AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF


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This thesis situates a discussion of Thoreau’s later natural history essays in the context of the author’s other writings. Beginning with an examination of the writings of Thoreau’s friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, this paper examines Thoreau’s relation to and departure from Emerson’s understanding of time, place, and pattern in nature. Through a close reading of Thoreau’s journal entries and natural history essays, this thesis follows Thoreau’s development as a naturalist and examines the relationship between his natural history writings and the American transcendentalist movement.
An Autumn Journey:  
Time, Place, and Pattern in Henry David Thoreau’s Later Work

by

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"Walden is a perfect forest mirror . . . Nothing so fair, so pure, and at the same time so large, as a lake, perchance lies on the surface of the earth. Sky water. It needs no fence" (Walden 127). For Henry David Thoreau, poet and prophet of the natural world, Walden Pond was the ultimate source of originality and imagination for his own intellect. Reflecting the endless horizon of human possibility, as well as a certain moral purity within himself, Thoreau’s pond echoes the Emersonian philosophy of a mind in harmony with the Over-Soul, a world in conformity to thought. As Laura Dassow Walls eloquently notes, however, there remains “a curious interplay between fate and chance in Walden, between the overt certainty that all nature symbolizes our most divine thoughts and the sneaking suspicion that there is a certain arbitrariness behind it all” (157). “What if all ponds were shallow? Would it not react on the minds of men? I am thankful that this pond was made pure and deep for a symbol” (Walden 190). In his search for the physical limits of Walden Pond, Thoreau acknowledged his own need to discover an ultimate end in nature. Is Walden bottomless? No, mainly because Thoreau refuses to concede the lack of ultimate fulfillment a natural world without limits would
exercise over him. Therefore, just at the moment when Thoreau has the opportunity to achieve a complete harmony with nature, he pulls back for subjugation of the world that inspires him. And in so doing, Thoreau highlights his ever increasing internal conflict between the teleology of early Emersonian idealism and the moral uncertainty of a natural world in constant flux.

Paradox has traditionally been a word used to describe the career of Thoreau. At once Transcendentalist and botanist, writer and scientist, Thoreau’s life work has resisted the type of specialization of knowledge that defines modern learning. On the contrary, while Thoreau most assuredly made his mark as a writer—crafting the prose of independence and revolt from the modern and rapidly progressing industrialized world in such works as “Civil Disobedience” and Walden—current scholarship has only now begun to realize the depths of Thoreau’s scientific progressivism. Indeed, at a time when evolution theory was being widely refuted by Harvard academics, Thoreau embarked upon a new career of empirical research, meticulously cataloguing the wildlife of his native Concord in an attempt to validate a new theory of nature. This theory, as opposed to early Emersonian philosophy, did not view nature as a veil to absolute truth, but as a self perpetuating whole made up of interconnected and vital parts which we are a subjective part of. Hence, empirical science served as the “bottom that will hold an anchor” and “not drag” (Journal v. 1 54) for Thoreau’s Transcendental allegiances. To quote William Rossi: “Now that the once potent myth of Thoreau’s post Walden decline has died
out, most critics have come to appreciate how ‘Thoreau’s interest in scientific approaches to nature merged with rather than replaced his Transcendental approach’” (28). Following, and sometimes forging the path of Charles Darwin and Alexander Von Humboldt, Thoreau’s science removes the objective layer of learning while acknowledging that truth may only be obtained by studying material facts, and our relation to them.

To be certain, of the two most interconnected names that for right or wrong are associated with the Transcendentalist movement, Emerson and Thoreau, Thoreau has always been regarded as the more sensual. Thoreau’s walking stick, for example, is famous not for the manner in which it was crafted, or for its sparseness of design, but for the simple twenty-four evenly spaced lines notched on its length, signifying its height in inches. During his time at Walden, Thoreau’s crude scientific tool helped him to measure the depths of the pond, as well as catalogue the size relations of numerous other fauna and plant life in the region. For the protégé of Ralph Waldo Emerson, this type of exact measurement was, if not extreme, at least unnecessary. After all, Transcendentalist theory had long professed (by the time Thoreau was at Walden) a disdain for the cold rationalism of John Locke’s empiricism and Enlightenment thought, preferring to view absolute truth as attainable only through individual, abstract thought on down. As Emerson--in what is regarded as the Transcendentalist manifesto *Nature* (1836)--authoritatively states:
“All facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren like a single sex” (Selected Essays 50).

Considering Thoreau’s own preoccupation with the principle of gestation as it applied conjointly to nature and the human imagination, Emerson’s metaphor of infertility is quite cryptic and consequently does a great deal to foster the type of sharp dividing lines that once separated Thoreau’s latter empirical research from his Transcendentalist roots. Looking beyond the early words of a lyceum speaker seeking to offer a definitive statement of purpose for the first distinctly American intellectual movement, however, we can say that the Transcendentalist movement actually embraced empirical means of research. As Walls acknowledges, the problem for Emerson and his followers was not empirical science, but the overall fragmentation of knowledge caused by the increasing specialization of the fields of science. “Voice after voice calls for knowledge to be made whole again, for the great system to be conceived entire, for all to remember and reiterate, as does Herschell, that the essence of the universe is not division, but unity” (7).

Verily, Emerson realized the enormous potential of science to unify the theory of human thought. Having once considered writing himself a “natural history of the woods around” his “shifting camp for every month of the year” (Emerson qtd. in “Introduction,” 9), Emerson saw taxonomic science as, in its idealistic form, demonstrating a system of linkages and power in nature. As Emerson comments in July, 1833, upon visiting the Museum d’Histoire Naturelle in Paris, for example,
empirical classification demonstrated a unity of thought unattainable through 19th century conceptions of science. “I am moved by strange sympathies . . . I say continually I am a naturalist” (JMN v.4:199-200). While Emerson never did pursue empirical research to the degree of his pupil, and while his initial written stance on nature and empirical science was of a dualistic nature (soul = self, all that is not me = nature) the idea that nature could inform thought on both an individual and universal scale is something that stayed with Emerson throughout his career. As David Robinson explains, Emerson was impressed by “the physical evidence” of the “unity and dynamism of nature” (79).

The problem, as it pertained to Transcendentalist thought, was how to acknowledge nature while keeping the individual in control. How, to put it another way, does the “self reliant” individual simultaneously accept the wide diversity of fact and increasing knowledge while still keeping it unified under one law of the universe that he or she may easily relate to? In an early journal entry, made just shortly after Emerson’s 1837 address at Cambridge, *The American Scholar*, Thoreau ponders these questions:

> How indispensable to a correct study of nature is a perception of her true meaning. The fact will one day flower into a truth. The season will mature and fructify what the understanding has cultivated. Mere accumulators of facts--collectors of materials for the master-workmen --are like those plants growing in dark forests, which “put forth only leaves instead of blossoms” (Journal v. 1: 19).
To be certain, Thoreau was acutely aware of the necessity of acknowledging empirical fact as a measure of moral truth. While the “company line” endorsed by Transcendentalist idealism was that “divine” truth needs no outside support, its members (including Emerson) were (in practice) just as quick to claim evidence within nature of a “divine” or ahistorical plan as not. The logical conclusion for Thoreau was that theory and hypothesis had to be combined with empirical evidence and that the only way to do that would be to distinguish between a fact in itself (as representative of an integral and interconnected whole) and an abstract theory that allowed the relation of parts to be recognizable to the human mind. To put it simply, Thoreau had to take objective, empirical fact and bring it into dialogue with subjective idealism, thereby creating a theory of science that was pliable, but still universal.

Essentially, what separated Thoreau’s interest in science from that of his contemporaries was his acknowledgment - even if it was undeveloped, or not fully comprehended by the “young” writer - that science, even before the professional title existed, was fundamentally made up of scientists. “The fact which interests us most,” Thoreau writes in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), “is the life of the naturalist. The purest science is still biographical” (362). Quite clearly, while Thoreau refutes the Emersonian idea that nature must be a veil to universal truth, the idea that the experience of man is ahistorical is obviously borrowed and adapted vigorously from his mentor. If science, as history did for
Emerson, teaches Thoreau nothing, the life of the scientist—the act of both accumulating fact and making connections with one’s own mind and eyes—allows him to admire and draw strength from the ideal of the scientific life. It is a concrete mode for Thoreau to allow the individual to have control over the material world.

With the philosophy that the life of science must be inherently intermingled with the life of the scientist, however, Thoreau also exposes the greatest impediment to ascertaining “divine” truth—human subjectivity. As Robert D. Richardson explains, Thoreau, “like Goethe . . . is concerned with how things strike us, not just how things are, apart from human observation” (T&S 113). As such, Thoreau allows ideological shifts, limited knowledge and emotional responses to enter into conversation with Emerson’s “sublime” theory. Knowledge, consequently, cannot be experienced as originating from divine law down to mankind, but only through a commonality of perception peculiar to a group of individuals. Reality, or truth, as Kenneth Burke would have explained it, is utterly impossible because of our predestined position in an “unending conversation” of history (110). While we may recognize that reality, or truth, is universal and continuous, our understanding of it is always subjective because of the utter impossibility of an individual accumulating all possible information. Hence, while we may move outside of certain preconceptions and ideological screens our ability to perceive truth is limited. We are, to turn Emerson’s statement in Nature on its head, “undoubtedly” consigned to “have” “questions which are unanswerable” (Selected Essays 35).
Regardless of the difficulties imposed by human subjectivity, however, Thoreau did not abandon his pursuit of universal truth. In fact, it is just the opposite as Thoreau’s acknowledgment of human subjectivity allows him to account for the dynamic nature of the physical world. As H. Daniel Peck explains: “The impressive thing about Thoreau’s attempt to answer these questions” about human perspective “is the degree to which it adumbrates the modern position” (Peck 106). Seeing kinship between Thoreau’s vision of truth and that of Alfred North Whitehead, Peck argues that Thoreau’s concept of knowledge is closer to a process philosophy than we are commonly aware of. Examining the words of Whitehead, for example, we can discern a profound similarity of approaches.

One all pervasive fact, inherent in the very character of what is real is the transition of things, the passage one to another. This passage is not a mere linear procession of discreet entities. However we fix a determinate entity, there is always a narrower determination of something which is presupposed in our first choice. Also there is always a wider determination into which our first choice fades by transition beyond itself. The general aspect of nature is that of evolutionary expansiveness. These unities, which I call events, are the emergence into actuality of something. How are we to characterize the something which thus emerges? The name “event” given to such a unity, draws attention to the inherent transitoriness, combined with the actual unity (Whitehead 95).

While Thoreau may have been unprepared to recognize and confront the issue of change in these exact terms, Whitehead’s concept of “evolutionary expansiveness” is more than slightly reminiscent of Thoreau’s mature theory of change. Recognizing nature as being comprised of ever expanding social linkages, Thoreau sees change being accounted for within the grand scheme of continuous creation. As Peck once
again explains, Whitehead’s “event” serves the same purpose as Thoreau’s category: to validate the emergence of ‘things’ into unity and coherence in a world constantly changing before our eyes” (Peck 107).

Indeed, although Thoreau at some level recognized the impossibility of achieving complete objectivity, he also realized the liberating power of subjective science for the human imagination. As Walls puts it: “Despite the claims of the disassociation of science and society, science is fundamentally social. It grows and extends not by some mysterious inner force but by multiplying social links and associations, becoming ever more technical and stronger as the number of linkages increases, until it seems, invincible” (Walls 70). For Thoreau, science held its greatest potential not in its ability to decipher “divine” law, but in its ability to recognize what is universal and “awe-inspiring” to mankind. As Thoreau demonstrates in an 1852 journal passage:

Science affirms too much. Science assumes to show why the lightning strikes a tree - but it does not show us the moral why, any better than our instincts do. It is full of presumption. . . . All the phenomenon of nature need to be seen from the point of view of wonder and awe - like lightning - & on the other hand the lightning itself needs to be regarded with serenity (sic) as the most familiar and innocent phenomenon. . . . Men are probably nearer to the essential truths in their superstitions than in their science (Journal v. 4: 157-58).

What frustrates Thoreau, and drives his internal conflict with science, is how its professionalization has led to a certain perceived aura of final authority within society. Professional science, as it was developing in the 19th century, presumed
truth for all instead of acknowledging subjective truth within the realm of the scientific community. When Thoreau tells Henry Williams Jr., therefore, on the eve of his first sustained botanical research for Louis Agassiz in 1847, "I am a Schoolmaster - a Private Tutor, a Surveyor - a Gardener, a Farmer - a Painter, I mean a House Painter, a Carpenter, a Mason, a Day Laborer, a Pencil Maker, a Glass Paper Maker, a Writer, and sometimes a Poetaster" (Correspondence 186), he is attempting to refute the growing conception that the experiences of a group of scientists can define mankind's entire existence. Thoreau refuses to identify himself as either a Transcendentalist or a naturalist because his sensual knowledge encompasses a wider range of experience and stimuli.

Thoreau's inner conflict between an innocent love of empirical science and a disdain for the generalizations of society that science could be fundamentally objective found its most useful outlet in his protean use of language. Indeed, what is the most distinctive element of Thoreau's style of writing is a tendency to take a familiar term and reverse its meaning--to challenge the set of assumed truths within society by attacking its core, language. Upon publication of "the first of his fully characteristic and very un-Emersonian pieces" (TLOTM 124), the 1843 essay "A Winter Walk," for example, Thoreau was criticized most pointedly by Emerson for his extensive use of oxymorons. "I mean to send the Winter's Walk (sic) to the printer tomorrow for the Dial. I had some hesitation... on account of mannerism, ... for example, to call a cold place sultry, a solitude public, a wilderness
domestic . . .” (Correspondence 137). While Thoreau’s contradictions were in part determined by the character of Transcendental thinking, which viewed paradoxes as expressing the ultimate moral truths found in nature, the writer’s early prose is decidedly anti-idealist in that it places as much emphasis on the “shams and delusions” that hinder man from “seeing” as upon the spiritual meaning of individual objects. Whether he is portraying “herds as the keeper of men” (38), or calling farms and houses a “family tomb” (25) in Walden, Thoreau’s writing upsets the balance of assumed truths we find in civilized society and institutions and forces us to reexamine our own individuality within society. For Thoreau personally, the principle of individuality and choice within society seemed so unattainable that he believed that true spirituality could only be achieved by rejecting society.

As Joseph Moldenhauer argues, “Thoreau’s ironic sensibility embraced paradox” and although he sometimes questioned himself, he never abandoned this “device of argumentation” (353). During the latter years of his life when Thoreau had, to borrow a phrase from Mark Twain, thrown himself “whole hog” into the career of empirical research, his conception of scientific language remained that of a skeptical nature. “Our scientific names convey a very partial information only; they suggest certain thoughts only. . . . How little I know of that arbor vitae when I have learned only what science can tell me! It is but a word. It is not a tree of life” (Journal v. 10: 294). The “tree of life” for Thoreau, could just as easily be “the tree of knowledge of good and evil,” menacingly warning the strict empiricist from
the almost forgotten recesses of his younger, idealist self not to abandon “sympathy” and “application” when practicing his craft (A Week 362). Because looking beyond his modern label of naturalist, Thoreau saw scientific nomenclature as a heuristic tool at best, establishing basic parameters in which to have an “ongoing conversation” before eventually arriving at a deeper understanding of the physical world. At its worst, scientific nomenclature was overly confining, leading to the over-specialization of science and the false belief that objective truth could be established outside of nature.

Thoreau’s theory of language, then, and of scientific nomenclature in particular, is deliberately non linear and ahistorical. This, of course, derived from his schooling in Transcendentalist thought that advocated a theory of glossology, or belief that words ideally represent truths found in nature. In contrast to traditional conceptions of learning, however, glossology is immune to any final sense of achievement, as by its very acknowledgment of the subjectivity of ideological language, it bars the human being from clear intellectual progression and any final sense of achievement. Progress to one level of understanding, as Emerson might have put it, and the individual is forced to, once again, strip away all he knows and start over. “Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning; that there is always another dawn risen on midnoon, and under every deep a lower deep oceans (Selected Essays 225). Thoreau’s “beginning,” whether he likes it or
not, is ideological language, but instead of considering it an absolute truth of his existence he pushes against its enslaving power and forces language to take on symbols and meanings he never considered before. As Michael Berger argues: “That Thoreau still attempts to translate nature’s language into human language is a measure of his disposition to acknowledge ultimate limitations while still striving toward the limit” (Berger 88). But while he inherently believes in this paradox of action, its non-linear nature becomes its own confining wall, not allowing the young writer to either completely break from Emerson’s “imperialism of thought” or fully embrace temporal nature.

Considering Thoreau’s reflection that “every path but your own is the path of fate” (Walden 80) we can see that his early prose is at times less a complete acceptance of nature, than a complete renunciation of the limitations of and trappings of artificial society. Careful to distinguish between a fleeting ideological concept and an empirical fact representative of the interconnected truth of nature, Thoreau strives to create a world that will both inspire him and give him a distant landscape, in addition to allowing him to bend and twist fate to his own personal spiritual vision. Thoreau does not simply marvel at how nature corresponds directly to his own thoughts, but he idealizes and remythologizes it, thereby giving it a certain illusive quality that somehow stays slightly outside of himself. One of the numerous extended passages in Walden that reinforces this idealistic representation of nature is found in the following from “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”: 
I got up and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. . . . That man who does not believe that each day contains an earlier, more sacred and aural hour that he has yet profaned, has despaired of life, and is pursuing a descending and darkening way. After a partial cessation of his sensual life, the soul of man, or its origins rather, are reinvigorated each day, and his Genius tries again what noble life it can make (60).

Thoreau’s return to nature in Walden, therefore, is not in response to any “call of the wild,” within himself but the result of a need to attain a medicinal or spiritually cleansing experience outside of the conformity of institutions (Jackson 214). It is a mental baptism in the wild that throws off the boundaries of society and repetition. “Can it be called a morning if our senses are not clarified so that we perceive more clearly?” (Walden 61). The simple life, by whose gauge Thoreau measured men and economies, aimed at the most complete realization of a perfect individuality essentially unattainable in an artificially created society.

Thoreau believes, then, that he is most himself when thrown furthest from the morality which is paralyzing the society in which he was by chance born. Here, life forms and processes shoot outward from him, instead of monotonously following those cruel and restraining forces that act from without, in space, time and society, as on mere dead mechanical matter (Walls 72). One could even say that Thoreau defines himself as alive by defining the world around him as dead, to animate with his own supernatural spirit.

Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. . . . And we are able to
apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality which surrounds us. The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives in conceiving them (Walden 65-66).

If you change yourself, can you change your surroundings? Freedom, for Thoreau, is the right and will to choose your own lot, and choice is inadequate unless guided by innate desire and imagination. Strip away the artificial, Thoreau tells the “desperate” man, and you will be able to read nature’s language and shape it to mirror your own thoughts. The “coward” accepts the natural world as controlling the height of his own attainment. “By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof of our actions and their consequence; and all good things, good and bad, go by us like a turrent. We are not wholly involved in nature” (91).

If the younger Thoreau’s understanding of nature is not based on the principle of innate connections and relations, how then can we characterize his philosophy? More than anything else, we can say that Thoreau, as a Romantic writer, feared a civilization that held within it mere shadows of what primitive nature once was. He was alarmed by the prospect of a civilization where imagination and poetry have dried up in the absence of a wild frontier to limit and inspire mankind. As Thoreau himself states, he cherishes “vague and misty forms, vaguest when the cloud at which I gaze is dissipated quite, and naught but the skyey depths are seen” (79). Nature in itself holds no greater purpose, for Thoreau, than to stand for the
unknown and untamed parts of ourselves. It allows us to find inspiration in a world in which no event occurs as a result of our ideological positions or dogmas.

As I came home through the woods with my string of fish, trailing my pole, it being quite dark, I caught a glimpse of a woodchuck stealing across my path, and felt a sting thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw, not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented (140).

How long will the frontier remain a mystery to us? To what end does it need to be cherished? Although there were very few people thinking in these terms during Thoreau’s lifetime, he clearly saw the limitations objective, scientific knowledge and civilization placed on the imagination. As he saw the limitlessness of the frontier decreasing in his own lifetime, Thoreau was drawn to partake in the sensuous inspiration of nature. In his momentary impulse to “devour” the woodchuck “raw,” Thoreau elevates his philosophical ideas and makes them worldly. He tests his theories in an environment that holds the keys for unlocking his own thoughts.

Ultimately, the Thoreau of Walden is unable to reconcile his wish to achieve a purely sensual connection with nature with his desire to achieve a higher, spiritual existence outside of the world. “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct towards a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another towards a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both (140). Thoreau’s early weakness is that he cannot trust his own observations or even his own common sense. While he feels the need to “reverence” his “primitive and savage” state, he continues to intellectualize and idealize, and in doing so is in danger of missing the
life he so diligently seeks. “We are conscious of an animal within us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers” (146). Considering that the major difference between Thoreau and his fellow Transcendentalist was always that the writer of *Walden* was more the practitioner than the theorist, we are left to wonder why the young writer periodically expressed a need to limit his sensual experience in nature? (Shepard 110). How can the pursuit of a wildness that seeks to lose all forms of artificial socialization be finally considered contradictory to the spiritual life?

To answer this question, we must, again, understand Thoreau’s deep aversion to objective science. Looking at an 1840 meditation, we can discern more than a passing concern for the abstract and sweeping scientific definitions of nature that discount the importance of self determination in the physical world.

Mathematical truths stand aloof from the warm life of man - the mere cold and unfleshed skeletons of truth. . . . The eye that can appreciate the naked and absolute beauty of a scientific truth, is far rarer than that which discerns moral beauty. Men demand that the truth be dressed in the warm colors of life - and wear a flesh and blood dress. They do not love the absolute truth, but the partial, because it fits and measures them and their commodities best - but let them remember that notwithstanding these delinquencies in practice - Science still exists as the sealer of weights and measures . . . Cold and abstract law from on high “seals” the measures of our lives - science the stern lawgiver (*A Week* 361-62).

Does science deliver abstracted commandments from the mountaintop that seal our fate? As much as Thoreau’s early Romantic writings are concerned with landscapes, they are equally concerned with boundaries and fences, not encumbrances. For
although the principle of a wild, untamed nature serves to inspire him, it also reminds him of the seeming uncontrollability of scientific law. The curious thing is that Thoreau seems to be fully aware, during his Transcendentalist period, that nature is somehow inherently connected to him and a part of his own individuality. “There is unquestionably this instinct in me which belongs to the lower orders of creation; yet with every year I am less a fisherman, though without more humanity or even wisdom; at present I am no fisherman at all” (Walden 143). The nearer he comes to an intercourse with nature, the more content he is. Yet, as much as he wishes to realize, rather than idealize his relations with nature, he has moments when he mistrust himself, because the same scientific laws of chance that define nature must then apply to him. The result is an unsatisfied yearning in Thoreau’s writings that he is never quite able to understand.

The center of Thoreau’s philosophic system is a desire to meet life without encumbrances, seeking no other reward than inner enrichment, which those who live sheltered lives rarely do. This desire ultimately quickens his own fear of conformity and finally prompts him to leave Walden in 1847, as he truly says, for as good a reason as he went to them. “I had not lived there a week before my feet wore a path from my door to the pond side; and though it is five or six years since I trod it, it is still quite distinct” (294). Transcendentalism for Thoreau is no pose. It is a genuine effort of practical imagination, a mode of living, the art of packing each day with the utmost life. “To effect the quality of day, that is the highest of the arts” (36). Yet,
“the quality of the day is real only when individuality rules circumstance and draws sustenance from the surroundings by the art of fastidious selection. In this way, Thoreau is more artist than philosopher, less a teacher of ethics than of aesthetics. Once again, however, Thoreau is not simply content with ideas for their own sake like Emerson. He feels the need not only to simplify nature to its barest essentials, but to get his hands in the dirt and escape from himself into the growing and wild things of nature. His concepts are never far from sensual perception, and if he paradoxically alternates between scientific theory and practice we can attribute it to his own fear of stagnation found in absolute consistency.

Thoreau’s evolution from Transcendentalist to empirical scientist was one of inner strain and conflict. While he made his legendary retreat to Walden Pond on July 4, 1845, *Walden* was not published for the reading community until the latter part of 1854, after Thoreau’s hobby of empirical research had completely captivated his attention. Truly, Thoreau’s most accessible work—generally recognized as demonstrating the peak of his life’s poetic powers—is also the scene of his intellectual transformation. Perusing its pages, one can almost palpably envision the eccentric from Concord painstakingly going through his earlier prose, struggling to reconcile his empiricist undertakings with a Transcendental text. That Thoreau does not retreat from this challenge is perhaps the greatest testimony to his intellectual genius and proof that his observations after *Walden* could never be a retreat, but rather, a challenge to his earlier work. As Thoreau all too clearly realized at the
mere beginning of his intellectual life: "Cowardice is unscientific - for there cannot be a science of ignorance - There may be a science of war - for that advances - but a retreat is rarely well conducted, if it is - then is it an orderly advance in the face of circumstances" (Journal 1 98). Rejecting science, not professional science as it was conceived in his time, but a subjective and liberating conception of science was unthinkable for Thoreau because it entailed meekly rejecting the possibility of perceiving truth, even if it was a fragmentary truth. In innocently delving into empirical science, therefore, Thoreau opened up a Pandora's Box from which he could not retreat.
How is it that what is actually present and transpiring is commonly perceived by the common sense and understanding only, is bare and bold, without halo or the blue enamel of the intervening air? But let it be past or to come, and it is at once idealized. As the man dead is spiritualized, so the fact remembered is idealized. It is a deed ripe and with the bloom on it. It is not simply the understanding now, but the imagination, that takes cognizance of it. The imagination requires a long range (Journal v. 13: 17).

Like his counterpart Ralph Emerson, Thoreau believed that the great deeds of mankind were ahistorical, that no matter what position an individual occupied along a linear, or historical timeline, he or she was able to draw inspiration from the deeds of the past through “the perfect sympathy that exists between like minds” (JRWE v. 3: 440), the knowledge that no individual experience is foreign to another person. Indeed, Thoreau believed that part of establishing an original relationship to the universe entailed practicing the art of relational seeing in nature that allows the individual to comprehend universal truth, or truths outside of the transient elements of temporal or chronological time and this was due, in part, to the early influence of Emerson. In 1840, the year The Dial was founded, for example, Thoreau was impressed enough by Emerson’s liberating conviction of the essential uniformity of human nature and experience as laid out in a series of lectures and the published essay “History” (1839) that he was drawn to adapt his mentor’s theory for his own piece on history, an essay on the Roman satirist Persius. Interpreting Persius
through the lens of Emerson’s “History,” Thoreau contends that “all questions rely on the present for their solution. Time measures nothing but itself” (EE&M 126). Clearly, for a student fresh out of Harvard University, for an original thinker relentlessly schooled in the literary classics, Thoreau welcomed Emerson’s method of reading history for its ability to jettison what is not required for the “self-reliant” individual. As Thoreau sees it, the past can now be idealized as a tool of the imagination because the individual is able to focus on what is universal and permanent, instead of what is selective and fleeting.

What becomes clear as Thoreau’s career progresses, however, is the degree to which he modifies Emerson’s original concept of the universal or ahistorical man to more thoroughly account for change within a temporal world. For as any scholar of history may tell you, recovering the thoughts and learning of ancient mankind is more problematic than recovering the tangible remains of his achievements. This difficulty, which needs little explanation, derives from the fact that mankind, while outwardly proclaiming immortality, is inherently connected to a temporal world. As Thoreau brilliantly puts it:

“It is easier to recover the history of trees which stood here a century or more ago than it is to recover the history of the men who walked beneath them. How do we know - how little more can we know - of these two centuries of Concord life?” (Journal v. 14: 152).

Understanding that it is impossible to truly proclaim immortality while human beings are connected to a natural world founded on death and decay, Thoreau moves away
from his mentor’s idea that there can be a universal human history. Instead, Thoreau finds himself increasingly drawn to the question, how can mankind find a sense of permanence while he is connected to a temporal world?

The inescapable corollary between the lectures Emerson gave on the philosophy of history in the latter part of 1836 and the early part of 1837 and Thoreau’s search for constancy among change in nature during his empirical work of the 1850s is self-evident. The lectures were more than a general discussion of history; they served as a sort of instructional on how to interact with history, how to deal with what W.J. Bate described as the ever increasing burden of the past. It was one of Emerson’s favorite early lecture topics and logically followed Transcendentalist concerns over Enlightenment thought, specifically, Locke’s denial of innate conceptions of the mind and the passive study of material facts. The insurgent speaker maintained that truth is truth only as it transcends particular times, places, institutions and persons. Consequently, time must be both cyclical and universal. As Richardson tells us, the lectures returned again and again to two main points. “One is a radical dechronolized conception of history; the other is an insistence on the subordination of the individual to the whole (TMOF 257).

Emerson’s lectures on history, combined with his early essays “Self Reliance” and “The American Scholar” fostered a new concept of American individualism grounded in social connections, a plea for every man, woman, and child to “accept the place the divine providence has found for you, the society of
your contemporaries, the connection of events” (Emerson 177). While the phrase
“self reliance” has effectively entered the modern American lexicon as a metaphor
for rigid independence and isolation from society, the argument is essentially a
sophism, as Emerson advocated self reliance as a starting point only, a method of
intellectually and spiritually distancing himself from the accumulating weight of the
past, yet drawing nearer to the inherent permanence and interconnectivity of the
universe. Frustrated in his experience as a Unitarian minister, Emerson saw church
and/or ideological society standing as a mediator between God and the erring
private man, signifying the besetting sin of his time: men and women deferring the
powers inside themselves to powers outside themselves. By adopting an
independence from institutions Emerson believed he had removed the barrier
between himself and God, accepting his place in the blessed One.” Now, “he could
proclaim self reliance because he could also proclaim God Reliance; he could seek a
natural freedom because he also sought a supernatural perception; he could
challenge society with his heresies because he considered himself closer to the true
faith than they . . .” (Whicher 66).

But while “self reliance” sought to establish an original relationship to the
universe, that original relationship required aesthetic selectivity, as Emerson believed
it was the duty of every individual to “pierce the rotten diction” of institutions “and
fasten words to visible things” in nature (Emerson 51). If Locke believed that
empirical facts fundamentally translated into truth, Emerson believed that they did so
only through the art of association, the active framing of the mind. Without this ability of the intellect, the individual would be unable to continually rise to new levels of understanding, to interpret his or her world and account for change in the physical world within the scope of a less obviously visible constancy in nature. Influenced by Platonic idealism, Emerson gave primacy to the spiritual over the material, but argued that the two realms were not radically disjoined (as he felt Americans believed) but rather corresponded symbolically, point for point, as if in a kind of mirror.

Emerson’s theory of the permanence and interconnectivity of time, then, was constructed as a means of freeing the individual to push against the constraining envelope of ideological society, to test his or her truths in personal experience and creativity, not debate or institutional criticisms. Emerson saw journal writing as a perfect means of exercising the individual’s dual material and creative quest for truth, because it incorporates the daily experiential observations of its author and simultaneously provides a format for the creative, or aesthetic endeavor. Additionally, a journal allowed Emerson to edit the passage of chronological time, to look back on his past entries and astutely focus on what he perceived to be universal and timeless. As Emerson observes, a journal “is to the author a book of constants, each mind requiring to write the whole of literature and science for himself” (JMN v. 11: 295). While it would be inane to attach intellectual or artistic originality to the decision to keep a daily record of personal thoughts and
observations where millions have done so before, Emerson clearly saw journal writing as a significant occupation for the self-reliant individual. As he encouraged his intellectual followers to keep a journal, he also encouraged a new generation to seek an original relationship with the universe, to base their truths on the notion of "god within" and diminish the powers of institutions by taking all of history within themselves. Joining the ranks of this new generation at Emerson's urging in October of 1837, Thoreau began to keep a journal that would keep his own history. "What are you doing now? he asked. Do you keep a journal? So I make my first entry today" (Journal v. 1: 19).

As we have demonstrated, Emerson envisioned journal writing as a workshop for his burgeoning intellectual movement, a source book of documented inspiration, if you will, which the careful and fastidious individual could use to edit his or her own observations in search of the type of large and universal themes that could only signify spiritual truth. "The essays Emerson projected," Richardson observes "were the product of his selectivity, as each essay represented the best of the journals comments" (TMOF 320). Thoreau, in turn, spent a good portion of his early career cannibalizing the contents of his journal for specific and calculated literary enterprises. Prior to 1850 his dated entries are sporadic at best due to his habit of removing pages directly from his notebooks in order to avoid the tedious labor of copying passages into literary drafts. Sometime during his editing of the Walden manuscript in the early 1850s, however, the journal began to develop an
almost organic feel, as Thoreau began to structure it in such a way that his present thoughts could be easily referenced against his past observations. “In a journal it is important in a few words to describe the weather, or character of the day, as it may affect our feelings. That which was so important at the time cannot be unimportant to remember” (Journal v. 7: 171).

Indeed, while acknowledging Thoreau’s journal is a lifework, in the sense that it ultimately became his central literary concern is correct, it is also proper to refer to Thoreau’s journal as a life work in that its structure enabled “Thoreau to be true to the trials, changes and growth he had known - to actualize by means of his former life his present aspirations” (Paul xxiv). Eager as he was to discover universal truth, Thoreau’s experience, if nothing else, had taught him the valuable lesson of avoiding a foolish consistency of the mind, of allowing ideas to pass through his intellect in all their shapes and forms so that he could participate in the organic processes of rebirth and renewal he so closely observed within nature. “Some men’s lives are but an aspiration, a yearning towards a higher state and they are wholly misapprehended, until they are referred to, or traced through, all their metamorphosis” (Journal v. 3: 71). Technically, while Thoreau’s journal is neither biography nor memoir—as its non linear structure results in a blurring of the chronological progression of its author’s life—it is a material memory book, so to speak, a book deliberately designed to keep time by enlarging the temporal view of reality through the process of cross-reference in observation and thought. That one
does not readily separate the time periods of Thoreau’s life is semi-intentional, for
by permitting its author to work backwards, the journal enables Thoreau to trace the
original germ of an idea in experiential observation--to come to the moment of its
original freshness--and then to follow out Thoreau’s own method of getting his
thoughts to cohere to the present. “It is now a deed ripe and with bloom on it.” As
such, Thoreau’s mature journal, in contrast to Emerson’s, does not seek to edit out
unimportant experiential information at the whim of its author. Rather, it places
mankind inside an interconnected and self-animating natural world where the role of
the individual is not to “pierce through the rotten diction of institutions,” and fasten
thoughts directly unto objects in nature as on mere dead matter but to discover
universal truth within a natural world that is not just a symbol, but an inherent part
of man’s physical and spiritual existence. Inspired during the Spring of 1850 by his
reading of Humboldt’s five volume survey of the material universe Kosmos,
“Thoreau saw his task to be the joining of poetry, philosophy and science into a
harmonized whole that emerged from the interconnected details of particular natural
facts” (Walls 4).

As anyone who has followed him into the journal or the late natural history
essays such as “The Dispersion of Seeds” will realize, Thoreau’s work led him
deeper into an ecologically connected self than we can find in any work by an
American writer before or after. If nature was the backdrop, albeit an important
one, of Thoreau’s previous work, it now stood out front and center as being part
and parcel connected to the fate of man. “How plainly we are a part of nature! For
we live like the animals around us” (Journal v. 8: 341). But this admission does not mean that Thoreau dispensed with the Transcendental separation of object and self. Striving not to simply discard all that had come before in his intellectual life, Thoreau was primarily concerned with the effect objects in nature had upon him and vice versa how his particular method of seeing as a subjective individual affected the attempts of the scientific community to bring abstract methodology to the study of nature.

“I think that the man of science makes this mistake, and the mass of mankind along with him: that you should coolly give your chief attention to the phenomenon which excites you as something independent of you, and not as it is related to you. The important fact is its effect on me. He thinks that I have no business to see anything else but what he defines the rainbow to be, but I care not whether my vision of truth is a waking thought or dream remembered, whether it is seen in the light or in the dark. It is the subject of the vision, the truth alone, which concerns me. The philosopher for whom rainbows, etc., can be explained away never saw them. With regard to such objects, I find that it is not they themselves (with which the men of science deal) that concern me; the point of interest is somewhere between me and them (i.e. the objects) . . . (Journal v. 10: 164-65).

A purely objective account of nature remained inadequate for Thoreau because he quite correctly identified it as something as much related to him as the physical body which he inhabits. As Peter Blakemore persuasively argues, Thoreau realized that “a rainbow cannot be contained by . . . an abstract and general description, nor can it exist absent of the precise time, place and weather in which it occurs” (117). Most of all, as a writer Thoreau understood that science, like poetry, cannot exist absent of the presence of an actual perceiver to pen the significance and beauty of the
rainbow so that information may be communicated to others. By registering the way changes in the land affected him therefore, and in turn keeping track of how his own perspective prepared him to see particular things, Thoreau intertwines the pursuit of truth with the cultivation of a local way of perceiving and creates an embodied identity that cannot be abstracted from place. Hence, like Edmund Husserl a half century later, Thoreau finds that there is no such thing as consciousness, only “consciousness-of” (96). Although the professional scientist professes that natural phenomenon must be studied in a completely objective manner, “Thoreau knows that the human imagination must lie at the center of knowledge (Blakemore 119). “The point of interest somewhere between” objective science and art is the reciprocating interanimation of man and nature.

Emerson too made the mistake of viewing the phenomenon that excited him as something independent from him. Puzzlingly, Emerson brought to his readings of his protégé’s material an unwillingness, or at least an unconscious refusal, to acknowledge the fundamental and vital role nature held for Thoreau. Addressing an audience of family, friends and peers at Thoreau’s funeral, for example, Emerson curiously sums up his friend’s unfinished work by stating: “I must add the cardinal fact, that there was an excellent wisdom in him, proper to a rare class of me, which showed him the material world as a means and a symbol” (Emerson 401). How do we explain Emerson’s uncharacteristic lack of vision and obvious misinterpretation? The answer can be found by referring back to Emerson’s life-long search for permanence in the universe.
In searching for things that were ahistorical and permanent, nature held a difficult paradox for Emerson. For while he took solace in the knowledge that any move into nature is necessarily a simultaneous move outside of linear history and cultural institutions, nature's flux and unpredictability drove Emerson to elevate man above the world that inspires him. Indeed, despite Emerson's almost obsessive fascination with trying to discover natural laws as evidence of a grand design in nature there is ample evidence to suggest that, at some level, Emerson doubted the very things he professed. As we can observe in the following passage from his 1840 essay "Circles," Emerson saw nature, in addition to being a source of inspiration, as a world of uncertainty, change and inevitable death.

There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees... The Greek sculpture is all melted away, as if it had been statues of ice; here and there a solitary figure or fragment remaining, as we see flecks and scraps of snow left in cold dells and mountain clefts in June and July. For the genius that created it creates now somewhere else. The Greek letters last a little longer, but are already passing under the same sentence and tumbling into the inevitable pit which the creation of new thoughts opens for all that is old. The new continents are built on the ruins of an old planet; the new races out of the decomposition of the forgoing (SFRWE 169).

Emerson, as any author does, sought to achieve immortality by putting events and feelings into writing—events and feelings that ideally transcend time. But by going a step beyond this, and trying to put nature in the immortal, Emerson was left with a dilemma: how do you proclaim immortality yet account for a living world where the natural processes specify that all things must wither and die? His deep faith in the
parallelism and perpetual dialogue of mind and nature not withstanding, Emerson’s knowledge of the “fluid and volatile” elements of nature often gave him pause throughout his career. Hence, where Thoreau praises the self animating forces of the world he studies, Emerson professes that “the key to everyman is his thought. Sturdy and defying though he look, he has a helm which he obeys, which is the idea after which all his facts are classified” (169). While Emerson did begin to turn away from this bold defiance of a “rough and surly world” (332) in his 1860 essay “Fate” (around the same time Thoreau’s health began to take a turn for the worse), the younger writer refuses to acknowledge the power the natural world holds over him. Clearly, beginning with the death of his wife Ellen in 1830 to the ravages of the natural world, Emerson felt the need to elevate man above nature and thereby regain some measure of control. More importantly, as Robert Kuhn McGregor notes “by denying nature any significant role in the universe, he denied death. He and Ellen Tucker were still at one in the universal spirit” (40). It is the wish to bring this type of teleological and moral order to nature which explains Emerson’s contrasting vision of the physical world.

Thoreau had an intimate knowledge of this intellectual and moral dilemma from his own battle with the frailties of the flesh. “I must confess that there is nothing so strange to me as my own body. I love any other piece of nature, almost, better (Journal v. 1: 321). As he almost always did, however, Thoreau looked for answers not by distancing himself from the world he is conscious of, but by seeking
to emulate its patterns. Written during the fall of 1857, but not sent out for publication until February 20th of 1862, well after Thoreau knew that the family curse of tuberculosis that had claimed his brother John would not escape his path, "Autumnal Tints" is an examination of a natural world at its full maturity before physical death.

How they are mixed up, of all species, oak and maple and chestnut and birch! But nature is not cluttered with them; she is a perfect husbandman; she stores them all. . . . How beautifully they go to their graves! how gently lay themselves down and turn to mould! - painted of a thousand hues, and fit to make the beds of us living. So they troop to their last resting-place, light and frisky. They put on no weeds, but merrily they go scampering over the earth, selecting the spot, choosing a lot, ordering no iron fence, whispering all through the woods about it, - some choosing the spot where the bodies of men are mouldering beneath, and meeting them half way. How many flutterings before they rest quietly in their graves! They that soared so loftily, how contentedly they returned to the dust again, and are laid low, resigned to lie and decay at the foot of a tree, and afford nourishment to new generations of their kind, as well as to flutter on high! They teach us how to die. One wonders if the time will ever come when men, with their boasted faith in immortality, will lie down as gracefully and as ripe, -- with such an Indian-summer serenity will shed their bodies, as they do their hair and nails (TNHE 158).

Like most of his American literary and intellectual contemporaries, Thoreau was deeply concerned with the question of the past, namely, how does it limit, yet inspire us? Yet time for Thoreau does not simply mean the implied dangers of European institutions and nobility, but actual loss and disconnection from the universe, what William Shakespeare sullenly described as "the whips and scorns of time" (Hamlet III. i. 69). With the realization that his own time was limited, Thoreau struggled to
maintain productivity and reach intellectual ripeness before his physical body gave out. This theme, which runs throughout “Autumnal Tints,” culminates with Thoreau asking longingly: “Would it not be well to consult with Nature in the outset? for she is the most extensive and experienced planter of us all . . .” (86).

How can mankind begin to improve upon nature? For Thoreau the question is as much inane as it is false, as the teachings of institutions and organized religion that man may cheat physical death through an abstract conception of immortality have brought him no closer to the type of quiet acceptance of death he seeks. Rather, Thoreau takes solace in a vision of the autumn of life not as a time of death and decay, “but as a time of the perfect maturing of trees, the colored leaves answering to the ripened fruits, the high point of ripeness for the year” (Richardson 361). If physical death itself is inevitable, Thoreau gleans the lesson from nature that the peak of life is not at the beginning, but instead at the end where mankind may thrive before “quietly” going to its grave. “I think that the change to some higher color in a leaf is an evidence that it has arrived at a late and perfect maturity, answering to the maturity of fruits” (TNHE 138). In this way, Thoreau held the belief that nature was a kind of mentor for us all, showing us essentially how to die and benevolently guiding us towards the path of truth.

The idea that nature was a mentor to us all was based on a concrete notion of kinship, both biological and spiritual. As Thoreau states: “Each humblest of plant, or weed, as we call it, stands there to express some thought or mood of
ours . . ." (*TNHE* 145). Greater than a simple intellectual and emotive dialogue, though, the "mutuality of man and nature is possible only because man is part of nature, quite literally—the chemical elements and forces of nature form our very bodies and minds" (*Walls* 91). Standing ideologically next to Humboldt, Thoreau sees man and nature as being joined by blood as well as thought, physical and moral nature as being mutually interactive. "We love to see any redness in the vegetation of the temperate zone. It is the color of colors. This plant speaks to our blood . . . It is an emblem of a successful life completed not premature, which is an ornament to nature" (*TNHE* 142). For Thoreau then there can be no immortal human history while the natural world remains separate, bound by time. Instead, what is impressed upon Thoreau's mind is how nature accounts for diversity and change within the universal framework, storing all species, "oak and maple and chestnut and birch," simultaneously, no matter how different. Thus, this harmonious synthesis of parts within the physical world is directly relatable to the history of mankind, as mankind cannot study its own history absent of the forces of nature that help to create it. From this perspective, man is not the consummation of creation, but part of a natural world that is vastly larger than he alone. This, to Humboldt and Thoreau, makes nature's inscrutable mystery all the more powerful, and necessitates that mankind may be able to trace knowledge only on a limited scale, through the antecedence of its parts, thereby unlocking some of nature's secrets only to produce
impressions all the more “imposing and more worthy of the majesty of creation”  
(Kosmos v.1:40).

Unmistakably, there is ample evidence to suggest that Humboldt’s theory of the antecedence of empirical parts in nature profoundly influenced Thoreau as his mature journal refuses to trivialize an empirical fact - no matter how seemingly insignificant - in the face of his knowledge that even in differences, facts in nature connect with one another to form a complete and holistic picture of the universe. Where Emerson and Kant held that parts are isolated and lack identity unless they directly correspond to human thought (and if they cannot be, they are discarded as inconsequential) Thoreau and Humboldt maintained that parts in nature gain their identity not from the animating thought of the mankind, but in how their differences inform and reflect the whole in their unity of interdependence. As Humboldt explains it: “Nature considered rationally . . . is a unity in diversity of phenomena, a harmony, blending together all created things, however dissimilar in form and attributes; one great whole . . . animated by the breath of life” (Kosmos v. 1: 24). To discard inconvenient parts in nature because they do not directly follow a certain imperialism of the mind, therefore, is unpragmatic because it fosters a selective or fragmatized view of the universe.

Thoreau did not need to be convinced of this, of course, as his engagement with all the particulars of his environment allowed him to perceive events outside of his localized perspective. Beginning in the summer of 1850, he had moved into the
third-floor attic of the newly remodeled house in Concord that he shared with his parents and younger sister and established a productive daily routine of morning and evening study separated by a long afternoon walk. Here, by recording impressions from year to year and keeping track of its effect on the perceiving self, coming back as a home traveler might to the same places, the same ponds, the same trees,
Thoreau created one of the most carefully and continuously constructions of identity in relation to land. Where he was accused of a certain amount of provincialism by his contemporaries (his botanical observations are almost exclusively confined to the area of Concord) Thoreau, in actuality, realized the inherent intellectual worth of his detailed investigation of the familiar not in its localization, but in its ability to provide insight into the self-animating forces that make up the whole.

The actual objects which one person will see from a particular hilltop are just as different from those which another will see as the persons are different. . . . In my botanical rambles I find that the first idea, or image, of a plant occupies my thoughts, though it may at first seem very foreign to this locality, and for some weeks or months I go thinking of it and expecting it unconsciously, and at length I surely see it, and it is henceforth an actual neighbor of mine (Journal v. 11: 285).

Although gauging Thoreau’s exact methodology is always a difficult task, given his propensity to skillfully avoid attaching his name to any one intellectual approach or occupation, we can with a reasonable degree of certainty infer that he distrusted efforts to read nature when the perspective was not localized by a personal connection to the land. In his experiences, Thoreau saw that to succeed in perceiving things as they actually are required a certain awareness of man’s limits,
an ability to see without taking in too much so to speak. "In Humboldt," Walls explains, "seeing is both partial and total: partial, in the place bound, limited view given to the researcher who is in actual contact with nature; total in the way such partial views combine and interconnect to create the grand view, the perspective that integrates the multitude of details into the coherent whole (Walls 170).

Thoreau’s hard earned wisdom of the 1850s about nature’s complexity taught him that the individual must look from the particular to the general and not vice versa in order to comprehend truth. For to generalize without taking into account the dynamism of nature insures an isolated and fragmented perspective. Once, years earlier, Thoreau had climbed Mount Ktaadn and felt a strangeness, an isolation from nature. "I was deep within the hostile ranks of clouds, and all objects were obscured by them" (TMW 63). Now, as a more seasoned naturalist Thoreau reaches the conclusion that the "hilltop" perspective can only isolate him from a practical understanding of truth, making his vision of nature clouded and askew. Clearly what Ktaadn has taught Thoreau is that while he is a part of nature, he is not the lord of nature and must not make the mistake of trying to interpret his world by rejecting the local perspective. Rather, by celebrating provincialism, Thoreau allowed himself to edit the plenitude of nature before him, to turn his restricted outlook into a strength by allowing him to pick and choose what to see and not see. Where Emerson used the metaphor of the transparent eyeball to describe a perception that transcends time and institutions, Thoreau claims a more humble
intentionality of the eye, a localizing of perception that claims that facts in nature only reveal their significance when we know what it is we seek. Through this type of engagement with his environment, Thoreau created his world, even as he was created doing it.

Of no area of Thoreau’s studies was this method more apparent than in his daily walks. For in sauntering, Thoreau thoroughly intertwined his conceptions of sight and site. Spiraling in and out through time, between the walks he took yesterday, the year before and will necessarily take tomorrow among the same fields and forests, Thoreau’s connection to place allowed him to hone his attention on how the land around him subtly changed from day to day, and how it maintained an element of constancy through these changes. Therefore, because his method was very much related to a personal relationship with the natural world, we can contend that Thoreau’s idea of scientific observation is as much subjective as objective, poetic as well as historical. Certainly, Thoreau very much considered walking—ambling through a familiar landscape—a type of art from, which only the keenest mind could recognize for its inherent worth. In a memorandum written in his own hand on a version of “Walking” that he read as a lecture in April 1851, for example, Thoreau thought enough of his shiftless activities that he was drawn to muse, “I regard this as a sort of introduction to all that I may write hereafter” (Berger 2).

I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is of taking walks, -- who had a genius, so to speak, for sauntering, which word is beautifully derived “from idle people who roved about the country . . . Some, however, would derive the word from sans terre, without land or
home, which, therefore, in the good sense, will mean, having no
particular home, but equally at home everywhere. For this is the
secret of successful sauntering. He who sits still in a house all the
time may be the greatest vagrant of all; but the saunterer, in the
good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is
all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea
(*TNHE* 94).

Interestingly, Thoreau chose to compare his own sauntering with the rhythms and
flow of the earth’s rivers. For as H. Daniel Peck explains, “a lake or a pond, like
Thoreau’s Walden, invites a solitary communion with nature; and an ocean, such as
the Atlantic or Cape Cod, beckons towards a vast, lonely wilderness of space” (22).
Not less significantly, rivers, like Mark Twain’s Mississippi River, connect places,
towns, communities and individuals to one another. In the case of Thoreau, though,
the “shortest course to the sea” is a river that not only connects people and places,
but connects the past and present. As Peck further tells us, “morning work
awakened Thoreau, made him feel systematically alert to what the next days
observations might reveal. But it also drew his attention to the “prior”—the
perceptions of yesterdays and the day before, which, when brought forward into the
act of composition, established their relation to the present (45). Being thoroughly
conscious of how time is perceived by the mass of mankind to be connected with
loss and physical death, Thoreau’s cataloguing of nature over a linear span of time
made possible an alternate sense of history. Instead of viewing the passage of time
as destructive, Thoreau witnessed time as a source of ripening and fruition in nature,
informing the whole of history through its processes of rebirth and renewal.
How does the localization of perspective inform the whole? In relief to the provincialism of his observations Thoreau developed the idea of wildness—the knowledge that even in a limited perspective a human being cannot comprehend all that is before him in the natural world. Indeed, the more naturally diverse and complex the landscape was that Thoreau studied, the more that place presented itself as a desirable subject for his attention. This dualistic method, of provincialism combined with a quest to understand the whole through observation of the cooperation of parts within a wild and uncertain natural world, results in impulses associated with both the loftiest thoughts of Thoreau’s imagination and those of nature’s lowliest creatures. Yet, instead of working against one another, Thoreau’s age and experience have trained him to use these conflicting strategies in order to find a balance between the transcendental and the physical in the latter part of his life. Or, in the words of Michael Berger, “within the context of a cooperative polarity Thoreau maintains his idealism as a flexible counterpart to empirical information” (107). His idealism does not sweep away the ontological and existential claims of physical reality but dialectically responds to suggestions from the sense impressions he so assiduously gathers.

A life of fair weather walks might never show you the goose sailing on our waters, or the great heron feeding here. When the storm increases, then these great birds that carry the mail of the seasons lay to. To see wild life you must go forth at a wild season. When it rains and blows, keeping men indoors, then the lover of nature must go forth. Then returns nature to her wild estate. In pleasant sunny weather you may catch butterflies, but only when the storm rages that lays prostrate the forest and wrecks the mariner, do you come
upon the feeding-grounds of wildest fowl,—of heron and geese
(Journal v. 3: 444).

At the heart of Thoreau’s search for truth is the belief that the sheltered life of artificial society has led to a life of stagnation for the individual. Going forth into nature during a wild season, then, is significant not only because it shows the individual the dynamism present in the natural world, but because it symbolizes the effort required on the part of the individual to understand his or her world. Where Locke maintained that human understanding was like “a dark room,” “a closet wholly shut from light” with some small openings to let in sensory information (“Essay II.” xi. 17), Thoreau places earnest responsibility on the individual mind to frame the data before it and not passively accept information. Witnessing a generation of scientists traveling all over the world to find the key to the universe, Thoreau asks why mankind doesn’t “begin his travels at home? Would he have to go very far or look very closely to discover novelties?” (Journal v. 2: 376). Thoreau saw great wonders in some of the simplest organisms in nature—a seed, a pond—and this sense of awe was built on the principle that humankind had to simply open its eyes and reassert control over the information present all through nature to comprehend meaning. Understanding the world as a complete and closed circle, Thoreau endeavored to observe all possible causes and coincidences within his home landscape and to use his intuitive intellect to draw meaning from this sensory information.
Still, this does not mean that making sense of nature’s patterns was easy for Thoreau. Inundated with the flood of stimuli present before him in the natural world, he often encountered difficulty cataloguing all the information around him, once remarking, “Nothing lives in the air but in rapid motion.” “I must observe it next year” (Journal v. 4: 66). The fact that Thoreau could count on observing the same phenomenon year in and year out is exactly the point, though, as the knowledge of the seasons may be one of the most important additions to Thoreau’s thought after 1850. Even though Thoreau’s “broken task” is associated with the enormous amount of material he left behind in three sets of notebooks when he died, it is the opinion of scholars like Bradley Dean that Thoreau planned to “synthesize” this raw material “so that he could construct a single ‘archetypal’ year, a technique he had used to wonderful effect in Walden” (“Introduction” xi). While it is impossible to definitively prove what is sometimes known as the “Kalendar” project is the direction he would have continued to embark upon had he lived, it is reasonable to say that the change of seasons gave Thoreau a sense of repetition and constancy through change in nature--a palpable connection to the eternal parts of the universe. Reinforcing this contention, Peck persuasively argues that Thoreau’s journal was designed to both fight the attrition of the past as well as measure the direction of change by gradually placing facts along a linear span of time. “The disciplined recording of alert observation would provide an invaluable record of facts that, when remembered in relation to other facts, might reveal the direction and
nature of change” (45). While in May of 1852 Thoreau may have become frustrated with his inability to observe everything that was going on around him in nature, his acceptance of the symmetry of time, and of the structure of the seasons, allowed him to bring a sense of order to nature’s flux. Refuting the approach of so called objective-scientists, Thoreau’s instincts tell him that there is likeness and constancy to be found for the man or woman who is up to seeing it. In this regard, we can say that while the professional scientist looks for differences between the gossamer of spring and that of fall, Thoreau’s aesthetic eye seeks likeness and symmetry. Therefore, where he may have succumbed to the ever increasing burden of the past, to an unmanageable flood of empirical information, Thoreau structured the information presented to him in such a way that it would not overtake him. The strategy he has employed, as Peck puts it, “is to kill time by containing it, by taking the entire temporal order--‘summer and winter’--within himself” (Peck 5). Subsequently, Thoreau’s aesthetic eye was drawn to the interconnectivity of objects in the natural world as well as the rhythmic and cyclical nature of time.

The passage of the seasons also convinced Thoreau of one other fact, that nature was not created perfectly eons ago but was in actuality in a continuous state of creation. One of the consequences of Thoreau’s status as a part time surveyor was that he was often exposed to the questions of the land-holding community which employed him from time to time. Of these questions perhaps none so grabbed Thoreau’s attention as to how the natural fauna found among the landscape could so
completely change with no warning to the naturalist? “I have often been asked, as many of you have been, if I could tell how it happened, that when a pine wood was cut down an oak one commonly sprang up and vice versa (TNHE 73). As part of a speech he gave on September 20th of 1860, Thoreau attempted to answer this question. Beginning by informing his audience that he will be discussing “a purely scientific subject” (73) “The Succession of Forest Trees” is Thoreau’s testament to a constantly renewing natural world.

So far from the seed having laid dormant in the soil since the oaks grew there before, as many believe, it is well known that it is difficult to preserve the vitality of acorns long enough to transport them to Europe; and it is recommended in Loudon’s “Arboretum,” as the safest course, to sprout them in pots on the voyage. The same authority states that “very few acorns of any species will germinate after having been kept a year,” that beech mast “only retains its vital properties one year,” and the black walnut “seldom more than six months after it has ripened.” I have frequently found that in November almost every acorn left on the ground had sprouted or decayed (88).

Rather than believing that the oak seed remains in the ground for years unchanged, as the land-owners who employ him do, Thoreau correctly knew that nature had no such need to store its resources as it continually renewed itself each year. Observing from years walking through the fields of Concord Thoreau realizes that seeds are transported by “wind, water, and animals, the very sort of interdependency he champions in nature. The irony, of course, is that Thoreau knows more about the fields that lie right under the planting communities noses than they do. For while the majority of men he has come across blindly assert that the oak forest springs up by
accident, Thoreau knows it is simply part of nature’s cyclical rhythms. "But the truth is, that it has not lain in the ground so long, but is regularly planted every year" (77). In his introduction to Faith in a Seed, Richardson notes that "In this manuscript he emerges a major ally of Charles Darwin. The Dispersion of Seeds argues against the concept of special creation, instead making a positive case for Darwin’s developmental concept of continuos creation” (Dean 13-14).

One interesting sidenote to Thoreau’s study of nature is that “in his late journals he frequently compares “the early naturalists, quaint, credulous, unable to tell fact from fable, but with a sense of wonder and miracle fully playing over the world” with the “modern scientist, to the latter’s disadvantage” (Baym 234). “So far as natural history is concerned, you often have your choice between uninteresting truth and interesting falsehood” (Journal v. 13: 181). Indeed, what becomes ever so clear in Thoreau’s work is that he disdains the way in which the “wonder and miracle” of a wild natural world has been take away from mankind, leaving the world to be contemplated by men with no connection or emotional investment in the land they study.

Men of science, when they pause to contemplate “the power, wisdom, and goodness” of God, or, as they sometimes call him, “the Almighty Designer,” speak of him as a total stranger whom it is necessary to treat with the highest consideration. They seem suddenly to have lost their wits (Journal v. 12: 28).

Nature, quite clearly, was no stranger to Thoreau. While he may have been unable to grasp all of nature’s patterns within his lifetime it was as much an instinctive part
of him as humanly possible. For in this dynamic and awe-inspiring world Thoreau found answers to the most personal question of his life and, ultimately, a sense of serenity. While he might have occasionally felt the itch to travel to the far reaches of the world Thoreau was convinced that you “could learn closest to home what was ultimately of the greatest value” (Dean xvii-xviii).

Does man create or discover relationships in nature? Emerson leans on the side of creation, but Thoreau believes that we simply discover truth through the intention of the eye. Thoreau presents himself in these essays as a teacher and initiate in the art of seeing and studying nature. “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil,—to regard man as an inhabitant or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (TNHE 93). Sometimes, as on October 14, 1857, Thoreau would “doubt if you can ever get Nature to repeat herself exactly” (Journal v. 10: 97). Far more typically, however, he would search natural phenomenon for those things that did repeat and would therefore allow themselves to be categorized. Yet this does not mean that Thoreau thought mankind’s task to understand nature was easy. Just the opposite, Thoreau believed nature’s greatest intellectual and spiritual truths could only be properly seen, tasted, cultivated by the man who is in a ripe frame of mind for it. As Thoreau tells us: “Of course no flavors [of the local wild apples] are thrown away; they are intended for the taste that is up to them” (TNHE 200).
What a piece of work is a man,
How noble in reason
How infinite in faculties
In form and moving, how express and admirable
In action how like an angel
In apprehension, how like a god!
The beauty of the world; the paragon of animals
And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?
Man delights not me - not woman neither,
Though by your smiling you seem to say so
(Hamlet II, ii, 297-304).

Since before there was a formal science of philosophy for mankind to tackle the great questions of the universe, writers such as William Shakespeare have asked: What is the nature of man? What is his place in the universe? Complicating these questions is the age-old belief in the duality of the natural world, the idea that while nature is temporal it marches to a rhythm not perceptible to man over thousands, even millions of years. In a sense religious mythology implies that this universal rhythm, while not implanted in man, exists so that humanity may be subtly reminded of the natural laws of the Creator as well as his or her former place in the immortal spirit. During the nineteenth century this ecstatic surrender to the perfection of God's design was articulated in the Emersonian tendency to view the infinitely large in nature by revelation of its single principle of production. As Emerson states "a rule of one art, or a law of one organization, holds true throughout nature"
(Selected Essays 60); "the whole code of her laws may be written on the thumbnail,
or the signet of a ring” (CW 3: 105). In this gnomic theory, natural phenomena are not significant in and of themselves, but function as signs, or physical guides, so that mankind may see the organizing principle behind the differing forms of creation. However, if Emerson maintained that mankind’s ability to recognize divine law elevated him above a merely temporal physical world, the brevity of these flashes of illumination and man’s own ignorance of his divine nature prevent him from reclaiming his proper position in the blessed “One.” “This substitution is man’s curse and challenge; it is the sign that he has been expelled from the garden of Eden, but in true Miltonic fashion it is the sign that there is a peculiarly human, and therefore superior, way to regain it” (Baym 226).

Disregarding whatever conventions have since been established about the boundary between religion and science, in the 1840s the precise definition of science was hardly so settled as to disregard the “the traditional Christian view, shared by Catholics and Protestants alike, that creation is God’s ‘other book, a Holy Writ of living hieroglyphs” (Bercovitch 152). As Robert M. Young observes, in the nineteenth century, “Science did not replace God: God became identified with the laws of nature” (240). Indeed, Emerson’s own view of the capacity of science to enlarge the doctrines of theology bears the distinct influence of John Herschel’s Preliminary Discourse on the Study of Natural Philosophy, which explored the question of the nature of man by elevating the mind of the individual over the physical world. Though we are physically weak, explains Herschel, human beings
have become lords of the universe because “man is constituted as a speculative
being; he contemplates the world, and the objects around him, not with a passive,
indifferent eye, but as a system disposed with order and design” (Herschel 3, 4).
Subsequently, for Emerson, Herschel’s theory held its greatest potential in its
attempt to dissolve the cumbersome catalogues of empirical particulars that threaten
to make scientific practice unmanageable in favor of a belief in a human intellect that
can pervade objects in nature for the inclusive order of a single formula of creation.
In trying to discern divine law, therefore, objects themselves lose their significance
in the face of an objective eye that sees through matter to the sublime plan of the
Creator.

The Divine Author of the universe cannot be supposed to have laid
down particular laws, enumerating all individual contingencies,
which his materials have understood and obey; --this would be to
attribute to him the imperfections of human legislation; --but rather,
by creating them, endued them with certain fixed qualities and
powers, he has impressed them in their origins with the spirit, not
the letter of his law (Herschel 37).

Generally credited with formulating the modern scientific method, Herschel’s theory
functioned as a powerful heuristic tool for Emerson. Sliding between abstract
theory and concrete fact, Herschel impressed upon his readers that “natural
philosophy is essentially united in all its departments, through all which one spirit
reigns and one method of enquiry applies” (219). But due to the vast scope of the
universe and human limitations, mankind must prove the existence of a unified world
by observing the patterns of particular natural facts. Consequently, information can
be gathered and classified only within a theory that contemplates the plan behind
God's world; facts are not facts until a hypothesis gives them significance.

Although Herschel was careful to distinguish between the idea that mankind
has the power to recognize Divine law in nature and the false perception that the
material universe obeys the will of humanity, Emerson used Herschel's theory to
simultaneously liberate mankind from the perils of the flesh and regain its proper
position in the Divine. For while individually the human mind is inferior to the
Creator's, Emerson believed that within the smallest cell of an individual lies
everything that mankind is and is necessarily destined to become. Therefore, rather
than being limited by his temporal existence Emerson sees the life of the individual
as being an apprenticeship towards the path of truth. "All our progress is an
unfolding, like the vegetable bud," says Emerson (CW 2: 195); we ever become
more of what we already are. Exploiting the analogy between nature and mind to
sound a moral lesson in self culture, whereby the soul grows by steady increments
through the ladder of advancing but isomorphic forms, discarding each for the next,
and finally all for the heaven of the spirit; Emerson deploys his discipline to liberate
himself from nature's necessary vulnerability.

Man is . . . a stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the
poles of the Universe. He betrays his relationship to what is below
him, --thick skulled, small-brained, fishy, quadrumanous, --
quadruped ill-disguised, hardly escaped into biped, and has paid for
the new powers by loss of some of the old ones. But the lightning
which explodes and fashions planets, maker of planets and suns, is
in him. On one side, elemental order, sandstone and granite, rock-
ledges, peat-bog, forest, sea and shore; and, on the other part,
thought, the spirit which composes and decomposes nature, --here
they are, side by side, god and devil, mind and matter, king and conspirator, belt and spasm, riding peacefully together in the eye and brain of every man (Selected Essays 373-74).

In his analysis of the natural world Emerson concluded that the individual object is indispensable in its ability to collapse the entire plan of Creation within its structure, allowing mankind to understand the universe. “The ray of light passes invisible through space, and only when it falls on an object is it to be seen” (CW 2: 199). Yet contrary to a philosophy that praises the value of the empirical fact itself, Emerson ultimately uses nature to study the mind, advocating a type of double-consciousness of existence, whereby the individual comes to realize that all of the natural social body is just a reflection of the truth as God sees it. As Walls speculates, “the doubling of organic immanence and gnomic transcendence” allows the individual to experience moments of revelation “when in the pure harmony of the gnomic object the mind within” recognizes “the Mind without,” becoming no longer ourselves, our daily, divided, worldly, and social and fragmented selves, but ‘beside’ ourselves—with joy—in a transport of ecstasy” (“The Anatomy of Truth” 13). In this state of ek-stasis, “outstanding” or standing aside from ourselves, we are split from ourselves to join in an ecstatic union with God. Or, to put it another way, in witnessing an art so pure that it coincides with the primal generative forms of nature, the individual grasps the Mind of the Creator as identical with the mind and heart of mankind.
As we have seen, Thoreau was at least as equally concerned as Emerson with discovering the laws of nature. Contrary to Emerson's ideal of a perfect union with the mind of the Creator, however, Thoreau's observations had informed him of the profound difficulty of viewing an ordered universe as a temporal being. For while Thoreau may have insisted that nature was perfectly regular, he often found his measuring instruments improperly designed to record the precision of God's handiwork. As Thoreau states: "It takes us many years to find out that Nature repeats herself annually. But how perfectly regular and calculable all her phenomena must appear to a mind that has observed her for a thousand years" (Journal v. 13: 279). Quite obviously, the mind of the human being who observes nature's patterns is not the same mind who has created the universe. Because just as strongly as Thoreau believed the world to be God's text book he also saw mankind as having lost its place in the Divine. Consequently, if the universe in its vast regularity is still divine, it has lost its human purpose, leaving humanity with an insufficient knowledge of nature's patterns to comprehend truth. Hence, God's intelligence and human intelligence are sharply distinguished for Thoreau, while Emerson and the Transcendentalists base their faith on a human participation in the divine mind.

Thoreau devoted the autumn of his life and career to learning the natural world well enough to identify her patterns. In her cyclical organization he saw that change could be celebrated within the context of a natural world that is bound by
certain temporal patterns, "for in repetition lay the hope of learning, correcting, refining, and profiting from past error" (Baym 226). Reading the late journals, though, one senses that Thoreau came to realize that his task of cataloguing and identifying all of nature's patterns, as he had originally conceived it, was impossible. On the contrary, looking at the natural world around him Thoreau increasingly came to advocate a philosophy that celebrated mankind's ignorance in the face of an awe-inspiring natural world as well as championing humanity's quest for truth by cataloguing empirical facts. "As it is important to consider Nature from the point of view of science... it is equally important often to ignore and forget all that men presume that they know, and take an original and unprejudiced view of nature..." (Journal v. 13: 168-69). Considering his profound need to study his world in the greatest possible detail, readers may ask how Thoreau came to repeatedly shift perspectives in his writings from those of an informed and seasoned naturalist to that of an awe-struck, but unsophisticated observer?

To answer this question it is first necessary to reiterate that in observing nature Thoreau was his own guide, meaning that his occupation of cataloguing the physical world was done absent of the aid of any scientific instruments that he could not fashion himself or the tutelage of a professionally trained naturalist. Necessarily, the downfall of this method of observation is that while Thoreau's knowledge of nature's patterns grew, so too did his need to consult sources other than his own mind and senses. For there reaches a point in any human education when an
individual realizes that all knowledge cannot be observed firsthand, but must be either discerned from a book or observed through the aid of artificial means.

Thoreau understood that in order to completely observe all of nature’s processes he might be required to use instruments and manuals to see what could not possibly be seen with the naked eye. Rather than relying on an aid to learning that was tied to artificial society, or fostered an unoriginal relationship to the universe, however, Thoreau chose to reject knowledge discerned through secondary sources as unnecessary to the individual. As Nina Baym remarks “fine discrimination and detailed knowledge” was “to be cultivated as an aid to appreciation;” Thoreau’s position being that of an “informed amateur” (228).

Science is inhuman. Things seen with a microscope begin to be insignificant. So described, they are as monstrous as if they should be magnified a thousand diameters. Suppose I should see and describe men and houses and trees and birds as if they were a thousand times larger than they are! With our prying instruments we disturb the balance and harmony of nature. (Journal v. 12: 171).

While the opinion that he was merely an “informed amateur” unnecessarily trivializes his profound scientific knowledge of the material world, the argument that Thoreau was principally concerned with knowledge as it is readily accessible to the most common of men is a compelling one. In Thoreau’s study, the aim of science was not to “study sound divorced from the ear which heard it” (Baym 232), but to lead mankind into a personal participation with nature so that he may learn the laws that explain him and his place in the universe. To study nature, then, becomes a program
of action in which the reconciliation of man and God is achieved by equating material with spiritual laws. Concurrently, if the laws of the universe exist in a way not knowable or perceptible by the individual, not only does the study of nature seem pointless but the whole man-centered cosmos comes into question.

If Thoreau could not accept that the laws of the universe can be unknowable to the individual without the help of tools outside of the senses, the next logical question to ask is how did he ultimately hope to uncover truth? While Thoreau did not subscribe to Emerson’s theory that the mind of the Creator and the mind of man are the same, he did provide a method by which humanity could grasp the plan of the Divine. Instead of studying nature as an objective scientist, Thoreau saw the naturalist’s life and identity as being so thoroughly connected to the land that he or she might be able to instinctively anticipate nature’s patterns absent of direct knowledge provided by the senses. For when the individual has learned nature so thoroughly that he may anticipate her, when he knows what comes next without thought, he will be able to discern ever finer patterns and more precise regularities previously unavailable to mankind. “The true man of science will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel better than other men... the most scientific will still be the healthiest and friendliest man, and possess a more perfect Indian wisdom” (Journal v. 5: 131). What is this Indian wisdom? Thoreau often saw Indian culture as the most closely approximating the ideal life of humanity because unlike “white” culture, Native Americans have not
corrupted their instinctive abilities to understand the universe by overly relying on artificial society to comprehend the world. As Transcendental as Emerson, then, Thoreau believed that God's power could be directly known by mankind through intuitions of his own divinity, but "more Calvinist than Emerson," he also "had a strong sense of man estranged from God" (Baym 224). God and the creation are taken away from man, opening the very gap anticipation was meant to close.

In the essays prepared for publication immediately before his death, Thoreau's work follows this theme with one major addition. Accepting at long last that God will not make him a partner he contents himself with learning nature as much for pleasure as for knowledge. The end of such essays as "Autumnal Tints" and "Wild Apples," for example, focus as much on the idea that nature should be enjoyed for the emotions they excite as for the knowledge they impart. "But much more important than a knowledge of the names and distinctions of color is the joy and exhilaration these colored leaves excite" (TNHE 162). Similarly, Thoreau begins his larger posthumously published work *Wild Fruits* with the statement that "the value of" wild fruits "is not in the mere possession or eating of them, but in the sight and enjoyment of them" (4). Quite clearly Thoreau equates overly technical and dry descriptions of nature as being tied to the language of artificial society and hence, unnecessary for the individual attempting to witness the Divine in the physical world.

I think that the most important requisite in describing an animal, is to be sure and give its character and spirit, for in that you have, without error, the sum and effect of all its parts, known and
unknown. You must tell what it is to man. Surely the most important part of an animal is its anima, its vital spirit, on which is based its character and all the peculiarities by which it most concerns us. Yet most scientific books that treat of animals leave this out altogether, and what they describe are as it were phenomenon of dead matter (Journal v. 13: 154-55).

How does an individual come to recognize the importance of an object in nature? Clearly, for Thoreau, man must first come to recognize what the object’s relationship is to himself. Only in this manner may the individual come to gauge the object’s effect upon him and subsequently maintain his line of sight in the center of the universe. However, man may only recognize the importance of objects around him through the art of careful anticipation, because nature will hide the secrets of her fruits from the individual who is unprepared to see them. As Thoreau often observes: “They are at first hard to detect in such places amid the red lower leaves, as if nature meant to conceal the fruit, especially if your mind is unprepared for it” (Wild Fruits 11).

Taken together then Thoreau’s understanding of nature’s patterns help him to understand his place in the universe. But while Agassiz and Emerson claimed authority by disappearing into the Author of all nature, Thoreau, by contrast, foregrounds his own presence, his labor and his voice, the longing that led him to nature and the sweet and stubborn imprecations of nature in his most social speculations. For in the act of entering into nature for pleasure Thoreau achieves a true sauntering of the eye. It frees his mind and heart so that he may anticipate the
order of the universe, rather than trying to comprehend the world where his physical senses are insignificant.

I must walk more with free senses. It is as bad to study stars and clouds as flowers and stones. I must let my sense wander as my thoughts, my eyes see without looking. Carlyle said that how to observe was to look, but I say that it is rather to see, and the more you look the less you will observe. I have the habit of attention to such excess that my sense get no rest, from suffer from a constant strain. Be not preoccupied with looking. Go not to the object, let it come to you. When I have found myself ever looking down and confining my gaze to the flowers, I have thought it might be well to get into the habit of observing the clouds as a corrective; but no! that study would be just as bad. What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering of the eye (Journal v. 4: 351).

By letting his senses wander in the manner of a casual observer Thoreau ensures that the life of the naturalist becomes not a professional occupation but an emblematic one--emblematic of the possibilities of all men. For while Thoreau ultimately wishes to discover truth among God’s handiwork, he is bereft of those limiting tools of the professional scientist that make journeys into nature secular rather than spiritual experiences. Unwilling to use spy glasses or a telescope, Thoreau holds that “the naked eye may easily see farther than the armed” (Journal v. 4: 471). Quite correctly Thoreau understands that anything seen with something other than the natural eye of man becomes a professional and necessarily privileged occupation. Since Thoreau does not champion the lives of some men, but off all men, he rejects the idea of specialized knowledge on the grounds that what man cannot learn with his own abilities is unnecessary and betrays his spiritual nature.
In the autumnal mood of his late writings Thoreau came to move away from the Emersonian belief that mankind could read divine law in nature. This is not to say, however, that he also moved away from his belief in the powers of human aspiration. On the contrary, if there is one thing apparent in Thoreau’s latter writings it is that he still celebrates the greatest possibilities of human ambition, but with a greater acceptance of the difficulty in properly measuring a complex and changing natural world. This difficulty though derives as much from the principle that the world was not perfectly created eons ago as from the fact that individual human perception is limited and hence improperly designed to read nature’s unity. As William Howarth remarks, “in the journal” and late natural history essays Thoreau “had begun to develop a new vision of nature, beyond the stable and orderly design of Locke and Newton that Harvard taught him, and toward the romantic vision of nature as a process of ceaseless, dynamic change, its patterns of life and death forming a single great poem” (27). Indeed, for Thoreau the most harmonious man will always be the poet, for in the best romantic tradition, the poet does not compete with a complex and mystified natural world, but embraces it with the spark of the human spirit, thereby bringing it into a wider, moral sphere. Hence, rather than being limited by nature’s power Thoreau sees man as striving to express the dynamic nature of his thoughts through the inspiration of the natural world.

“Horticulturalists think that they make flower-gardens, though in their thoughts they are barren and flowerless, but to the poet the earth is a flower-garden wherever he
goes or thinks” (Journal v. 10: 405). Thoreau thought it “horrible to imagine a
world in which men were irrelevant,” but “perhaps almost as horrible” to the writer
from Concord was the continued “spread of a type of men who thought they were
irrelevant; for we always lead, do we not, the life we imagine we are leading?”
(Baym 234). More than detailed knowledge and highly formulated scientific theory
then, Thoreau wished to reverse the growing trend of imagined insignificance he
saw in the people of his age. For among other things he hoped that the knowledge
and wisdom contained in his work after Walden would free mankind to lead lives
not tied to the rigid roles defined by institutions and religious dogma, but connected
to the multifaceted and fluent aspects of the natural world.

Thoreau died on May 6, 1862, at home and surrounded by the friends and
family that had been there for him throughout his life and career. Ironically,
Thoreau contracted his fatal illness while out counting tree rings during a
characteristically cold December day in Concord. Although it is impossible to
definitively know what thoughts raced through his mind on that fateful day, we do
know for certain that Thoreau had just recently read Harland Coulta’s’s What Can be
Learned from a Tree, and was focusing his energies on the familiar topic of
mankind’s relationship to nature. In late November, just a short time before his last
illness would enter his bloodstream, for example, Thoreau stood looking at a thick
young forest “where not a tree or a seed of a tree had existed a year before”
(TLOTM 385) and pointedly remarked: “I confess that I love to be convinced of
this inextinguishable vitality in nature. I would rather that my body be buried in a soil thus wide-awake than in a mere inert and dead earth” (Journal v. 14: 268). How strange it must have seemed for Thoreau, imagining for one moment his sister re-reading this passage back to him as he lay on his sick bed unable to read or write for himself, to hear his words so prophetically referring to his final fate before the harshness of the natural world would set the events in motion. Yet, in typical fashion, Thoreau did not fear or question the inevitable fate of death that lay ahead of him, but embraced it with a serenity that puzzled those around him. When his visitors prodded him to make his peace with God, he simply responded “I did not know we had ever quarreled” (Edward Emerson 118). Likewise, Sam Staples, Thoreau’s one-time jailer remarked that he had never seen a man “dying with so much pleasure and peace” (Staples qtd. in Richardson, TLOTM 389). Undoubtedly, for an individual concerned with the rhythms and patterns of nature, death, even if it was his own death, was just a symbol of the natural progression of the world, its ever renewing vitality. Resisting the impulse to obsessively peer into the future, therefore, Thoreau urges mankind to embrace “one world at a time” (Sanborn 67) and reject the temptation to view one’s life as separate from the renewing forces around him. Well said, Mr. Thoreau.
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