beauty of the world found: an elevated thing is created which depends upon the poet’s intercession.

This is the beginning of the second phase of Thoreau’s project, ultimately: the realization of the Poet’s function in general, as interpreter between fantastic and material. The *Journal*’s focus shifts from definition to exploration—declarative sentences give way to implications, simile, attractions. Good writing, says Thoreau, “will be obedience to conscience. There must not be a particle of will or whim mixed with it. If we can listen, we shall hear.”<sup>27</sup> If we *can listen*. We is both Society and, more specifically, writers. Writers, this assertion implies, are not all gifted with the comprehension of the deeper world. “If” is an incredibly strong word because it introduces an element of doubt into this new phase which mirrors, curiously, the entry from 1838, “WHAT TO DO,” in which Thoreau compares his project, as he then comprehended it, to be potentially as empty, used-up, as a lobster-husk. The “if” in this later assertion reflects yet again the sense of doubt, but not only his own personal doubt—not simply, ‘perhaps what I am doing is

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<sup>26</sup> Peck, p. 68

<sup>27</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, Vol. 1, p. 177



useless'—but instead doubt about the entire profession of writing. The solution? The *inner voice*. Thoreau returns the reader of his *Journal*, perhaps himself, to the inner sense of words, only, this time, the whole of Nature can vocalize, and does, and it's up to the writer to be aware of that, and through that awareness of the inner voice, "reinststate ourselves on the pinnacle of humanity."

Journaling, then, is elevated from a daily rant about simple events, elevated from pithy commentary or tinny descriptions of the natural world, and toward a self-aware, self-elevating re-vision of the world described. The precariousness of the status of the writer—"if," the doubt of our abilities, and "can" also, speaking to the doubt once more (the sentence is not written "if we listen," as if to say that no presupposition can be made)—is critically balanced and in jeopardy. If one were to stop listening to Nature, one's elevation would be ruined. A writer, like Emerson in "The Transcendentalist," must actively seek out Nature in order to open oneself to Nature's influence, take an active role in a sort of renunciation of the self's pull away from the elevated world, like the walker who knows that he must not objectify the woods. Thoreau's act of Journaling is elevated to a documentation of that ongoing consideration of his own place, his own precariousness, his own responsibility to remain open to Nature's voice.

Thoreau treads an interesting line with this meditation. Still not a master craftsman, he spends time considering language's techniques not only on an abstract level (like that of the inner sense of words) but also on the level of trying to hammer out the way regular, quotidian linguistic tools such as similes factor into this grand interpretive function. He writes, "the unpretending truth of a simile implies sometimes such distinctness in the conception as only experience could have supplied. If [a writer] knows



what it was, he will know what it was like.”<sup>28</sup> That is to say, simile only properly works for someone who can comprehend the methodology behind the imagery. Were I to assert, “a tree is like the veins of the earth,” the power of the simile is, for me, dependent upon understanding why I chose that image. In a way the act of using a simile is analogous to the choosing of a specific word to delineate a given concept—the way the word is chosen will alter the way the audience reacts and comprehends that word.

The shift starting to occur in these entries, through 1841 is one in which Thoreau goes from actual material descriptions to metaphorical considerations. Slowly, his function as a writer is becoming clear to him. February of that year saw two major revelatory conclusions—on the one hand, the *Journal* is an active communion with the divine within Nature, and on the other, each aspect of the entry produced comes *directly* from the writer. He writes, “my journal is that of me which would else spill over and run to waste, gleanings from the field which in action I reap. I must not live from it, but in it for the gods,”<sup>29</sup> and “the author’s character is read from title-page to end. Of this he never corrects the proofs.”<sup>30</sup> If the author is so present in his work, unable to be divorced from it<sup>31</sup> then everything that the author writes in the text can be assumed to be analogous to his frame-of-reference—the question of intentionality would necessarily have to intercede to demystify this transfigurative vision of what the author is. According to these passages, the author is almost just a cipher for the ideas or images present in the text. It would simultaneously eliminate and force the hand of intentionality: the reader would at once have to acknowledge that Thoreau himself, assuming he was writing in the proper

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<sup>28</sup> Thoreau, *Journal* V. 1, p. 193

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 207

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 225

<sup>31</sup> Thoreau’s assertions would seem to suggest that the author and the text are one and the same entity, insofar as perceptions are inseparable from their perceiver.

Transcendentalist mode, sacrificed his agency to the power of Nature. At the same time, if the character of the author is to be assumed present throughout the entire text, then it must be assumed that everything about the *Journal* is meticulously put together. The hyperbolic assumption of a unified project, present from start to finish, must be correct. In either case, the author's status as a simultaneously Natural and Social entity still stands. Everything embodied by the *inner sense* of the words he put into the *Journal* and the natural world itself, in a way, lies on one side of the border that the author treads, where the intentionality, the author's vision and daily life all embody the side of the *Journal* that comes from Thoreau's material, physical aspect.

Thoreau's own presence in the text is minimal—often the entries do not include the first person pronoun except to demonstrate what Thoreau saw in the world or thinks in reference to a given abstract concept. In a way, the catalogues of natural phenomena were lists of Thoreau's own self-perceptions: noting that which he observed is in a way noting that he observed at all. Peck asserts that Thoreau's attention to Nature was focused on “natural objects whose structures and design suggested symbolic meaning,”<sup>32</sup> that is to say that Thoreau's entries textualize a world that he himself read as a text. The act of creating out of natural objects a sort of spiritual meaning is a key aspect of the first years of the *Journal*: such an act demonstrates Thoreau's interiority and his intent. The act of seeing—or in a way attributing—a meaning to the world around him serves not only to elevate the forest around him as he walks through it but also to create a dialogue with himself over the metaphysical truth of the world around him. To walk through Nature, as “Walking” demonstrates, is in fact an act of devotion: the true walker, the saunterer, becomes a *saint terror* or a *sans terror*, one who attributes to the land a divinity and one

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<sup>32</sup> Peck, p. 50

who is equally at home no matter where he goes. The descriptive aspect of the *Journal* becomes Thoreau's presence: we see what he sees, because he commits it to paper in that fashion, and that cipher creates out of the world a constant stream of divine energy. The reader reads the *Journal* the way Thoreau reads Nature, simply because of the way the text is constructed.

In the elevation of the world around him, the text becomes an active consideration of the world's metaphysical nature. Thoreau's text drops the entry titles as its main theme becomes the relation of text to its author. The profusion of such thoughts, still early on, leads up to his time at Walden Pond, which should be considered, ultimately, as an interior journey: Thoreau retreated from society into his cabin in order to *write*. That immersion into the natural world is directly related to Thoreau's need to immerse himself in the textualization of the same world. Therefore, Thoreau's consistent meditation on what the Poet is supposed to do, or what writing is or should be, is a consideration of how he himself fits in with the rest of the world. Thoreau, through this consideration, casts himself as an outsider looking into a system: taking a step back from the occupation of 'Poet' in order to establish its systematic manifestation the same way the saunterer is simultaneously removed from and immersed in the Natural World: the immersion comes from a constant *mental* engagement.

Thoreau's walks, after all, are walks not guided by the feet or even the mind but a conscious self-renunciation to the forces of Nature themselves. The writer makes it his job to be aware of this odd relation, and catalogue it, as Thoreau explains in an entry from 1841: "Let us wander where we will, the universe is built around us, and we are

central still.”<sup>33</sup> This sentiment emphasizes the Poet’s place as interpreter and the force of his perception. The idea of the universe being built around its viewer is just an illustration of Thoreau’s ability to perceive and therefore to construct. For anyone else, the universe would not appear concave in reference to Thoreau, but in reference to the perceiver’s own active comprehension of the image in question. This is a question of relation, of the poet’s place in the world.<sup>34</sup> The thing is, that this relation is not a single relation or a single perception of relation persistently repeated over days, weeks, months, decades, but instead an ongoing reconsideration or reaffirmation of the difference between the self and the world surrounding the self. If Thoreau had come to a conclusion about his place, about the place of the Poet, within the natural world, then the recurring meditations on the difference between observer and observation would not be necessary: Thoreau would have had his answer.

Thoreau never stopped considering this relationship for the same reason he never stopped going on walks in the woods, and the same reason he never stopped writing in his *Journal*. The act of meditation itself became for him a key function of the purpose of the writer. The recognition of that function comes for Thoreau probably around the time he retreats to Walden Pond,<sup>35</sup> because there his entries become less about the Poet and more about the *word*. The years that Thoreau spent at the pond forever changed his project: notwithstanding having given his project a published, unitary, singular face in the

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<sup>33</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. 1, p. 274

<sup>34</sup> Cameron, p. 16

<sup>35</sup> The years 1845-49 are ostensibly the four years from which much of the material for *Walden* was culled, a fact indicated only by the preponderance of footnotes identifying passages from the *Journal* which appear in the final book. Delineated in the 1906 *Riverside Thoreau*, the core of the Walden period (1845-47) is found in a separate notebook, included as Volume 1, chapter 8 of the collection.

novel<sup>36</sup> that resulted from these years, the time at the pond brought Thoreau closer to Nature than he had ever been. It made him more attuned to his own mental processes, and prompted in him a much more active journalistic spirit. This can be seen not only in the nature of his entries that he wrote while at the pond, but from an empirical perspective simply by considering the *amount* he wrote in his *Journal* after that time. The first volume of the *Riverside*, for instance, covers the first decade of his project, where the second volume, of equal length, covers only twenty-one months.<sup>37</sup>

If anything, his time at Walden made it harder for Thoreau to come to a conclusion about the place of the writer. His 'border life' was thrown ever more in relief by the visitors that he had while at the pond: they were instances of the Societal world, invading what became a constructed, but perfectly so, union between the Poet and Nature. His forced interaction with them, at least on the page, throws his liminality into stark relief: without their presence the aspects of his existence not explicitly Natural—those parts of him exterior from his mind, I suppose—need be utilized, whereas when he is free of social interaction his being can be focused on his interiority.

Once at Walden his mind turned inward. Immersed in nature, he consequently became immersed in his self, and able to pick apart the mechanics of his relation to the outside world. In a way, the end result of the Walden period was a comprehension of the function of going for a walk. Not preoccupied with turning away from Nature as one does when a walk is ended, Thoreau's sauntering was perpetually at the highest connection with the natural world that occurs at the height of a walk. The hours he spent walking and the transcendent relationship that occurred during that time are textually linked through

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<sup>36</sup> I consider *Walden* a novel because of its fictionalized structure. Its nonfiction counterpart is found in the *Journal* from the time he spent by the pond.

<sup>37</sup> From January 1850 to September 1851



the ongoing, comprehensive and truly cognizant meditation that occurred throughout the entire Walden Period. As a result of this achievement, the much-deepened connection with Nature stayed with Thoreau for the rest of his project. It was an awakening to the true depth of his meditation.

Three key entries from 1845 reflect this depth, and identify a greatly clarified understanding of what the word itself was and could do. The interval between written word and spoken language is one of permanence: spoken word is “transient, a sound, a tongue [...] natural and convenient.” The written word, however, is “divine and instructive” in its permanence. Committing a word down to paper, to Thoreau, was analogous to placing a star in the sky: stars “are written words and stereotyped on the blue parchment of the skies,” which ultimately stand for the purest celestial ideas. Words are ‘above’ utterances, characterized as clouds which, though “genial, refreshing with their showers and gratifying with their tints,” serve to obstruct the true power of the word.<sup>38</sup>

The word’s status as “the most perfect work of human art,” given its ultimate translatability. Once a thing is committed to paper in one language, argues Thoreau, it can be recreated in any other: it is permanent and therefore able to be limitlessly disseminated. The writer, then, creates a document simultaneously of the past—by definition, the *Journal* itself, any journal, is a document of events or visions that already happened—present, as manifested in the act of committing events to paper, which is not only a transcription but also an interpretation and metaphoricization, and ultimately elevation, and future: I, in 2006, am reading and writing about the visions transcribed by

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<sup>38</sup> Thoreau, *Journal* vol. 1, p. 369



a man over a hundred and fifty years ago. Writing “is the simplest and purest channel by which a revelation may be transmitted from age to age.”<sup>39</sup>

Not only is writing timeless or elevated above speech, but it is also the mirror of Nature. In August of 1845 the final key piece of Thoreau’s Walden meditations is committed to paper: nature is related to art the same way art is related to nature. Thoreau writes that sometimes the top of a sumach plant, “or a single limb or leaf, seems to have grown to a distinct expression as if it were a symbol for me to interpret.” The relationship that Thoreau has explored throughout his previous entries is here inverted, and no longer is Thoreau inscribing a meaning upon Nature, but Nature inscribes a meaning upon itself, by appearing to Thoreau as symbolic. The Poet’s purpose is therefore to recognize that meaning, internalize it, and transmit it to the public.

Thoreau sees that “every natural form—palm leaves and acorns, oak leaves and sumach and dodder—are [*sic*] untranslatable aphorisms.”<sup>40</sup> What does this do for the nature of the Poet’s relationship to Nature? The poet cannot judge his relation to Nature, can but let Nature flow through him, just as the saunterer cannot objectify his destination. It places the Poet back in the position as a vehicle for the voice of Nature, while also clarifying one thing about the Natural world: it is somehow untranslatable itself—the ability of the poet is to depict this untranslatability, to convert the aphorisms to something a person of Society can understand. The function of writing, given the untranslatability of the tree, is not to distinguish the self from the world, but to consider the ways in which the self relates to the world. It demands a recognition that the word ‘tree’ will never stand for an actual tree, but is the closest thing a human can get to manipulation and

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 370

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 380

comprehension of the untranslatable object. The object can never become a word, but the word is a close enough approximation that the Poet can use that to depict a natural phenomenon to his readers. Thus, in this simultaneous existence among untranslatable natural symbols and the poetic approximation does Thoreau become unfailingly cognizant of the Poet a liminal creature, confined to that 'border life' which defines his project. The next step, nearing the final self-awareness, is to recognize what to do in that existence, how best to recognize his function as a creature of both worlds. Necessarily, Thoreau's entries become all the more involved, longer, more philosophically concerned. His world was effectively rewritten for him by the end of the Walden Period, as his poetic project came into its own.

No longer concerned with short aphorisms or brief meditations, once the 1850's got under way, Thoreau's entries increasingly resembled the writing that went into *Walden*. No doubt, Thoreau finally understood the power of the written word—setting down for all time the closest representation to Nature to which any form of representation could approach. Thoreau's entries reflect, in a way, some sort of desire to make his work *count*. Its focus becomes this notion: to best understand and effect the world around him, he would have to return to basics, and finally understand himself above all. With self-knowledge, ultimately, would come truest understanding of his place in the world and how his writing could best effect that world.

Between 1850 and 1852 the *Journal* turns ever further inward. Therefore much of what appears in the *Journal* refers back to a previous idea—Thoreau begins to meditate again on what 'fact' is and what it does, for instance—and specifically looks at what he

had learned. Perhaps this was what Peck was considering when he wrote that the *Journal* is Thoreau forcing himself to act as a writer until he becomes one, viewed from a different perspective. Peck's assertion is somewhat cynical and simplistic, and overly critical of what it means for an author to recognize where his writing went over the course of his career.

What happens in the final two years of my study is that Thoreau's introspection grows not into self-doubt but self-affirmation. His quitting Walden Pond was a great shakeup for him; no longer surrounded by his source of inspiration, he is forced to turn inward, and his entries become not only about observing nature, but re-entering it, for the briefest of periods. That act is a reaffirmation of his project, and his philosophy: All of a sudden, the "Walking" model becomes all the more necessary, because walking was a return to a spiritual ideal, in which he existed perpetually while at Walden.

This ideal is made manifest in a return to concerns of his mind and his emotions, not only as they are reflected by or relating to his visions, but instead as causal to what he perceives, how he perceives it, and why he chooses to document it. The idealization of Nature and of Concord begins to become not only a function of the power of Nature over the author but simultaneously the power of the author over his text. In November of 1850, Thoreau states this new direction famously, writing, "my Journal should be the record of my love. I would write in it only of the things I love; my affection for any aspect of the world, what I love to think of."<sup>41</sup>

This contradicts his previous assertions almost completely: before, the majority of his statements about his *Journal*'s function or his function as a writer seem to emphasize his taking a passive role and allowing Nature to simply flow through him and his pen.

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<sup>41</sup> Thoreau, *Journal*, vol. II, p. 101

Thoreau meant to be a voice for the exterior world. The idea that the *Journal* become a record of things *he* loves, then, puts his interpretive capacity at the forefront of his project. It also speaks to a degree of self-censorship. Why would he not simply record that which Nature prompts him to record? The choice is not merely a censorship, but instead an affirmation of self-direction. Why take a passive role in his writing when he could embrace the power of what his words can do? Authorial intent factors here—the *Journal* in its latest stages is an affirmation of the power of the writer to map his mind, map the world around him, and instill both with a beauty and a divinity—the power of writing.

The ending of *Walden* suggests that Thoreau, the character, is returning to society in order to spread the word about what he learned from cleansing his body of social influences. In my mind I conceive of Thoreau's return as analogous to that of the Buddha emerging from underneath the Bodhi tree: he saw it as his newfound purpose to spread the word about what anyone could do if they allowed Nature back into their lives. Thoreau's newfound purpose in the *Journal* seems to reflect that. In the same entry, he mentions that he feels "ripe for something, yet [can] do nothing, can't discover what that thing is. I feel fertile merely. It is seedtime with me. I have lain fallow long enough."<sup>42</sup> This is Thoreau speaking of his newfound sense of the future and of his newly-established sense of direction. Thoreau is ready for the next stage in his life, and the ability to shape it with his writing. The language suggests a good deal of frustration, but rather than read it as an expression of a perception of impotence or inability, it seems to me to be a statement of expectance, an awareness of what he will create as time, and his pen, continue onward.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid

By focusing his mind on what he would select to commit to paper, instead of just illustrating a directionless mental chaos, Thoreau refines his project to the extent of creating, on the page, a new Concord invested with his new vision: the journal as record of love, the most idealized of visions. Thoreau saw that his text could truly recreate the world in a more beautiful image. More than just a book of memory or a meditation on the ever-changing world, the *Journal* became a focused re-vision of what Thoreau's world was. Thoreau's perception, and his acknowledgement of it, became a key aspect of this new phase because it's a full affirmation of the true power of the author.

Says Thoreau, the Poet must no longer simply be a scribe for Nature, but "must be continually watching the moods of his mind, as the astronomer watches the aspects of the heavens."<sup>43</sup> The Poet's thoughts are here as stars, acknowledging their elevation over ordinary thoughts, and also bring to mind the idea that the universe is built around the poet, expressed by Thoreau in 1841. The Poet's moods are thrown into the heavens, into the literally highest aspect of Nature, yet simultaneously existing within his mind, this time. Unlike the earlier entry, where the vastness of the universe dwarfs Thoreau, here he acknowledges the celestuality of the Poet's thought. Though such a comparison may form a visual connection to the tiny man observing the concave sky and concave gulf, the fact is, that the man's thoughts are necessarily all-encompassing. They spread from his body to the stars, throwing themselves over the rest of the world in the meantime. Everything in the world is in the scope of the brain of the poet. These thoughts, continues Thoreau, must be catalogued, as an astronomer catalogues stars, creating a map of the poet's mind. That's what the *Journal* is, or becomes—a catalogue not only of Thoreau's surroundings but of his vision of these surroundings. Perception is creation.

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<sup>43</sup> Thoreau, *Journal* vol. II, p, 402



The writer becomes, as Thoreau puts it, “a man writing, the scribe of all nature.” New to this idea is the fact that Thoreau emphasizes ‘man.’ He is not merely the voice of Nature; he does not merely allow the winds to pass through him and use his body as a puppet to express themselves. No, a writer “is the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing,”<sup>44</sup> but still separate, removed from the influences of the Natural world, but able to evoke those influences and control their function and manifestation. Each of these things, corn, grass, atmosphere, are contained within the writer’s mind, after all, and it is up to him to represent them and utilize them to his own ends. That’s ultimately the Poet’s power—whoever controls the word in a way controls the world. Such understanding of his power is a far cry from the tentative, studious first entries in the text. His project and self-understanding have developed to the point of his rewriting terms which were fundamental to him in 1837.

When he was first beginning his journal, Thoreau defined fact as that which would flower into truth. To the older Thoreau, a fact is the frame of the picture that his entry seeks to paint. The metaphor would seem to suggest either a border in which to contain the given Truth or perhaps a thing with which to round out the presentation of the whole idea. Fact surrounds a Truth, but is only the exterior, shallow object of perception. The Truth is a deeper, internal reflection of the Natural beauty presented in the bigger picture. The entry continues: “my facts shall be falsehoods to the common sense. I would so state facts that they shall be significant, shall be mythos or mythologic.”<sup>45</sup> Thoreau’s new conception of what a fact is depends identifies it as a thing to be guided to a larger purpose by the Poet. A fact is nothing without the artist’s—or writer’s—elevation of it

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<sup>44</sup> Thoreau, *Journal* vol. II, p. 441

<sup>45</sup> Thoreau, *Journal* vol. III p. 99

just as a frame is nothing without the picture within it. Thoreau would then create out of facts a *myth*, an elevated, preserved story which exists to teach or to explain, a story which would shape a culture.

Facts, Thoreau writes in 1852, “collected by a poet are set down at last as winged seeds of truth, samaræ, tinged with his expectation. Oh, may my words be as verdurous and sempiternal as the hills!”<sup>46</sup> This is what facts can do. More than just a beginning, even more than just a frame, the ordinary occurrences of the daily world are made into winged seeds, who would be carried onward by the wind. Thoreau saw writing as the way to populate the earth with these seeds, plant his ideas, change the world. Writing is the ultimate, transcendent source of information. Good writing, writing which extends the natural world into the world of text, has the power to connect the mind of the reader, bring it into the larger system.

That’s the power of words, of writing: to act as generating forces, populate minds, perhaps hearts and societies, with Thoreau’s thoughts, intentions. *Walden* spoke to this, his essays spoke to this, and his *Journal* did as well. Its function was not merely to create pretty picture of Thoreau’s day and thoughts, to be read by no one. In a way it was a book of inspiration. Thoreau’s continually catalogued visions eventually created something which influenced even its creator. By examining, as he must have, the *Journal*’s contents over the course of its genesis, the picture of what it was must have become increasingly clear. Thoreau saw a deeper vision of the world around him in that book.

In one entry from August of 1852, Thoreau uses the word ‘Now.’ It precedes a passage which a reader would call ‘Thoreauvian,’ in its philosophical revelation. The

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<sup>46</sup> *Journal* vol. IV, p. 116

passage reads, in part, "I live so much in my habitual thoughts, a routine of thought, that I forget there is any outside to the globe, and am surprised when I behold it as now."<sup>47</sup> The moment is forever frozen in time for Thoreau and for the reader. References of temporality, Slovic would insist, are normally used to demonstrate the totality of the passage of time and the change of the seasons. This sentiment is accurate, and no small aspect of why this passage is key to understand the final stage in the metamorphosis of the *Journal*. It is Thoreau demanding that he not lose sight of the world around him by burying himself in the workings of his mind—a fundamental demand to make, given that the Transcendentalists' project was initially dependent upon Nature. No matter how much emphasis Thoreau would place on the power of his *perception*, and his agency as a writer to chose to catalogue that perception, he warns himself that to be a true Transcendental writer is to simultaneously hold the mind and that which is perceived by the mind in equal regard. "Why," he asks, "have we ever slandered the outward? The perception of surfaces will always have the effect of miracle to a sane sense."<sup>48</sup> See here, the equation of perception and the actual outward manifestation of the thing perceived. They are, to Thoreau, one and the same: the mind of the writer, the action of the writer, and the thing being written about.

The power of perception and the re-valuing of the object of perception brings Thoreau's project to a definition. The evolution of the last fifteen years had come to an end. Thoreau recognized the power of his work and the power of his self. By the end of 1852 his place within Nature is established and recognized. He sees that the writer is a liminal creature, and would use his writing to catalogue joys and elevated perceptions to

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<sup>47</sup> Thoreau, *Journal* vol. IV, p. 312

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 313

deliver similar perceptions to the reader, in hopes of bringing the reader's mind onto an equal footing with that of Thoreau.

He becomes bogged down, though, with the distinction between studying and seeing, and the resolution of this conflict codifies in his mind what he had to do with his journal for the rest of its existence. He writes, "I must walk more with free senses. It is as bad to *study* stars and clouds as flowers and stones. It must let my sense wander as my thoughts, my eyes see without looking. [...] What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering of the eye."<sup>49</sup> The problem of studying gives this metaphoricized passage a key relation to the problem of writing, and stars evokes the Poet's thoughts. The writer must be as free as the walker—the eye, that is, the perceptive act which translates image to the poet's mind (therefore, onto the page) must allow itself to be as free as the walker, and not fixate on any one image or imagistic scheme. The poet must not lose sight of the forest for the trees, must allow his mind to wander. There's no way the world will be accurately represented if only one image is taken up.

A free mind leads a free pen, and therefore leads to a writing which truly captures all the world. The more Thoreau can represent, in a way, the closer to his mind is the text that results. This is where the journey of Thoreau's *Journal* ultimately concludes: it evolves from a studious workbook in which the guidelines for observation, for perception, for writing are plainly established. It continues to a book of self-evaluation, turning inward to compare the writer to the world around it. The metaphor of a walk through the woods here becomes key to understanding this project, as writing becomes an act of observation in order to recognize the transcendental value of the subject portrayed by writing—viewed on the walk—and a relation to that object, as walking initially for

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 351

Thoreau was a self-aware meditation on the difference between self and nature. The *Journal's* entire process of definition is completed when the writer realizes that he is exterior from the world, but through the act of writing united with the forces of divinity that create the symbols—rock, tree, hill—and can therefore mimic that divine act of representation with ink on paper, just as the true walker in nature is not separate from the world around him, because the walk becomes an immersive act.

The immersion in Nature leads to the awareness of the power of Thoreau's perception, leads to the idea that just as he, through walking, is joined to Nature, so is he, through writing, able to consider himself joined to all of creation. The Poet is one and the same with that which he has written, as it is an extension of his mind. It is also an extension of Nature, being the result of its inspiring beauty and divinity. The Poet is simultaneously of Nature and of Society, an interpreter who brings nature's divinity into the minds of readers. No superiority should be assumed, because ultimately, each person is merely part of the larger divine system. The quest to self-understanding, ultimately, leads to a comprehension of the world in which the self serves as a single aspect.



## *Conclusion*

The evolution of the *Journal* mirrors the stages of Thoreau's interaction with Nature, ultimately placing himself on its level, no longer artificially elevated above it so much as at one with it, by eliminating objectivity entirely. Is this the same for all students of literature? Thoreau would have it, we study literature and we create literature for the same reasons. His *Journal* began as a studious examination of individual concepts or aphoristic phrases he crafted. He also praised Goethe, and the Classical authors, as paradigmatic. Thoreau saw in that literature something which spoke to him, which instructed, informed and inspired his comprehension of the world around him. This particular relation to literature has not changed for today's students.

If a text functions the same way as does the Natural world, it must also inform its reader by forcing him to examine the way in which he interacts with that text. Thoreau's project in the *Journal* perpetually considers the question of the Poet's function if only to come to no clear conclusion other than the one that was self-evident all along: the poet is a wanderer throughout the text of the world. Literature was his forest. Students of literature, today, also seek a deeper interaction with and a deeper awareness of the world around them.

We are motivated to immerse ourselves in the texts that we study because to do so brings us to Thoreau's state of liminality. We enter into the mind of an author, gain access to that world-creating perception that reaches to the stars in the sky. I am not Nature, but I perceive it, which ties me to it, says Thoreau. I am not Thoreau, but I study Thoreau, because he asks the same questions I do. His purpose as it is expressed in the *Journal* is to reconcile his self with the world around him, to find his place in the natural

order, and to express that search or that answer. The *Journal* is the record of that constant journey. He asks the same questions therein as any student of literature would ask when they enter deeply into a text, those deep questions that are often brushed aside by people not in the know: who are we, where are we, and for what reason. These are the questions that drives Thoreau's ongoing consideration of his self in context. These are the questions which prompt him to look as closely at Concord as he did, to allow it to permeate his thoughts and be recreated therein as an ideal.

The passage of time has done nothing to change the prevalence of Thoreau's questions. Everyone studying literature knows that at bottom the text focuses on a journey from a beginning to an ending. No matter the text in question, there is a journey, a walk; either in the textual character arc or in the physical movement of the eyes of the reader down the page. The interaction with the symbols presented thereupon is exactly analogous to Thoreau studying the flora and fauna of his surroundings: in either case, the material thing—a word or a tree—stands for the same metaphysical aspect. To read is to observe an entire world, and to be able to study that world is to be able to study your own world, and yourself, by observing the way your mind or heart is effected by that which you read.

Reading a text forces a reader to destabilize his picture of himself. If the text is read in a high sense it would be read in full awareness of the technique—the reader is reading specifically to study not only the text, but himself. Thoreau's constant theorizing about what the Poet is serves as a consideration of what he himself is doing. My meditating about Thoreau, in turn, is a mediation on my own reaction, my own understanding, about myself in relation to Thoreau.

And what have I learned? I have understood why we do what it is what we do. Thoreau wrote to recreate the world after his mind's perception of it. To be a poet, in the manner of Thoreau, is to transcribe the constant consideration of selfhood-in-relation, selfhood in context. That same awareness can, and ultimately should be applied to a student's interaction with a text—rather than consider the text as a closed entity with no connection to the world around it, one must instead think of a text as the end of a long process and a long series of influences. The text did not appear out of nowhere, and is not the product of a nameless force of creation; it is, instead, created by a writer who had been in turn prompted to create based on an external stimulus—inspired. Thoreau would consider inspiration the literal breathing-into, an infusion of Nature's divinity into the mind of the writer. But I would argue that inspiration is instead the spark which is ignited by an awareness brought on by the writer's sudden knowledge of his place in the world, purpose derived by the culmination of external stimuli which led to the inception of his idea in the first place.

The writer must, in sum, be aware of the fact that he is not an isolated creature. The writer is an agent for forces which one may consider divine or the product of the influence of the outside world upon his mental processes. Thoreau's work was created by his interaction with the outside world—it drove him to create. Today's writers, today's readers, are similarly infused by the world around them. The mind, for a student of literature, for a writer, is just the intermediary between that author's creative forces and the rest of the world. Given the nature of this connection, ultimately the hope is that the Poet, with all his world-changing power, channel his higher awareness and interaction with the world to change it for the better. Thoreau's project was a better world through

awareness, and this hope must be taken up by students the world over. Once it is, the idealization of the world might be lifted from the page and brought into reality.

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### *Three Ancillary Works*

Textually, I drew most of this paper's influences from scholars explicitly dealing with Thoreau's work. However, there were a number of works that influenced the shaping and articulation of this text's underlying concern. Those are *Writing for an Endangered World*, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. There are so many books which contributed to my philosophical perspective, the mere seeds of which have made it into this essay—I focus on these three only because I'm so limited, and maybe they best exemplify what I would hope writers would know their job to be.

Only one of these books is at all related to Thoreau, obviously. However, the other two, by Hunter S. Thompson and John Steinbeck, deal with something which has both shaped my reading of Thoreau for the last two years and my interest in literature in general. They deal with the powerlessness of people without voice. *Fear and Loathing* is a book I read over the summer while interning for *The Raw Story*, an internet-based news website started by John Byrne (OC '03), the main focus of which is reporting the underreported scandals and spin-free dealings in the government and across the country. *Fear and Loathing* chronicles Hunter Thompson's coverage of the McGovern Presidential campaign, painting it as a doomed quest from the start. Dr. Thompson recognizes, ultimately, that though the writer has no power to directly change the course of events—for a journalist this would break the code of ethics enforcing them to be *reporters* rather than *doers*—he can have a more indirect influence with the use of his words, by reaching into the minds of his readers. The book is a clarion-call for writers to

use their abilities to change the course of history, by showing their readers the truth underneath events.

*The Grapes of Wrath* is another, similar book: Steinbeck's use of the poor, displaced farmers and their ultimately futile journey toward a better future is a concentrated cry out—a screed against the ruinous effects of the labor laws of the day. The book defined American Literature for the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a tool for the championing of the underdog, an idea which Dr. Thompson similarly trumpeted. This book is less directly related to Thoreau than even *Fear and Loathing* in that it doesn't directly express the power of the writer. Its content speaks for itself. Before deciding to focus my thesis on Thoreau, I wanted to write about this book, R. Persig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as a consideration of American Identity by way of the Quest for Truth. That Quest is still a major part of my concern, only, due to a limit both of pagination and of time, is limited to its manifestation in a single author, in a single aspect of that author's writing.

Buell's text, *Writing for an Endangered World*, stands on the same line that Thoreau tread in the sense that Buell's concern in that text is the use of literature to highlight ecocentrism, the modern equivalent of Thoreau's applied Romanticism. I realized after having finished thinking through my thesis that what it ultimately validated above all is the Romantic period's deification of Nature, attempting to lift it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by way of one of its cardinal avatars. Buell's text has a similar purpose, considering instead of one author, several, thereby demonstrating the truly pervasive and necessary recognition of the value of the natural world, and its effects on writers and readers alike.

The three texts each are concerned with American authors, American identity and the American quest for meaning. This in any study of literature is absolutely key—we must be aware of who we are, and where we are, before we can truly know what to do. These three books shaped my intellectual and ideological approach in ways which ultimately serve to enforce my reading of the *Journal* as an ongoing narrative, a Quest underwent by Thoreau to recognize and embody his place in the world. I had to limit it to the perceptions of the Poet only because there is no way to say all that needs to be said about the entire *Journal*, at least, not in fifty pages.

There's always more to be written.

Onwards!

SHB  
21 April, 2006