

## A Few Notches

### *Words as Woods and Woods as Words*

Let us begin this walk through the woods and words of *Walden* by traversing, or perhaps meandering through, some text. In the chapter entitled “Spring,” Thoreau is walking (or at least writing about walking) by a cut in the earth along the path of the railroad. He is stopped in his tracks by the forms of sand and clay flowing down the sides of the cut. Fittingly, it is spring that enables the still, frozen ground to thaw and flow, “thus suddenly” catching Thoreau’s attention. One of his first remarks is:

As it flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines, ...and resembling, as you look down on them, the lacinated, lobed, and imbricated thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopard’s paws or birds’ feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds. It is a truly *grotesque* vegetation...” (XVII, 6)

What is going on here? Thoreau seems to have found jumping-off points for his imagination in the forms and patterns of the thawing mud. It is not just mud next to him, but leaves, lichen, lungs, and bowels; all of these things can take a similar form and so refer to and connote one another. Images have connotations much like words do. In “Reading,” Thoreau says that “we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have” (III, 3). It is Thoreau’s conjecturing that lets him see leaves, lungs, and bowels in the patterns slipping down the hill. I, and Thoreau too I think, would extend this way of thinking about text and reading to images, sensorial phenomena, nature. Words and lines thus become shapes, patterns, textures, and colors. They become rocks, mud, leaves, and feathers. From these too we must conjecture “a larger sense than common use permits.” Like Heidegger’s “thing,” their meaning emerges when they are allowed to gather connotations – when they transcend their physical borders. Regarding words, Thoreau says, “[t]he volatile truth of our words should continually betray the

inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly *translated*; its literal monument alone remains” (XVIII, 6). Similarly, the truth of nature, of visual, material, and sensorial events, betrays the “literal monument” of rocks and plant cells. The meaning – or “truth” – does not reside alone in the materiality of artifacts. A magnifying glass will probably not help much. The meaning, or “larger sense,” inhabits the spaces *in-between* artifacts and observers. Here I think Stanley Cavell’s words on text and reading are also helpful. He says,

Since every mark counts, the task is to arrive in turn at each of them, as at conclusions. A deep reading...is one in which you depart from a given word as from a point of origin; you go deep as into woods. ... The depths of a book are nothing apart from its surfaces. (*The Senses of Walden*, pg. 65)

So, if one word is a whole forest, then the meaning we find in it depends on whether we venture forth on foot – perhaps even bringing a tent – taking the time to notice the particularities of its textures, or bushwhack a beeline route with an SUV, or better yet, bypass the whole thing while drinking a cocktail on an American Airlines jet. And if words are like woods, woods are also like words. That is, the patterns of nature Thoreau encounters at the railroad cut behave much like words. They too have surfaces and depths. He would like us to be able to dwell on both words and any other sensorial phenomenon enough that we do not simply take them for granted at surface value. We must strive to sink in. We are mistaken if “our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. [If we] think that that *is* which *appears* to be” (IV, 21). The “surface of things” is just that, a surface, an appearance, and thus, an illusion as far as meaning is concerned. It is an inability to see through this illusive surface that keeps us from “going deep” and receiving hidden possibilities for meaning and growth. Thoreau penetrates the surface of the railroad cut with his imagination, with words; he can write because he has learned to read “the language which all things and events speak” (IV, 1). He has learned “to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look” (II, 15). I think Cavell’s definition of imagination is useful. He refers to imagination as “our capacity for images, and for the meaning or phenomenology of our images” (103). So, this capacity called imagination is not just the ability to hold an image, like that of the mud flow, in one’s head, but the capacity to excavate meaning from such an image – to go deeper.

*More Deep Readings, Facts, and the Spaces In-Between*

As he stands next to the railroad cut, Thoreau settles on the pattern of a “vegetable leaf” for a while:

The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat, ( $\lambda\epsilon\iota\beta\omega$  *labor*, *lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing;  $\lambda\omicron\beta\acute{o}\varsigma$ , globus, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words); *externally*, a dry thin leaf, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of *lobe* are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single-lobed, or B, double-lobed), with the liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward. In globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves. Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself... (XVII, 7).

This passage reminds me of when Thoreau earlier says “I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I was not as wise as the day I was born” (II, 23). In the excerpt above, Thoreau seems to be re-creating language itself, acknowledging its written shapes and spoken sounds, and the meanings these shapes and sounds connote. He is taking us back to the maternity ward of language, where we may “oo” and “ahh” at letters like newborns. This reminds us how often we take these meaningful qualities of language for granted when we use it. We forget that this wondrous living earth we inhabit is embedded in our language – right into its lines, curves, and loops – right into its sounds and its roots.

Thoreau’s meditation on the “vegetable leaf” is another example of a deep reading. Let us remember that all this came out of the mud! Here Thoreau hints at the structure of this ecstatic experience; he says, “the very globe continually transcends and translates itself.” Of course, it does not do this entirely “itself,” because Thoreau is there “decipher[ing] this hieroglyphic for us” (XVII, 9). But at the same time, it does have a certain kind of autonomy, in that without its forms, Thoreau would have nothing to decipher, nothing to provoke words. There would be no matter at hand. This brings us to the importance of facts.

I used to think “facts” were tid-bits of knowledge about materially observable physical phenomena, something to be found in science textbooks, but Thoreau and Cavell have redefined this word for me. Cavell writes:

A fact has two surfaces because a fact is not merely an event in the world but the assertion of an event, the wording of the world. ...it will feel like a discovery of the *a priori*, a necessity of language, and of the world, coming to light (44).

This “wording” is the making of a “humanity,” which Thoreau defines as an “account of human experience” (XI, 1). So a fact is an event as well as the humanity that contains the meaning of an event or experience.

Thus, it is imagination that allows Thoreau to enact this re-creation of the railroad cut. Obviously, the insights he pours onto paper are not just waiting right there, simply to be picked up off the ground. But it is also not imagination alone that enables such an experience of insight and the textual account that follows. It is imagination in cooperation with what is given, that is, the givenness of the railroad cut: the mud, the water, the sunshine and the forms and patterns they all flow into. This is the fact or event. It is Thoreau’s ability to pay close, careful attention to what is given, and to put it into words, that takes him and the railroad cut into a space of creativity *in-between* him and the railroad cut.

Thoreau says that “this one hillside illustrated the principle of all the operations of Nature. The Maker of this earth put patented a leaf” (XVII, 9). This leaf form is essentially about being “alive” and following one’s inner genius. Thoreau and the railroad cut (and all living and non-living things) are internally related by this underlying “principle.” In the case of humans, this principle comes in the form of having at least the potential to inhabit an “in-between” space of creativity and rebirth. Thoreau also says, “No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly. The atoms have already learned this law and are pregnant by it” (XVII, 7). This “idea” or “law” is the same as the above “principle” and it runs through every atom – in plants, in this paper, in my fingers, in your eyes. We are all pregnant and waiting. Eventfulness, creativity, life can spring forth from anything. Humans just need a “fact” to draw them into this space.

In this way, that which is given lets Thoreau discover something in himself that otherwise would not have surfaced, at least in that particular way and with those particular words. Cavell writes, “[t]he human imagination is released by fact. Alone, left to its own devices, it will not recover reality, it will not form an edge” (75). Imagination alone is not creative enough to “form an edge” because we need events that are outside of us to pull us beyond ourselves, to give us something to respond to, and to make us question who we are. Professor Davis says, “[W]hen Thoreau is looking at the railroad cut imagination is not ‘left to itself’ but bound to what the cut is showing him, but that sense of being bound is not a ‘limitation’ in a bad sense, but rather a release...in what sense?” The imagination is “bound” like a book is bound; it has only so many pages, and a limit to the content it can hold, but it also has purpose, a direction to follow out, and “points of origin” to give to readers. From this binding, something emerges that is worthy of being put between two covers and sewn together up the spine. Something substantial, with a backbone, is birthed. We are bound by the claim of that which attracts us. But this is a releasing, freeing bind because it lets us see something new and interpret meaning, and in turn, discover new senses of ourselves. We are the pages of a book that is already written, but this book is not the true self. It is never finished, always awaiting the press of the world to prompt us to discover what words we are capable of.

The spaces *in-between* are where we change and grow. There is a limit to the kind of growth and self-discovery that I can prompt for myself. It is the event that I cannot imagine on my own or create for myself that will probably show me the most and be the thing I was really most looking for. Thoreau says, “[i]f you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career” (II, 22). We will conclude our mortal careers because, when we truly encounter a fact and respond with a true humanity, the immortal “genius” part of us is growing and old senses of self are cast off. To have these kinds of experiences we must let ourselves be attracted to facts like railroad cuts. We must let ourselves be interested in the world. It is here that reality is recovered because we realize something that was previously hidden, missed, or passed by thoughtlessly. It is here that we may come to embody our potential.

Next, the leafy branching streams of mud at the railroad cut “transcends and translates” into the human body and we continue to be reminded of our internal relation to nature – our potential to be alive. Thoreau writes,

You see here perchance how blood-vessels are formed. If you look closely you observe that first there pushes forward from the thawing mass a stream of softened sand with a drop-like point, like the ball of the finger, feeling its way... In the silicious matter which the water deposits is perhaps the bony system, and in the still finer soil and organic matter the fleshy fibre or cellular tissue... What is man but a thawing mass of clay?... Who knows what the human body would expand and flow out to under a more genial heaven? ... Is not the hand a spreading *palm* leaf with its lobes and veins?... The lip-*labium*; from *labor* (?) -laps or lapses from the sides of the cavernous mouth (XVII, 8).

Thoreau asks what form the human body might flow out to. In Thoreau’s case, his body flows out of a pen onto paper...right there! Right here too! His words in the excerpt above are another re-creation of the railroad cut. Especially considering the reference to clay, they are also a re-creation, or redefinition, of the creation myth found in Genesis 2:7: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground.” This story of re-creation is about rebirth in the Thoreauian sense, meaning that the sense of self that follows its genius is born. Thoreau himself is being re-created as he ponders the meaning of the railroad cut. And, ideally, so am I as I write these very words, and so are you as you read this.

I keep coming back to this line: “What is man but a thawing mass of clay?” If we are clay, then we are capable of thawing and flowing and growing in the Thoreauian sense. It means we are capable of change, and possibly even thoughtful choice. Unless we are fired, we are eternally reworkable; just add water. Even fired pots will eventually come around through the rock cycle. At the end of the railroad-cut scene, Thoreau says “And not only [this earth], but the institutions upon it are plastic like clay in the hands of the potter” (XVII, 9). The problem is that we have forgotten our participation in the *making* of our world and ourselves. We have forgotten our capacity for images and meaning-making. We are always already creating our world, whether we acknowledge this creativity or not. This is because “the universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions.” It answers to our conceptions whether they are “mean or magnanimous,

scientific or magical, faithful or treacherous...” (Cavell, 112). And “[w]e do not see our hand in what happens” (Cavell, 82) because we have constructed the myth and illusion of fate. We have forgotten that our ancestors consented to the social contract and sculpted our institutions. We are oblivious to the way we use words, and thus confine ourselves to certain worlds of meaning. Since we mistake illusions for reality, “[t]o locate ourselves in this maze, the first step is to see that we ourselves are its architects and hence are in a position to recollect the design. The first step in building our dwelling is to recognize that we have already built one” (Cavell, 82).

A few summers ago, I worked at a kids’ art camp; I thought I could give the children the realization that they make their world, that they are powerful makers. I like to think of ceramics as a ritual or practice of acknowledging “our hand in what happens.” It is also a chance to let the imagination get to work. It is practice in “conceiving” and making a world, like the artist of Kouroo who makes “a new system in making a staff” (VXIII, 11). I have thought about going to a mall and setting up a little booth outside of Pottery Barn, and providing shoppers with little balls of clay. Do they realize they are choosing a world in which pottery is mass-produced by machine? It doesn’t have to be this way. Might this ball of clay invite them to recognize their hand? Might this be an “event” or “fact” worthy of new words and meanings for them? Would they also be sculpting themselves and their world as they pinch the clay between their fingers? Perhaps so and perhaps not. I get the impression from Thoreau and Cavell that we’ve got a long way to go.

### *The Making of Marks*

Lastly, the flowing railroad cut transcends the form of the human body and translates into “living poetry”:

These foliaceous heaps lie along the bank like the slag of a furnace, showing that Nature is ‘in full blast’ within. The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit – not a fossil earth, but a living earth... (XVII, 9).

The earth is “living poetry” because, in a sense, Thoreau is *reading* it. And it is also reading him. As Cavell says: “To be confident of nature, at every moment, appears as willingness to be confided in by it...as though he is letting himself be read by it, confessed in it, listening to it, not talking about it” (99). The earth is reading Thoreau in the sense that it is letting Thoreau in on some of Thoreau’s own secrets. The earth can bring out some of the secrets of Thoreau’s successor-self that Thoreau is unaware of. The earth is also poetry because it makes; it is creative. It flawlessly follows its genius and bursts into billions of intricate, extravagant forms that grow and change with the seasons. In addition to the spiritual food the earth makes, it also makes everything humans depend on for material survival; its “produce” does fill the shelves at Safeway.

And lastly, the earth is living poetry because of the way it bursts into Thoreau’s journal, and now here into this very paper I am writing. The earth provokes words. As Thoreau writes, “this sand foliage [is] remarkable.” Indeed, such an event is worthy of the marks of ink on paper. The first mark is right there in the earth, and then he re-marks it as he writes those very words in his journal. It seems that re-markability, or the ability to make marks again and again, is a sign of being alive in the Thoreauian sense. And a true work of art has marks that prompt more marks. Like Thoreau, I too am attracted to the earth, but I like to make my remarks in clay and fiber, with color and texture. Perhaps Thoreau would say to me, “You may melt your metals and cast them into the most beautiful moulds you can; they will never excite me like the forms which this molten earth flows out into” (XVII, 9). I know they won’t. I know they can’t. I don’t even think I would want them to. That’s why I run around in nature, wide-eyed, mashing clay into things, making impressions of bark and shells and cactus skeletons. I want to let nature into my kitchen, onto my dining room table. I want to bring it close, to make it a part of everyday thought patterns. I think Thoreau would probably approve. I’d give him a handmade pot if he were my neighbor.

Thoreau’s *Walden*, (or perhaps Walden’s Thoreau), invites us to live as if “every mark counts” (Cavell). It invites us to notice things like the railroad cut. In order to heed the marks of this world – to learn to read, listen, be read, and grow – we must learn to pay close attention to what is given and to notch our own sticks. Perhaps if we can heed the words of *Walden* – the bold brushstrokes and the delicate details – we may find ourselves living remarkable lives.