

“Concord River”

Living Transcendentally on Currents of Time

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I was born and lived through my teens just a few miles down the road from Concord in another minor village, Dedham; yet believe it or not, this is only my third visit ever here, and it's my first to a Thoreau Annual Gathering. I learned from flyers in the vestibule of my family Church that Thoreau was one in a long line of illustrious Unitarians -- his contentious relation to them left unmentioned. I had a soft place for him in my heart, though unlike many others, I never read *Walden* and “Civil Disobedience” in High School. A stone's throw from the First Parish, Unitarian, in place by 1638, was my river, the Charles, where I learned early on to paddle a 100-pound canvas covered Old Town. Concord and its river were *terra incognita*.

Some time later I learned that Thoreau had written *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*, *Maine Woods*, and *Cape Cod*, but I knew these only by title. Finally, in my early sixties (not so many years ago) after a career teaching Philosophy (but no Transcendentalists),

I opened these “lesser” works -- and let them open me, discovering treasures I never imagined.

I wander back to let you know I am not a seasoned Thoreau scholar but a recent convert to the unimaginable singularity and soaring universality of his poetic prose. In the past six years I have traveled quite a bit in Thoreau country and among transcendental walkers, and managed to teach him quite regularly in both religion and philosophy classes in Finger Lake country at Syracuse University and elsewhere.

My favorite texts defy present-day disciplinary boundaries. I take Thoreau, and write about him, as interchangeably and seamlessly literary and scientific, religious and philosophical. Setting aside his marriage of the scientific and literary, let me comment on philosophy, literature, and religion as bedfellows.

Now if philosophy is identified only with the dispassionate search for pure knowledge, its affinities with literature or religion will seem strange indeed. However, philosophy can be rooted in desolation as well as pure inquiry, in an ache for salvation and a capacity for wonder or awe. There is so much more to Thoreau’s philosophy, and to philosophy generally, than the desire for unassailable knowledge and the peevish itch to show that others don’t have it. Thoreau’s work, as I see it, is full of wonder, resists desolation, and is in straightforward pursuit of serenity or salvation. These themes or passions flower naturally in a literary philosophy with a religious bent -- or in a philosophy that is religious and literary. Treatises or knowledge-conveying tomes just wouldn’t work. He is an outsider to academic balkanization, and speaks non-academically to all on behalf of a fuller life.

I decided a year or two ago for deeply felt reasons that I wanted to focus my reading especially on Thoreau’s first book. When the opportunity to speak at this Gathering arrived, I

delighted, and decided to write exclusively on the first pages of *A Week*, taking up the prelude, all of eight pages, that he calls “Concord River”-- and read at a gently walking pace.

If you were looking for an august philosophical title for your brand of work, you couldn't do better than “Transcendentalism.” Being a philosopher by trade, you might think I'd start with a crisp definition, but I'll disappoint you on that. And I won't take an alternative, passing on a definitive statement of principles or a genealogy of the title's German pedigree from Plato and Kant onward to Thoreau and Emerson. The upward ascent in Plato toward eternal Forms, or the Kantian positing of regulative (and transcendental) Ideas risks lifting us out of sight into clouds of abstraction and dry argumentation. I'd prefer to keep close to where we stand, which is Thoreau's path, after all. One notable scholar suggests that we look for Thoreau's “*descend-entalism*”. This would let the ‘transcendent’ bob and weave uneventfully by and within the ebb and flow of a river.¹ We should find the poetry and philosophy *just there*, animating singular moments or occasions.

Thus we traffic unabashedly with the apparently low and immanent. In ways I'll clarify, the singular occasions we follow are anomalously, poetically, transcendental/immanent, temporal/atemporal, transversal/tributary.² We find them galore in “Concord River”. The so-called “Transcendentalism” of *A Week* is given (such as it is), in mobility of a writer's words, of his travels, of radiant things and prospects all about.

Of course, Thoreau once called himself a transcendentalist (as well as a mystic) in an offhand blurb for his alumni magazine. But however much he wandered and conversed with

¹ The quirky ‘Descendentalism’ is Joel Porte's, *Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed*, Yale 2004.

² Consider the line from *Walden* that has God “culminating in the present moment.” (Ch 2.)

that clutch of writers who became definitive of Transcendentalism, he had a healthy disrespect for clubs or programs or trends of thought congealed anywhere near doctrine. If he had faith, it would be a living faith found in walking, found in the particulars of his situation and what they could tell him, and found in a friend or two, and what both particulars and friends spoke intimately. He believed – so I believe – that there is nothing useful in joining a parade under the banner “Transcendentalist” and nothing useful in disquisitions on so abstract a visiting card. On the other hand, there is everything to be gained by finding the transcendental (whatever that might come to mean) in the singularities of landscape and cloudscape and river life that captured his so marvelously alert attention.

He would see these radiantly singular occasions shine sideways or transversally, backward and forward in time, up toward heaven and down toward the dark of a river bottom. He believed – so I believe – that we have not yet begun to see and hear and taste the things of the world and their interrelatedness, and not yet begun to see that our salvation lies in translating ourselves out of the reified prose of the world -- without losing touch with the world as it becomes freed into poetry. Finding transverse, tributary, temporal, and transcendental connections happens as we encounter not just a river, or a day’s travel on it, but its shad and weeds and wavelets and winds, its dams and bargemen, its alders and cranberries, its apple trees and histories of good and evil.³

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³ A better Biblical scholar than I heard in the start of this sentence a passage from Ephesians 3:18 that calls us to regard the “breadth, and length, and height, and depth” of the divine; and from the last part of this sentence will reverberate lines from the Psalms and from the Whirlwind in The Book of Job.

I've divided the time ahead into several sections, six in all. Here are the checkpoints to follow as we proceed.

- 1) A Transcendental River
- 2) The River as Paradise Lost and Regained
- 3) We are Translated by Words
- 4) Transcendentalism as Transformative Practice
- 5) Are Only Poets Fit to Transcend – and Descend or Return?
- 6) Of Time and the River: Life Lived, Life Dying

A TRANSCENDENTAL RIVER

Compared with the other tributaries of the Merrimack, it appears to have been properly named Musketaquid, or Meadow River, by the Indians. For the most part, it creeps through broad meadows, adorned with scattered oaks, where the cranberry is found in abundance, covering the ground like a mossbed.⁴

Within the first leaves of the book we learn that the river is not unto itself alone but belongs to a larger waterway, one tributary among others.⁵ We can see it, of course, in a pedestrian way as belonging just to the environs of Concord, but Thoreau wants to expand our attention. He leads us elsewhere, down to the Merrimack, that attenuated river that stretches North to disappear in the snowy heights of *Agiocochook*, Mt. Washington, and then descends so many

⁴ *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed, Carl F. Hove, William L. Howarth, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell, intro John McPhee, Princeton, 1980, p. 9.

⁵ Acoustical shadows of John Donne, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less . . ."

miles South to be swallowed in the vast Atlantic. And he leads us also to an attenuated elsewhere in *time*, even back to the Nile (as he suggests in “Concord’s” first sentence) -- not to mention back in time to those earlier associates of the oak adorned Meadow River, those dwellers who called it *Musketaquid*.

We learn that it flows as a network of strands, a reticulation, a tributary, and that it is part meadow, part river. We learn that river and meadow are intermixed, especially in spring floods, to form a broad marshland, an amphibious or anomalous zone. There we find the birds of the air who belong also to water, the brothers who will belong to both land and water, the sturdy dory painted blue above water line and green below, to mark its belonging to sky and water and marsh. All these flow with and against meadowed currents of water and wind.

Anomalous, amphibious zones are zones of flow and movement, completely neither here nor there, completely neither this nor that, zones for outlaws and nomads. In Thoreau’s posthumous *Cape Cod* they are the zones of scampering crabs half of the sea, half of the sands, anxiously and sideways inhabiting that changeling zone where in walking one is never sure if one belongs to the curling, rippling flood advancing to inundate the sands, or instead to the wet-dry *terra firma* only momentarily awash, the beach sounding gentle hisses as strange waters advance and retreat.⁶

After a number of poetic invocations, the days of *A Week* begin with a short prelude called “Concord River.” Here is that opening:

*The Musketaquid, or Grass-ground River, though probably as old
as the Nile or Euphrates, did not begin to have a place in civilized*

⁶ For clams and jelly fish as anomalous creatures, see *Cape Cod*, Ch. IV, p. 81.

*history until the fame of its grassy meadows and its fish attracted settlers out of England in 1635, when it received the other but kindred name of CONCORD from the first plantation on its banks, which appears to have been commenced in a spirit of peace and harmony. It will be Grass-ground River as long as grass grows and water runs here; it will be Concord River only while men lead peaceable lives on its banks.*⁷

Thoreau reports that on the arrival of English settlers, the river gains a new name, transferred from the name of the village -- the town that *appears*, as he says, to have been “commenced in a spirit of peace and harmony.” But how peaceable were the English displacers? And does the town deserve to retain its name? There is a not so gentle hint that the new name may not be fully deserved, for Thoreau immediately adds, “To an extinct race it was grass-ground, where they hunted and fished . . .” Now those first inhabitants are so far in retreat that they may well be called extinct -- dead, but not quite. Thoreau keeps them in a ghostly presence, appearing now and again as he honors their history and words, as he honors, for instance, in the first line of his prelude, not *his* but *their* word for this meadowy river, Musketaquid.

The late-coming English inhabitants took over the river and naming rights, baptizing Meadow River, “Concord River” -- as if the former were unconsecrated, uncouth, not transcendental or Edenic enough. It is settled by English eager to farm and to fish and to pray -- a people who one way or another will unsettle the long-standing tenants. The village is baptized “Concord,” and in the same breath, “The 12th Church of Christ.” Thoreau relies, as

⁷ *A Week*, p. 5.

he tells us, on the records of ‘old Johnson’, an historian or bard, it seems, who tells us also that Concord is soon neighbored by Sudbury, “the 19th Church in the Massachusetts Government.” So far as it is achieved, this is Christian peace and harmony. Hardly raising an eyebrow, Thoreau lets ‘old Johnson’ construe the advance of Massachusetts plantations as “Wonder Working Providence” – the narrative’s title. Thoreau can’t believe this for a second.

Concord River, we’re told, is well stocked with shad and allwives. Johnson adds observantly that salmon would be present too, but for the downstream falls too precipitous to leap. Soon the brothers Thoreau will encounter the new settlers’ homemade, manufactured falls on the Merrimack, made to drive mills. These impediments, as Henry observes, will stop the upward flow of fish in their natural transcendence from below, until they too become extinct. Fish and non-fish inhabit anomalous zones between life and death, death and life.⁸

THE RIVER AS PARADISE LOST AND REGAINED

In and about Concord, the river and town, we might hope for an eponymous heavenly harmony-in-the-making -- or at least possible harmony, glimpsed in the heaven Thoreau finds in the lily, a lily nearly missed as he walked years later in a malodorous swamp, suffering the stench of a fugitive slave bill.⁹ It will be a harmony-in-the-making, or at least a possible harmony, glimpsed in his pure fun scampering across ice in flow with a fox, or a lively peace, glimpsed in numberless other delightfully heaven-filled occasions and ecstasies. Thoreau

⁸ I discuss the respect in which John Brown comes to inhabit an anomalous zone where he both dies and lives in “Thoreau’s Translations: John Brown, Apples, Lilies,” in *The Concord Saunterer* July 2009, reappearing in *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell*, Continuum Books, 2009, ch 12.

⁹ See my discussion in “Thoreau’s Translations.”

gives nods toward paradise in *A Week on the Concord*, but acknowledges plenty of sorrows, as well.

The gentle flow of the river and writing might occasionally wash over the unsettling of the first ancient residents, and occasionally wash over the unspeakable death of John Thoreau. That death is mainly a back-story we know from other sources, though it is caught in the dedication inscribed before *A Week* gets underway, where he pleads, or prays, “Be Thou my muse, my Brother.” But then there is the dismembering story in “Thursday” that is by no means washed over, a story of apocalyptic events on the Merrimack and its shores, a bit upriver and downriver from the inflow of the Concord.

Thoreau’s telling of murders in Haverhill and some miles North is muted, almost even-handed. Yet the events surrounding Hannah Dustan in 1697 hold all the horror of Goya’s black painting, “Chronos Devouring His Children.” Perhaps the Concord and Merrimack are an anomalous region where paradise lost darkens paradise gained, and paradise gained is in the next nick of time darkened, and our precise place on these rivers is to be questioned at any bend.

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Let me break my pact to attend only to “Concord River”, turning ahead for a moment to “Thursday.” Here we’ll find the sense of paradise lost that one way or another pervades *A Week*, and even makes muted appearances in the mostly upbeat “Concord River.”

By now brothers John and Henry have reached the headwaters of the Merrimack, climbed Washington, and are making their downstream return. They sail swiftly, wind and current to their advantage, sweeping back toward the inflow of the Concord. Just past the turn up to Concord is Haverhill, Massachusetts. A few generations before the time of *A Week’s*

writing, and only a single lifetime ahead from the founding of Concord, in 1697 the town becomes stained in murderous blood, desecrating anything that might have spelled “concord.” Thoreau almost smoothly inserts these terrible interruptions into his tale of homecoming. Hannah Dustan, a settler in the village, is dragged from her home by a small band of Indians. They lead her out toward the river, grab her nursing infant, and dashing its brains against an apple tree, mark the end of Eden. And which earlier settlers had dashed Indian villages to bits? If we declared a primal act of evil, we might legitimate subsequent assignments of guilt, saving us from anxious oscillation between an unsteady guilt and innocence.

Dustan is brought several miles up the Merrimack, under watch -- at last, by only a remnant. As they sleep she kills and scalps them, children included, marking the end of Eden. She takes their canoe, paddling wildly by night, to escape down the very Merrimack the brothers are now plying, the very Merrimack that will welcome the inflow of the river that will bring them home – that marvelous tributary that spreads out into gentle marsh land, welcoming “gulls wheeling overhead” and “ducks by the hundreds”, halfway to heaven, half way to Eden.

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Back to Concord River. The Meadow River, or Musketaquid, became “Concord” as the plantation extended its prerogatives. The legacy already in place might be honored, so we’d be gathering today at the good village of Meadow or Grass-ground -- but here we are in Concord on the Concord, well past paradise, on a river having more or less survived, apparently indifferent to names. We might say the reality transcends the name, though it takes transcendental poets to whisper that secret. It is they who word the world, in ways that let us know -- that words are not all, and are never finished.

If there to be a Thoreau-style transcendence, or a paradise regained, then ordinary, diurnal things will appear in ways that let their immanence stride with their transcendence, and in ways that let their transcendence anchor in their dailyness. There must be walkers knee deep in the marsh, as well as lilies that do and don't transcend it, and poets in skiffs that let them transcend being permanently land-bound, that let them assume the rhythms of water (quite other than the beat of plodding of feet). For Thoreau-style Transcendentalism there must be poets with wings affording the rhythms and looks not just of the land- and water-bound but of the sky. Thoreau gives us bounteous things here and now – things that reach and gesture beyond here and now.

The brothers Thoreau, erstwhile village schoolteachers, take a river trip to fly free of the shackles of weekly business and the worst of prose, to row free, to climb free, to abide in clouds and heavenly mists, perhaps high enough to attain a prospect of continental scope – and also free to move gracefully among meadows and fish and fast water.

TRANSLATED BY WORDS

Here in “Concord River” we have Thoreau’s characteristic eye for singular evidence bringing us instantaneously elsewhere:

*Many waves are there agitated by the wind, **keeping nature fresh**, the **spray blowing in your face**, reeds and rushes waving; ducks by the hundred, all **uneasy in the surf**, in the raw wind, just ready to rise, and now going off with a clatter and a whistling **like riggers straight for Labrador**, flying against the stiff gale with **reefed wings**, or else circling round first, with all their paddles briskly moving, just over the*

surf, to reconnoitre you before they leave these parts; gulls wheeling overhead, muskrats swimming for dear life, wet and cold, with no fire to warm them by that you know of, their labored homes rising here and there like haystacks; and countless mice and moles and winged titmice along the sunny, windy shore; cranberries tossed on the waves and heaving up on the beach, their little red skiffs beating about among the alders;

-- such healthy natural tumult as proves the last day is not yet at hand.

Such description sustains an elsewhere indefinitely extending, a beckoning otherness of wonder, risk, and allure.¹⁰ It sustains a non-Newtonian excess, accessed by transcendentalists, walking, attentive, writing.

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If we listen to the affective, mobile, and knowing surface of Thoreau's words, we see how one takes up with the world poetically, religiously, philosophically.

- The wind is not just disturbing the waters, it is "*keeping nature fresh*", and letting you participate in the world's renewal, "*spray blowing in your face.*"
- The muskrats don't just paddle, but "*swim for dear life.*" Thoreau wants us to hear life – simultaneously dear, bounteous, and dangerous -- an amorphous and shape-shifting place of flow and change, of better and worse.
- There are ducks, but not just sitting or stuffed or floating or bobbing ones. We have "*ducks by the hundred, all uneasy in the surf, in the raw wind, just ready to rise*"; as I

¹⁰ On poetic description being prior to a stripped-down literalism, see my remarks on Rousseau on the primacy of the figurative toward the end of the first appendix.

hear it, they're ready in their uneasiness to see something higher, elsewhere, and rise toward it. Are we, also, "*uneasy in the surf*" ready to rise? Words translate us aloft, let us transcend.

- They're "*now going off with a clatter and a whistling like riggers straight for Labrador, flying against the stiff gale with reefed wings.*" In that ascent there is no necessary gap between sail riggers and ducks wheeling aloft, no gap between where we are and where they are. We're in a single arcing ascent, in a kind of mystic ecstasy.
- The ascending ducks are "*like riggers straight for Labrador*", and so we are translated high up in the yards and rigging of a sailing ship. This is the place, Melville warns, where Transcendentalism or Platonism become tempting.¹¹ Doctrine aside, it can be both bracingly ecstatic and mortally imprudent to go high aloft, to scan and to dream.
- The flock of hundreds might "*circle round first, with all their paddles briskly moving, just over the surf, to reconnoiter you before they leave these parts.*" Or before - having reconsidered -- they settle down again on the waters of the marsh.
- Gulls don't just fly overhead, but are "*wheeling*", even as the river and its words wheel on and on.
- As if to warm us to poetic malleability, translatability, Thoreau places "*mice*" next to winged "*titmice*," linking sounds and species in a passing perception.
- Our muskrats are "*wet and cold, with no fire to warm them by.*" But are we to ready to lament their fireless hearths? Thoreau adds *sotto voce* "*so far as we know*" -- a rather

¹¹ *Moby Dick*, xx

offhand but serious way to ask what we in fact know of the other, or each other, or of the uncanny unfoldings before us.

- Muskrats are swimming “*for dear life*”, as we’ve heard, haunted by dangers, real or imaginary, hurrying to the familiar, and we presume secure, haven of “*their labored homes rising here and there like haystacks.*” We know the feeling.
- Cranberries are cranberries, of course, but not only that as the poet’s eye, the translator’s eye, the transcendentalists’ eye, finds them “*tossed on the waves and heaving up on the beach, their little red skiffs beating about among the alders*”. They may sail through the chop as if in heaven -- or be tossed up on the beach as wrecks.
- Perhaps other red skiffs “beating about” are beating to windward on the way to Labrador, or beating their way up the Merrimack up toward *Agiocochook*, “Home of the Great Spirit” -- even while they are *also* skiffs seeking safe harbor by an alder, and *also* just cranberries rising and falling, bobbing, on wavelets on the edge of a watery meadow.
- Looking out across the wind-swept marshes, Thoreau finds “*such healthy natural tumult [as] proves the last day is not yet at hand.*” He might have added “Let us therefore cast off the hour of darkness and put on the garments of light.”¹²

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Having spread that extended and eventful passage out for close inspection, frame by frame, as it were, let me restore it for eyes and ears to its musical, cinematic, unfolding mobility.

¹²Romans 13:12, KJV: The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.

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

-- such healthy natural tumult as proves the last day is not yet at hand.

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Here is philosophy as religion as poetry, and poetry as philosophy as religion. It is religion insofar as it is a matter of tying-us-back into an overflowing, unfinished reality unhappily lost, a resewing of ligaments torn, a *religio* that is not just the prose of the world or the creed of a church or a school. But rejoining reality is also a kind of poetry and even a kind of natural philosophy or science, 19th century-style. It is also (broadly speaking) moral-aesthetic philosophy that displays and enacts a wise, attentive way of life, a way of walking and seeing. It offers imaginative and tactile immersion, a subtle cultivation of ever-alert sensory perception, a way of taking up with the world and sensing oneself in it (and of it).

Yet we know all too well that such tying-into-reality, sensing life or serenity in it, can miserably fail. Then we cannot find our way with the world, and are terribly lost to it, hence yearning for it. We feel the ache of knowing that everything hangs on the uncertain search.

Thoreau is ready to be startled into life, and to startle us with him, inviting us with Isaiah to “go out in joy” where “mountains and hills will burst into song [. . .] and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.”¹³ We are far from Newton’s burial of nature, dead through mandatory decoding as nothing but clanging mechanical parts. Wheeling gulls and red cranberry skiffs assure Thoreau (and us) that the end of the world is not quite at hand.¹⁴ Thus there is ample time for receiving the world, searching for it, articulating it for others, enjoying it (such as we may). As Wallace Stephens has it, “The search for reality is as momentous as the search for God.”¹⁵

TRANSCENDENTALISM AS TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

In many contexts of discussion, *Transcendentalism* is little more than a term of cataloguing

¹³ Isaiah 55:12

¹⁴ In his *Journals* (April 2, 1952) Thoreau affirms that the “The end of the world is not yet”. This affirmation occurs within reflections on the ambit of poetry: “The sun climbs to the zenith daily high over all literature and science . . . the sun of poetry and of each new child born into the planet has never been . . . brought nearer by a telescope. So it will be to the end of time. The end of the world is not yet.” This suggests compactly 1) that poetry encompasses all knowledge and literature; 2) that it delivers a world as fresh and new as the world must seem to a newborn child; 3) more emphatically, that the world is born again as poetry rises like the sun each day; and 4) that this assurance or conviction can not be made a whit stronger by an appeal to a telescope. The passage is quoted in Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America*, Chicago, 2009, in the course of tracing an ill-conceived opposition between science in its professionalized 20th and 21st century anti-Thoreauvian guise, and literature. Cora Diamond’s “Knowing Tornadoes and Other Things,” *New Literary History* 22, no.4 (1991), displays science (the meteorologist’s tornadoe and poetry (a writer’s evocation of its lived-presence) as affording contrasting but compatible (and equally essential) modes of perception and knowledge.

¹⁵ See Joel Porte’s discussion of Thoreau’s Faith and its affinities with Wallace Steven’s poem featuring Professor Eucalyptus, in *Consciousness and Culture*, Ch. 11.

convenience. If we wish to find Thoreau tucked in this drawer, he would be there in virtue of his walking and writing practice, each the inside of the other.¹⁶ He extends and deflects unnoticed but lively meanings from an object of attention (a cranberry) *out* to a birth and renewal -- and then brings them *back* to inhere in the *singular immanence* from which we began, a particular now unimaginably enriched, bounteous.

Things are the other side of their meanings and words are the other side of meaning-things disclosed. As poetically rendered, abundant things occupy amphibious zones, unstable sites, and in their liveliness pierce or break through regions-districts-matrixes-boundaries. Amphibious (or anomalous) zones lie where truncated meanings of the half-life-prosaic are overlapped by the ever-extending, ever transcending meanings each ordinary thing or congeries of them contains.

Abundant singularities radiate liveliness ‘sideways’ (transversally), ‘bottom-down and bottom-up’ (vertically), and backward and forward (temporally).¹⁷ Birds high above waters and above grasses create a vertical axis that extends down to reeds and allwives, riverbed fish and pebbled bottoms. There are sideways-spreading transversals as Concord River becomes one of many tributaries, as if sites were nodal points in a skein of strands unfolding. The

¹⁶ Walking affords an openness to the world, taking it in, internalizing it; writing (and its cognate thinking) are ways of making that intake available to others who can, in reading, share that walking.

¹⁷ Laura Walls nicely contrasts ‘top-down’ Rationalist holism (not Thoreau) from ‘bottom-up’ Empirical holism (Thoreau): see *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and 19th Century Natural Science*, pp. 60-93. The latter, in literature, science, and philosophy, is forever incomplete and in motion. Holism that starts from where we stand will always have indistinct and shifting, never-fully-filled-in foreground and background (and if our standing is mobile, as in walking, then an ever-shifting sense of a perceiver’s location and orientation is accentuated). “Whole” in such holism is achieved in various glimpses and portraits from here and now. The idea of a single, timeless map of the world is an illusion. The idea of an unending multiplicity of maps, each aiming for a holistic prospect (and achieving the one apt to its design and talent), is not only non-illusory. It is an essential feature of the reality we inherit and become. Iris Murdoch puts it pithily: We are creatures who make pictures (maps) of ourselves and become like them.” These are unfinishable feats we can laud and cherish. There is no cause to despair in the knowledge that a single full map, the ‘view from nowhere’, is a hopeless chimera.

Musketaquid-Concord belongs with the Euphrates and Nile – timeless rivers attaining a kind of eternity – and there is an openness ahead (“our last hour is yet”) creating an axis for transcendence through present into past and into future.

Evocations of multiple radial extensions out from a radiant singularity here-and-now become Thoreau’s evocations in and of Concord River. They are a series of interlaced flows, moments, and breakthroughs, that exemplify what a living, walking, or rowing transcendentalism might mean. As early as *A Week*, we find Thoreau not *talking* about transcendentalism, but writing it, walking it (living it, thinking it) in a way conspicuous to our eye and ear. This lets us glimpse what his moving meditations might mean, even as we move in resonance with them through paradise lost or regained.

A Thoreau-style transcendentalism must be anchored in the diurnal and immanent even as these whisper their self-anchored otherness, and intimates their deep pasts or deep futures. There must be affinities among things of land and river and sky (alders, shad, and gulls) and each must afford to the poet’s eye a more-than merely biological or physical presence. They must whisper their actual or possible conveyance of bounteousness or morbidity, fulfillment or despair, marvelous skill or terrible foreboding. Muskrats can swim for dear life, cranberries can beat upwind, thunder can forbiddingly roar. Thoreau’s responsiveness to the animation of the meadow’s gulls and alders and cranberries, and his reckoning with the age of the Nile and the “not yet” of the end of the world, give us these extensions beyond -- temporally, laterally, vertically.

ARE ONLY POETS FIT TO TRANSCEND – AND DESCEND OR RETURN?

I've said the poet's eye and word give us the immanent, transcendent, and transversal, as if poetic eye, word, and writing were the heart of the matter. Not denying this configuration for a Thoreau-style transcendentalism, we must enlarge it to include John Brown, who Thoreau calls the only true transcendentalist (someone who commits to ideals and acts on them). And it must include Thoreau as traveler and walker, someone whose ideal is to put himself in the way of things that the poetic eye and ear can take in. Furthermore, we should not think that possibilities for poetic reception and rendition are the province only of a talented elite. Consider how Thoreau makes his neighbors, who are neither near-saints like John Brown nor by any ordinary standard, poets, nonetheless assume the work of poetry and of living transcendently.

You shall see rude and sturdy, experienced and wise, men, keeping their castles, or teaming up their summer's wood, or chopping alone in the woods; men fuller of talk and rare adventure in the sun and wind and rain, than a chestnut is of meat, who were out not only in '75 and 1812, but have been out every day of their lives; greater men than Homer, or Chaucer, or Shakespeare, only they never got time to say so; they never took to the way of writing. Look at their fields, and imagine what they might write, if ever they should put pen to paper. Or what have they not written on the face of the earth already, clearing, and burning, and scratching, and harrowing, and plowing, and subsoiling, in and in, and out and out, and over and over, again and again, erasing what they had already written for want of

*parchment.*¹⁸

Thoreau had a healthy respect, even love, for men of the field and writers, and I would not exclude women: think of the allure of that lass on the slopes of Mt. Greylock.¹⁹ And this reputed curmudgeon could write on *Friday of A Week*,

*I pass along the streets of our village of Concord on the day of our annual Cattle-Show, when it usually happens that the leaves of the elms and buttonwoods begin first to strew the ground under the breath of the October wind, the lively spirits in their sap seem to mount as high as any plow-boy's let loose that day; This [is an] autumnal festival, when men are gathered in crowds in the streets as regularly and by as natural a law as the leaves cluster and rustle by the wayside. . . . I love these sons of earth, every mother's son of them, with their great hearty hearts rushing tumultuously in herds from spectacle to spectacle, as if fearful lest there should not be time between sun and sun to see them all, and the sun does not wait more than in hayingtime.*²⁰

¹⁸ *A Week*, p. 8.

¹⁹ The role of household women in Thoreau's life, the shock of his losing a marriage bid, and his 'domesticity' and 'gender blurring' are topics recently under fascinating and overdue discussion.

²⁰ *A Week*, 358.

OF TIME AND THE RIVER: LIFE LIVED, LIFE DYING

Sensing the present in its singularities can also be sensing eternity. Better yet, to truly sense the things of the moment is in fact to sense their eternity. As we will learn later, on a good Friday, “We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish . . .” “May we not see God?”²¹ And as we’ve seen, the senses allow the past and future and the eternal to saturate the things of the present moment. Still amidst moments of Concord River, Thoreau writes:

As yesterday and the historical ages are past, as the work of to-day is present, so some flitting perspectives and demi-experiences of the life that is in nature are in time veritably future, or rather outside to time, perennial, young, divine, in the wind and rain which never die.

Thoreau ends his prelude, “Concord River,” and readies himself for his *Week* of days, with this meditation on the Concord’s amble through time carrying life lived and life dying:

I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of all progress, following the same law with the system, with time, and all that is made; the weeds at the bottom

²¹ *A Week*, p. 382. Consider, also, the line from Ch 2 in *Walden* that finds “God culminates in the present moment.” See more on Thoreau’s view the senses are portals to heaven in my “Wonder and Affliction: Thoreau’s Dionysian World”, in an anthology on Thoreau forthcoming from Fordham, edited by Rick Furtak, and my “Thoreau’s Translations”, *Lost Intimacy*, Ch 12. For an account of the education of the senses and perception in the never-ending achievements of moral sensibility, see Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*, Harvard University Press, 2002. See my “Passionate Speech: Cavell and the Dark Woods of a Life”: <http://religion.syr.edu/mooney.html> including pertinent quotes from W. E. Sebold, George Eliot, and others. For a striking account of approaching literary texts that avoids the byways of post-structuralism, and gives a rationale for this avoidance, see “‘They practice their trades in different worlds’: Concepts in Post-structuralism and Ordinary Language Philosophy,” Toril Moi, *New Literary History*, Volume 40, Number 4, Autumn 2009, pp. 801-824.

*gently bending down the stream, shaken by the watery wind, still planted
where their seeds had sunk, but ere long to die and go down likewise*

In these last words, “ere long to die and go down likewise”, the emblem of simple progress slows to a gentle stop. But that emblem of progress can also slow to a stop, and well short of tragedy, in what sounds like a ringing affirmation of all life, as Thoreau takes a vantage “outside to time, perennial, young, divine.” Perhaps everything flows anomalously between the ephemeral here and now and the lastingly beyond-time. Be that as it may, in the last words of “Concord River”, Thoreau returns as his living transcendentalism must, to attend to the singular, the particular, as a portal to meaning and time. We sense an unanxious even serene being with time as he yields himself up to the river that is ready to carry him downstream and elsewhere.

*the shining pebbles, not yet anxious to better their condition, the chips
and weeds, and occasional logs and stems of trees that floated past,
fulfilling their fate, were objects of singular interest to me, and at last I
resolved to launch myself on its bosom and float whither it would bear
me.*

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AFTERTHOUGHTS

On the Romance of Literature and Philosophy

I. *Thoreau as Poet (with help from Wittgenstein and Kant)*

*Man is not a chamber of mirrors that reflect me
but the place where I stand.*

--**Thoreau** *Journals*, April 2, 1852

What have poets to do with philosophy, and what do both have to do with the sort of personal, almost autobiographical, narrative that we find in *A Week*? A poet seems to be in the business of challenging the too-early ossification of boundaries, the ossification of words and their anchors -- as Thoreau challenges the history of "Concord River" by extending it back toward "Musketaquid" -- or as in *Cape Cod*, he extends the miles of sands back toward their life as an arm of New France. (On Thoreau's challenging national borders and boundaries, see Laura Dassow Walls, "Global Transcendentalism" in *The Oxford Handbook of Transcendentalism*.)

Stanley Cavell links philosophy to autobiography, making its writing an instance of passionate and poetic speech -- not just a series of lawyer-like arguments, or analyses of social contracts, for instance -- and such speech carries, accordingly, the possibilities of redemption. The exemplars he inherits to model philosophy straddle literature and autobiography: Rousseau's *Reveries*, Thoreau's *Week*, Kierkegaard's *The Point of View of my*

Work, Montaigne's *Essays*. To accept this convergence of literature, philosophy, and religiously redemptive writing means setting aside a standing cultural anxiety. Being younger than poetry and religion, philosophy splits away to establish its separate identity, and bears grudges, passionately quarreling with its ancestral progenitors -- the "crude" irrational passions associated with tragedy, myth, music, and poetic intoxication.

There are inspirations in Thoreau for what some would call 'meaning in life' or 'life-philosophy', but then there is passion, music, and poetry, as well. And there are standardly philosophical moments in his writing, as when he characterizes our world (in Kantian terms) as "answering to our conceptions" (*Walden* Ch 2). Cavell points this out, and hints further that Thoreau can be seen as giving us a transcendental deduction of each word he writes (Cavell: *The Senses of Walden*; also "The Division of Talent", *Critical Inquiry*, [1986]). That would be to speak of "transcendence" not as a vector of meaning that flows out beyond immediate Lockean experience, and not as a "realm" of Ideas, Categories, or (in Emerson's terms) Intuitions that shape experience. It would be to speak of "transcendence" as in Kant, when he speaks of providing a "transcendental deduction" of a concept or category. Cavell must mean that Thoreau's poetic deviations and improvisations and fantasies and innovations can be given philosophical legitimation (a "deduction"), word by word. How could this be?

If Thoreau can be read this way -- and I'll have to fill out what this project might mean -- then Thoreau would be aiming at considerably more than what Kant famously attempts to achieve in giving a transcendental grounding, or legitimating, of categories like "causality". And he would be aiming at considerably more than Kant attempts to achieve in giving a grounding for a 'metaphysics of morals,' and much more than Kant attempts in grounding the activity of reason-giving in a *need* of reason. If Thoreau can give us a path toward a grounding of each word, it would be through a grounding of each thing that words word --

each thing in the ebb and flow of his writing, a writing that is adjunct to, or the other side of, a *natural unfolding* (each being the inside of the other).

Thoreau can be seen as conducting a ‘grounding’ of ‘Concord River’ (both the river as mobile site of life and the sentences and words of pages of *A Week*) by exposing us to multiple impacts and surprises – meaning break-throughs or irruptions. We are exposed to the meanings of Musketaquid and alder, as each is linked to ever-expanding networks -- as in alders giving refuge to cranberries, and the Meadow River flowing down to the maw of the sea. It is as if each thing is caught up in a flow of life-living-and-life-dying, what Wittgenstein called the stream of life and its natural history. The grounding of the words that flow with meanings of things is linked to ever-expanding networks of my writing and speaking where I stand behind (or evade) the breaking through of a swimming muskrat, say, into a muskrat “*swimming for dear life*”, and the breaking through of the latter to her aiming (or not) for *the warmth of a fire*. Grounding these words depends both on Thoreau’s skills and on my finding credibility in his words – nothing more, *nothing less*.

It is good to remember that we *experience the force* of our words (in their ebb and flow, in their give and take) – a force that alters our perceptions, this way and that. The “bottom line” is not a literal, immobile, logical or causal attachment of name-to-unwavering-thing, a one-to-one correspondence of perfect fit, or a ‘tracking’ of word to thing. The ‘bottom line’ in our immersions in words and worlds is their felt-weight, and the ongoing measured *negotiation* of that felt-weight in concert and conflict, credibility and lost-contact, with others. Furthermore, that experienced force or weight of words will resemble our responsiveness (or deafness) to what is surely, in these regions, figurative word-use. Rousseau (*On the Origin of Language*) was surely right that “figurative meaning precedes the literal, that our first utterances are signs of a sudden aspectual vision,” (as William Day

paraphrases in “Aspect Blindness and Language”. William Day and Victor Krebs, *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, Cambridge 2010).

Being struck by the poetic aspect to things, and having some facility in articulating this aspect, may be a notable accomplishment for mature adults who may have to struggle to escape a hard encasement in language and perception quite frozen or reified. Then a release toward the poetic or non-literal, a launch away from or against prosaic encasement, may be an inestimable achievement based on striving and struggle. But for infants and children (and many on through adulthood) language learning is not getting the literal straight, for the literal is not ‘the natural’ but a freezing up of a preliminary linguistic vocal flow and a freezing up of a prior anomalous shifting surround. We all begin not with the literal but with something better called the non-literal. Whatever we start with, in linguistic and world unfolding will be just too shifting and improvisatory to be more than partially, tentatively decipherable. Seeing and speaking begin as poetic adventures, fun and dangerous. We begin life exercising prodigious translation and decoding abilities pretty much on a par with our later, adult poetic abilities (if they haven’t fallen into decay). Thus some will live on to decipher, for example, a poem of Emily Dickinson, or *Finnegan’s Wake*, or a page from Thoreau – live to decipher the weight and meaning of these words and the things that they word. Rather than say that the world gets ornamented figurally, poetically, as ornamentation of a massively literal and unornamented world, it’s better to say that the world emerges as a figural world that gradually assumes a distillate of literality that sinks to the bottom of the barrel.

If my writing on Thoreau’s writing succeeds, then the words I write -- the other side of the things worded -- are ‘grounded’ (if they are) in their passing over to overlap with or to be neighbors to others. They are grounded (or not) as I *stand by* each passing or break through or overlapping – or as I *don’t* stand by these, but relinquish them, dismissing them as humor

or irony or 'mere metaphor' or 'rhetoric' or but a pretty turn of phrase, say. They are grounded (if they are) as each passing or break through or overlapping holds (or fails) under my listeners' or readers' reception or interrogation or rejection. Thus words stand or fall as my credibility in wording them before you stands or falls -- as my (or Thoreau's) intelligibility stands or falls, as he writes (for example) of muskrats swimming for dear life, toward a lodge with no warming fire, caught in the stream of life living (and life dying). I have no special authority in giving you my words as a transformative possibility. And authority does not rest in any book of rules or collection of high priests. Authority rests in mutual trust, as I offer an image or a thing as possessed of great import, and you take that offering in good faith (or not), and weigh the weight of the image or thing or word collaboratively with me and with others in extended dialogues of embrace and acknowledgment (or disdain, mockery, or dismissal).

And the transcendental deduction (or grounding) of ideals and aspirations, hopes and despairs, likewise ebbs and flows -- as we (do or do not) find Thoreau's words in praise of John Brown credible, say as he passes on Brown's death as a break through to glory because Brown, unlike Washington or Franklin, truly died *for* something (while Franklin and Washington did not die but 'went missing'). (See my discussion in "Thoreau's Translations", note 6 above.) The effort of grounding will ebb and flow as we read that only a few have learned 'the art of walking'; it will ebb and flow or as we (do or do not) find credible the suggestion that "Concord River" is perhaps only a temporary writing over of the name "Musketaquid" ("Concord" is withdrawn when peace disappears); it will ebb and flow or as we (do or do not) find credible the suggestion that Cape Cod's belonging to New England is an erasure, a 'writing over' of its life as an arm of New France.

Knowledge in ebb and flow is not therefore always or necessarily, frustratingly, despairingly, *uncertain*. It carries its certitude with the same flair as my knowledge that

crabs belong to the sea and to the land, or that my back door threshold belongs to the inside and to the outside of the house. Knowledge in ebb and flow is no more at risk in a debilitating sense than my footing is at risk, as I stand amidst the advance and retreat of the tide – *just there in its ebb and flow*. Nothing about being caught in its movement necessarily knocks out my footing. Balance in footing is maintained amidst flux. Equally, balance in understanding, intelligibility, is maintained, negotiated, amidst the ebb and flow of conversation, of reading and writing, of walking meditations that release poetic imagination to flower. This “transcendental” grounding of the intelligibility of the poetic is not chimerical or ‘just a brand of relativism’ but robustly relational, negotiable, and improvisational -- as when I know I am on *terra firma* (or not) as wavelets lap at my ankles, and as I *write* of their lap at my ankles, thereby giving my trust to words -- and to worlds -- and to you.

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II. ***A Romantic take on the Kantian “Thing in Itself”***

*And then a plank in reason, broke,
And I dropped down and down--
And hit a world at every plunge,
And finished knowing--then--*

-- Emily Dickinson

Kant says we cannot have knowledge of ‘the thing in itself’, that vague superfluity or monstrosity or excess – Or in a different register, that sturdy guarantor of finitude in knowing -- purportedly lying behind all experience. Yet perhaps the “thing in itself” is felt or heard or conveyed through media other than knowledge. Knowledge regulated by determinate concepts is not our sole access to the world. If I am struck by the wonder of a sunset, I might

resist saying that my being *impressed* by that wonder is a matter of *knowing* the sunset. Something strikes me convincingly as an aspect of the sky – I express this moment of impact by saying that I find the sunset wonderful. Thus at that moment the world contains for me something other than what I determinately *know* it contains.

There is an encounter, *here*, at sunset, that I can retrospectively divide into two aspects or vectors. There are matters that I *know*, for instance that the sun is going down to the left of that pine, that it is tinged with orange, that low clouds streak through it. And secondly, there are matters that exceed or transcend or supervene on those things I know: for instance, that the sunset is wonderful or foreboding or a descent into the underworld or a reminder that departure is both invigorating and depressing and in any case arresting. Determinate concepts (yielding familiar sort of reliable knowledge) will not ground my being swept away by a sunset, or by the distant prospect of a tornado or by a lunar eclipse. (See Cora Diamond, note 12, above.)

Given these thoughts I might claim that “the thing in itself” is not an illusion. By that I would mean not only that knowledge is not infinite, that there is always more to know, that there will always be shadows beckoning us to know more. I would mean in addition that lying within or behind a mere “happening”, say of the sun going down – something of mainly meteorological interest – there also is the sun as the focal point of an ever-widening and ever-deepening associative field. If that field is activated and focused (in wonder, say), it can deliver impacts that are as much an aspect of my perception as any predominately meteorological aspects. A sense of that field focused by an object of wonder (or terror, say) is a sense of the more-than-Newtonian world hiding behind mists. In awe (and perhaps, exasperation) I confess that human knowledge is finite, and falls far short of “the thing itself”, even as it sweeps wonders my way. Yet I may then come to suspect that this moment of awe (or terror) should not be described as failure to secure a “thing” in itself. It seems more like a

failure to secure a 'field' whose shadowed presence is the essential background from which things, persons, and particulars and their interconnections emerge -- the fields, for example, of awe or wonder or fear or affection.

Now if Thoreau's writing gives legitimacy, or authorizes, or grounds something like Kant's 'thing-in-itself', this means that we take a 'double aspect' rather than a "two object" view of Kant's notion. There are not two objects, the thing that appears and the thing that doesn't (the "thing-in-itself"); there is but one object, that has two aspects. As I interpret these two aspects here, one is the aspect that affords (let's call it) observational knowledge: the sun is setting tonight just to the left of the old oak. The second aspect is in a sense unknowable, or not exactly something to note down in a log: its wonder, for instance. A sunset known meteorologically can be eclipsed by the same sunset, but at this point it is no longer *that* sort of observational target but something else or more or other. It is now a force that sweeps me away. From this angle, to give a 'transcendental deduction' of 'the thing in itself' just means giving an explication of some experience (like a sunset) such that one sees a rationale for letting the field in view shift from one that is more or less restricted to objects of observation and knowledge to one that finds those objects under the aspect of wonder, dread, ephemerality, or delight – in any case, finds that the field of our experience affords access to such aspects as exceed targets of methodical observational knowing.

Our world, arriving under this aspect, is more than a world of dry factual knowledge. In wonder (for instance) the mind does not stop at such informational knowledge, this or that that if the mind goes further, will travel with an itch for explanation. Wonder (or devastation) are not there to be explained, or there as a ground for practical interests or instrumental appropriation. When, with Dickenson, we "hit a world at every plunge" and find we've "finished knowing then", the mind and heart leave prying for more data or its

explanation. They're patient with the rain or slant of sun -- stop *here and now*, in wonder and its world.

Emily Dickinson finds “a plank in reason break” -- she falls and falls, and “finished knowing then.” But having finished knowing does not erase her worlds. One can ‘finish knowing’ and fall in love, or plunge into dread, or fall into grief or delight – each ‘fall’ or “plunge” will organize the things of the world, let them be revealed as ways of being in the world, ways of being that begin when strict knowing stops. She “*hit a world at every plunge / and finished knowing – then --*”

When Thoreau says in “Walking” that “The highest we can attain to is not Knowledge but Sympathy with Intelligence’ I think he means that our highest, most fulfilling attunement to the world comes when we listen for news, for local “intelligence,” as the world gives its news under the aspects of love, or dread, or grief, or delight, and as that news comes from plant life or grand vistas. We have sympathy with, that is, openness toward, intelligence secreted our way in pouches others will miss. (In *Walden* the writer testifies to an affinity with plant life that affords him “intelligence.”) Only an attentive sympathy and affinity with such whispers, shouts, and news from the world can deliver us to sustaining worlds, when knowledge-as-data, or knowledge-as-explanation run out (as they must), and new life begins.

I must add that none of this supports the hyper-romantic view that observational or scientific (20th century style) dry knowledge and its explanations are fated to kill poetic evocation, the hyper-romantic view that knowledge leads necessarily to an objectified self empty of life. True, our universities in the past fifty years have seen a great shift of financial resources away from humanities and toward vocational-professional training and scientific enterprise. To say the least, this does not bode well for the survival of poetry or the humanities. The academy – not to mention a wide swath of high culture – suffers from a massive tilt toward the primacy of the scientifically factual and theoretical. Poetic and

figural speech and writing become marginalia, consigned to a cultural side-street of literature, entertainment, and cocktail party polish. The heyday of poetic and figural speech is part of a nostalgic earlier age, and must be ritualistically killed and reburied periodically out of deference to the happy emergence of a more ‘critical’ and ‘theoretical’ (if not ‘scientific’) cultural dispensation.

Despite the slim chance of success, *the retrieval of the figural* can be more than a nostalgic wish for a different, earlier time. It can be a defense of a *realism of the locally poetic* -- a defense in the face of ever-encroaching claims to Empire of the science-only opposition, whether in its guises as “*just-the-facts*” research, *critical unmasking* (as in the masters of suspicion), or *new-wave theoretical* (stepping back from, leaving behind as too messy, the felt-weight of words and our experience with them). Acknowledging – ruefully -- this massive cultural shift, there is nevertheless nothing *intrinsically impossible* about loving a lily and knowing its biology, between knowing the meteorology of tornadoes and being awed by their power, between naming fish in the stream and longing to become at one with their liquid darting. Thoreau should be assurance of that.

Thoreau’s ability to hold poetry and a keen naturalist’s observation in lively balance is discussed with matchless acuity, creativity, and learning in Laura Dassow Walls’ *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (University of Wisconsin, 1995), and in her recent *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humboldt and the Shaping of America*, Chicago, 2009.

In the body of my essay, “Concord River,” I try to display the transformative mobile ebb and flow of the river. From that effort I come to rely on the tributary, transversal, and transcendental as naming vectors of an immanent singularity. Those names were meant, however clumsily, to evoke a dynamic structure evident in the surface ebb and flow of so many of those early passages in “Concord River.” Only later did I read Laura Walls’

descriptions of a similar nexus of dynamic forces that she finds underlying Thoreau's lively observation-based natural science. She speaks of a congeries of vital facts suggestively implicating a whole – a “bottom-up empirical holism”, as she dubs it. It is wonderfully heartening to think that by different routes, and by different guiding lexical schemata, we converge on the same Thoreau -- indistinguishably poet-naturalist / naturalist-poet, if not prophet-seer scientist philosopher.

III. *Remarks on “Transcendentalism”*

The Idealism of the present day acquired the name “Transcendental” from Kant in answer to the skepticism of Locke. Kant showed that there are in the mind imperative forms which do not come by experience but through which experience is acquired. These are intuitions of the mind itself and denominated “Transcendental form”. Today all that is intuition is called “transcendental”

Emerson: “The Transcendentalist” '42

“What is transcendental? I give you Kant's answer: “I call all knowledge transcendental which is everywhere occupied not with the objects themselves but with our means of knowing them, so far as they can be known a priori.”

Fuller

A group of Concord intellectuals became “transcendentalists” in tribute to what they knew of Kant's “transcendental philosophy”. “Transcendentalist” was an adopted identity for Emerson, Fuller, and others -- but it meant many things. When Thoreau calls John Brown a “true transcendentalist” he means a man who lives high ideals, someone who transcends moral mediocrity. On the other hand, “The Transcendental Club” of Boston accepted the moniker because they saw themselves as following the spirit of German Philosophy generally

-- Kant, but also his romantic and idealistic successors. Frederick Hedge returned from Germany fired up about Kant, Herder, Fichte, Schiller, Kant, Coleridge and others who offered a lofty moral philosophy that put emphasis, in Kant's phrase, on "coming into one's maturity" through a critical reason that would undermine illiberal, authoritarian and clerical conservatism. Allied with imagination, reason could provide *intuitions* (notions not derived directly from worldly experience) about, for instance the role of regulative ideals like Morality and Freedom. Many transcendentalists were Ex- Unitarian Ministers who endorsed the new biblical criticism from Germany. The "search for the historical Jesus" discovered Jesus to be a near-perfect and fully human moral exemplar. How much emphasis the transcendentalists (or Thoreau) put on Kant's epistemology (as opposed to his moral philosophy) is uncertain. The "productive imagination" – an anti-Lockean idea of an *active, world-shaping* mind linked to the idea of artistic genius -- would be of considerable interest to them, an *inspiring* idea that left the bare bones empiricism of Locke or Hume to the side. Kant denied access to "the thing-in-itself". Decoupled from accountability to "the thing-in-itself", imagination and poetry were set free (or so one could argue). (See Phillip Gura, *American Transcendentalism, a History*, Hill and Wang, 2007).

Thoreau makes a claim that seems to transcend Kant's *First Critique* position: "*The boundaries of the actual are no more fixed and rigid than the elasticity of our imagination*" (J. V, 203). But it may not transcend Kant's *Third Critique* position. Be that as it may, Thoreau might let the elastic imagination stretches our apprehension of 'the actual', allowing it to achieve new form – for 'the actual', of course, is not fixed through time, but changes with it. Along the lines of Cavell's moral perfectionism, first voiced in *The Senses of Walden*, (Viking, 1972), and continued up through *Cities of Words, Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Harvard: 2005), imagination might let us become the actual persons we can be, making the boundaries of my actuality fluid and elastic. We find a person and writer

continually transcending their latest version of their worlds and the selves they can be. It is imagination that reveals that we are not 'beyond reproach', morally, and thus that there is always an improved self to make actual. Thoreau took philosophy to be as unfinished and non-systematic as the self, and devoted to the care of the unfinished self. Imagination is enlisted as the better is brought to light, and so partakes in the transfiguration of the soul, of nature, and of social life. Thoreau's imagination takes him to Concord's jail; his transfiguring experience, traveling transcendently to suffuse the imaginations Gandhi and King, remakes the world.

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