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**Thoreau and contemporary American nonfiction narrative prose  
of place**

**Walker, Pamela, Ph.D.**

**Rice University, 1991**

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RICE UNIVERSITY

THOREAU AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NONFICTION NARRATIVE PROSE OF  
PLACE

by

PAMELA WALKER

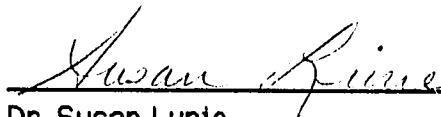
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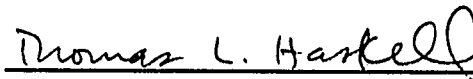
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# THOREAU AND CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NONFICTION NARRATIVE PROSE OF PLACE

Pamela Walker

## ABSTRACT

Thoreau is read chiefly as the author of the only two books he published during his life, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and Walden. However, Thoreau composed two other books, Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, which reveal a very different Thoreau in relation to time and place. A rhetorical analysis of the dialectic between lyrical, or metaphorical, nonnarrative and metonymic narrative in Thoreau's four books reveals a Thoreau increasingly engaged in natural and temporal human practice. By contrast with metaphorical writing's greater self-referentiality and insistence on its own mediation of experience, metonymy in conjunction with the mimesis of a narrative plot serves Thoreau simultaneously to mediate temporal human practice and yet also to point toward practice apart from mediation. In this way, metonymic narrative demonstrates simultaneously the necessity of human construction of experience and yet the contingency of human construction too. Such narrative, then, combines daring with deference to all that eludes construction. This disposition toward living and writing makes possible the articulation and exploration of crucial questions like how consciousness relates to practice, whether preservation of wilderness is necessary, and whether natural life is imperative and human life expendable.

A rhetorical analysis of Thoreau's four books not only reveals a more

historically engaged Thoreau than emerges when he is read as the author of only A Week and Walden, but it also shows Thoreau's rhetorical and thematic relation with several contemporary writers of nonfiction narrative prose of place. James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men perhaps more than any other single contemporary work embodies the conflict of rhetoric and purposes of all four of Thoreau's books. Looking at Agee in light of Thoreau as the author of four books illuminates within American nonfiction prose of place a persistent conflict between rhetorical strategies and related psychosexual and epistemological goals. However, the more this conflict resolves itself in favor of the rhetoric of metonymic narrative, as it does in Thoreau's Cape Cod and The Maine Woods and in William Least Heat Moon's Blue Highways, John McPhee's narratives, Ann Zwinger's Run, River, Run, and Edward Abbey's Desert Solitaire, the more salient become the themes of social criticism.

## Table of Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Introduction  | 1   |
| Part I. Thoreau as the Author of Four Books   |     |
| Chapter 1. The Thoreau of <u>A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers</u> and <u>Walden</u>   | 6   |
| Chapter 2. Thoreau's Traditional Place in American Literature and the Challenge of <u>Cape Cod</u> and <u>The Maine Woods</u>   | 47  |
| Part II. Thoreau and Contemporary Writers of Nonfiction Narrative Prose of Place: From the Importance of People in Relation to Place toward the Imperative of Place Apart from People |     |
| Chapter 3. James Agee, <u>Let Us Now Praise Famous Men</u>  | 85  |
| Chapter 4. William Least Heat Moon, <u>Blue Highways</u>  | 107 |
| Chapter 5. John McPhee and Several Narratives   | 116 |
| Chapter 6. Ann Zwinger, <u>Run, River, Run</u>  | 129 |
| Chapter 7. Edward Abbey, <u>Desert Solitaire</u>  | 137 |
| Conclusion  | 148 |



## Introduction

Thoreau is read chiefly as the author of the only two books he published during his life, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and Walden. However, Thoreau composed two other books, Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, which reveal a very different Thoreau in relation to time and place. That these last two books were published posthumously seems to account slightly if at all for why readers traditionally have given them only a negligible role in trying to understand Thoreau and his place in American literature. A much greater factor in the relative neglect of these two books probably inheres in the category of travel literature to which they frequently have been consigned, a category which Thoreau himself in Walden disparages as a shallow and shameful waste of time and from which his nonnarrative style in both A Week and Walden redeems these first two books, not only for Thoreau but for most of Thoreau's readers too.

Although persistent challenges to notions of a literary canon have done much to promote critical attention to texts in previously neglected or excluded categories, nevertheless even prominent travel writers in our own time, much like Thoreau in his, apologize for their type of writing. Paul Theroux, for example, begins an essay which appeared in the New York Times Book Review of July 30, 1989, with the admission,

I used to have some sympathy with the bewildered browser in a bookstore who, seeing the stacks of travel books, asked, "What are they *for*?" Until recently I felt that was a fair question. The travel book had always seemed to me a somewhat insufficient form. Why write in *that* country? What's the occasion? What's the point? So often such journeys appeared little more than excuses for authors in search of material in rather suspicious outings, I always thought.

But in the course of his essay, Theroux briefly reviews several travel narratives which provide various understandings, psychological, sociological, and topological, of places and people in relation to places, and his essay ends with an affirmation of the epistemological value of travel writing: "The job of the travel writer is to go far and wide, to make voluminous notes, to tell the truth. There is immense drudgery in the job. But the book ought to live and, if it is truthful, it ought to be prescient without making predictions." Reading Cape Cod and The Maine Woods in contrast to A Week and Walden shows that Thoreau discovers and commits himself to the same epistemological potential in travel narrative.

To probe this change in Thoreau, however, and on this basis to explore his relation to writers to whom he has not been adequately related, I use not the category of "travel writing" but rather the category of "nonfiction narrative prose of place." One value of this category is that it encompasses all of Thoreau's four books, his travels and his temporary settlement at Walden alike. Accordingly, the category facilitates considering Thoreau in relation to narratives both of travel, like Ann Zwinger's Run, River, Run, and of settlement, like Edward Abbey's Desert Solitaire. In addition, "place" instead of "travel" has the virtue of obviating any dichotomy between narratives about unsettled, or natural, places on the one hand and, on the other hand, settled places, a dichotomy which terms like "nature writing" along with "travel writing" imply. This obviation accordingly enables my examination of Thoreau's relation to writers like James Agee, William Least Heat Moon, and John McPhee (in some but not all of his work) who are less concerned with nature, or place apart from people, than concerned with people in settled relation to place. In sum, the category of nonfiction narrative

prose of place emphasizes narrative method itself as content and ascribes little if any value to subject or setting isolated from narrative mode of apprehension and representation.

This attention to narrative form as content highlights how A Week's and Walden's predominantly nonnarrative style enacts a displacement of the self into atemporal consciousness and, in contrast, how Cape Cod and The Maine Woods effect a replacement of the self into temporal space and practice through a metonymic narrative style. Thoreau, that is, becomes increasingly interested not in escaping his historical situation but in participating in it actively and critically, in knowing it and himself in terms of it. One of his major discoveries and abiding concerns is the diminishment of the natural and human ecology of places; his narrative writing simultaneously exposes and critiques this diminishment with a force that eludes his nonnarrative writing. And it is mainly on the basis of narrative's capacity to expose and criticize ecological diminishment that I explore Thoreau's relation to five contemporary writers of nonfiction narrative prose of place.

So, after first looking at Thoreau as the author of four books rather than only of two, I examine James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and William Least Heat Moon's Blue Highways in relation to Thoreau. This comparison links Thoreau to writers that reading him in terms of only his first two books has obscured his connection with. I then go on to explore Thoreau's relation to various narratives by John McPhee, to Ann Zwinger's Run, River, Run, and finally to Edward Abbey's Desert Solitaire, the sort of writers more usually associated with Thoreau because of the prominence they give to nature, or place apart from people. And yet, as I argue and attempt to show, the association of even writers like these with Thoreau is inadequate unless

it encompasses Thoreau's authorship not just of A Week and Walden but also of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods. In this area of my study, Annie Dillard's Pilgrim at Tinker Creek is perhaps the most conspicuously absent text. I exclude it because, by Dillard's apparent design and by virtue of its consistently nonnarrative, metaphorical style, the book lends itself to comparison with Thoreau almost exclusively in terms of Walden. To discuss this or any text on this traditional basis, it seems to me, would be to cover already much covered ground. My sense that this would be so seems substantiated by the rewards of my focus on McPhee, Zwinger, and Abbey. For relating the Thoreau of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods to McPhee, Zwinger, and Abbey produces perhaps the most interesting and unexpected discovery of my project: Thoreau's anticipation of the contemporary notion that natural life is imperative and human life expendable.

Thoreau's anticipation of this recent, ethically radical position I attribute not to any personal prescience on his part, but (and to resort again to Theroux's incisive affirmation of the epistemological value of travel narrative) to the prescient potential of narrative itself. My appreciation of this prescience, or knowingness, of narrative in contrast with other modes of apprehension and stylistic representation has been eclectically informed by various literary critics and theorists, among them Georg Lukacs, Fredric Jameson, Raymond Williams, Paul Ricoeur, Frank Kermode, and, though I do not have occasion to cite him in this study, Hayden White. Informed by these theorists, a major premise of my study is that a narrative mediation of experience more than any other form of mediation has the potential to point to experience apart from its own linguistic construction of it, and yet at the same time, narrative also necessarily demonstrates the dependence of

experience constructed as such upon narrative, upon narrator. However, because I am not interested in theory in and of itself but only insofar as it enables me to articulate more clearly my own more pedestrian, more empirically derived senses of textual issues, I have read only partially in narrative or any other literary theory. Instead of theory, I have concentrated on the striking differences between Thoreau's first two books and his last two, and on the basis of the significance I see in this difference, I relate Thoreau to five contemporary writers whose works seem to me most to demonstrate the same concerns.

## Part I. Thoreau as the Author of Four Books

### Chapter I. The Thoreau of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers and Walden

Thoreau's four majors works, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, Cape Cod, and The Maine Woods, variously enact an ambivalence toward temporal human experience and historical consciousness by means of a dialectical interplay between nonnarrative and narrative modes of representation. A desire to deny temporal experience a determinant role in the constitution of value produces nonnarrative meditation which gives preeminence to atemporal consciousness. In contrast to and in conflict with this repudiation of temporality, a desire to affirm the validity of the temporal produces narrative. While this interplay between nonnarrative and narrative persists in different dynamics throughout Thoreau's majors works as a process of thought and never resolves into any synthesis, a consideration of the works in the order of final composition for publication in book form illuminates Thoreau's development as a writer and as a man. "To write in different ways is to live in different ways," according to Raymond Williams,<sup>1</sup> and Thoreau's books evince as much. For A Week and Walden avow the received authority of transcendentalism, while Cape Cod and The Maine Woods assert rather the authority of Thoreau's own more practical consciousness, the consciousness, that is, of "what is actually being lived and not only what...is thought is being lived."<sup>2</sup> Or, in Thoreau's words: "The true poem is not that

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 205.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

which the public read. There is always a poem not printed on paper, coincident with the production of this, stereotyped in the poet's life. It is *what he has become through his work*<sup>3</sup>

As indicated by the interplay between nonnarrative and narrative within each and over the course of Thoreau's four books, Thoreau moves from an alienated stance of repudiation of the validity of temporal experience and its narrative representations to an increasingly participatory affirmation of the value of "sensuous human activity,"<sup>4</sup> and its narrative representations. In other words, the dialectic between nonnarrative and narrative in Thoreau's four books lends credence to theories that narrative not only is a primary cognitive act<sup>5</sup> but also is a "formal sign and concrete expression" of being "conceived as social and historical substance."<sup>6</sup> That is, the predominance of nonnarrative in A Week and Walden points to an alienated repudiation of the value of temporal being as such while predominance of narrative in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods points to unalienated, practical consciousness affirmatively engaged in sensuous human activity.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1985), 278-79, Thoreau's emphases. Hereafter in the text as A Week.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Porter, Seeing and Being (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981). Porter follows Marx in defining history as "sensuous human activity," a definition which encompasses nature as part of a humanly mediated temporality.

<sup>5</sup> Paul John Eakin, Fictions in Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 131-35, in direct reference to Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Louis O. Mink, "History and Fiction as Modes of Comprehension," New Literary History 1 (1969-1970), 541-58; and Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in On Narrative, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 169-90.

<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, Marxism and Form (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 205, based on Lukacs' "valorization of narrative" in his Theory of the Novel as indicative of "a preoccupation which is increasingly central to the most divergent schools of modern thought," i.e. an insistence on the relation between narrative and being understood as social and historical. See also Jay Clayton, "Narrative and Theories of Desire," Critical Inquiry 16 (1989), 33-53; Clayton argues that, "Both narrative and mimesis are strategies for placing us within a historically constructed world. As Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur and others have demonstrated, our very concept of history is dependent on narrative" (45).

Although A Week was first published in 1849 and Walden in 1854, Thoreau composed the first (and later only insignificantly altered) version of A Week and the earliest version of Walden by May, 1847, near the end of his residence at Walden.<sup>7</sup> Thoreau was not quite thirty years old and was still very directly influenced by Emerson and Emerson's romantic response to the social conditions of the time. Carolyn Porter characterizes Emerson's pre-Civil War America as a period of capitalistic industrial development marked increasingly by the division of labor and "division between production and consumption, so that the world of production recedes into the distance before the eyes of the dominant social order's members."<sup>8</sup> This economic rationalization, in other words, brings about a "reification of consciousness," the sense that even though "man makes his world," the role of "sensuous human activity" is obscured by the economic commodity structure and so "takes on the appearance of an alien, autonomous, given world."<sup>9</sup> In these conditions, man "assumes a detached contemplative stance not only toward an objective external world but toward the objectified constructs of his own mind, which he takes to be incorporated in the external world."<sup>10</sup> With regard to Emerson in particular and to romantics in general, Porter discovers that "the romantic effort to restore man's active participation in making the world he confronts can only reconstitute his activity on a nonsensuous, idealist ground," for the idealist ground of detached contemplation precludes "the recognition of history's primacy as 'sensuous human activity,'" a recognition

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<sup>7</sup> William Howarth, The Book of Concord (New York: The Viking Press, 1982), 42. My discussion of publication and textual history relies also on Linck C. Johnson's historical introduction to the Princeton edition of A Week (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 433-500.

<sup>8</sup> Carolyn Porter, Seeing and Being, 89.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 25.



which necessarily occurs "from a vantage within that activity."<sup>11</sup> Emerson, then, remained alienated, or reified in consciousness. Thoreau demonstrates a similar alienation in A Week and Walden, the two most romantic of his books,<sup>12</sup> but Cape Cod and The Maine Woods enact a much fuller participation in the human and natural history of the time. Thoreau, as Porter incidentally observes, shows "what may follow from reattaching the 'I' who sees nature to the 'I' who inhabits it," for "[v]ision becomes a form of action for Thoreau, who, unlike Emerson, loved nature and not the idea of it."<sup>13</sup> The interplay between narrative and nonnarrative within and over the course of Thoreau's four books traces the dynamics of Thoreau's movement from an alienated, idealist detachment from temporality to practical engagement in it.

Of Thoreau's four books, A Week is the least narrative and most meditative. Although Thoreau and his brother traveled on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers from August 31st to September 13th of 1839, Thoreau's project in this book is not to represent the trip but rather to make myth, to represent the redemption of mundane experience into essence through cosmic, cyclical regeneration in nature.<sup>14</sup> According to Eric Sundquist, "Thoreau is

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 28, 29.

<sup>12</sup> See discussions of Thoreau as a romantic in Sattelmeyer, Thoreau's Reading (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 27-77; Howarth, The Book of Concord, 53; Linck C. Johnson, Thoreau's Complex Weave (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1986), 82-83; Lawrence Buell, Literary Transcendentalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 207; James McIntosh, Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 210.

<sup>13</sup> Porter, Seeing and Being, 113.

<sup>14</sup> For example, L. C. Johnson, Thoreau's Complex Weave, 83, calls A Week Thoreau's "version of a seven-days creation"; Buell, Literary Transcendentalism, 163, observes that, "Thoreau's two major books [A Week and Walden] are organized around cycles of nature, which also symbolize the process of spiritual growth" and "delineate excursions into nature which fulfill a mythic pattern of a quest and return." Robert D. Richardson in Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 90, 91, sees Thoreau's mythmaking as the means to demonstrate that the "poet was neither helped nor hindered by the times in which he lived; he had

torn between two worlds," the historical world "which he seemingly wants to repudiate" and an Edenic other world which "he can never have."<sup>15</sup> Thoreau's repudiation of history in favor of myth, however, is qualified and frustrated by his choice of the literary excursion form, a form which traditionally relied on epistolary or journalistic methods of narrative organization.<sup>16</sup> The form of The Week, then, as Jameson explains of form in general, becomes "the final articulation of the deeper logic of the content itself,"<sup>17</sup> here an articulation of Thoreau's desire to repudiate history by making myth and yet the frustration of that desire by the seduction of the temporal, too, as manifested in his choice of a narrative form.

In his research on Thoreau's reading, Sattelmeyer finds that Thoreau "read widely in travel literature during the late 1840s," and moreover that, "his reading of travel books is perhaps the most constant feature among his literary interests from his college years until his final illness."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Buell points out that Thoreau's choice of the literary excursion indicates the popularity that travel writing has always enjoyed in America and yet also indicates a characteristically transcendentalist emphasis upon "the importance of the individual mind over . . . empirical fact."<sup>19</sup> Buell explains that this modification usually produces a more or less balanced interplay between narration of events and speculation detached from event. However, no such balance occurs in A Week; rather, narrative sequence is continuously disrupted or broken altogether by nonnarrative meditation. This repeated

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only to place himself in a simple and original relation to nature" and "the myth would arise naturally from nature to be expressed by the poet."

<sup>15</sup> Eric Sundquist, Home as Found (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 42.

<sup>16</sup> Buell, Literary Transcendentalism, 192.

<sup>17</sup> Fredric Jameson, Marxism and Form, 329.

<sup>18</sup> Sattelmeyer, Thoreau's Reading, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Buell, Literary Transcendentalism, 196, 198.

disruption enacts throughout the text the same ambivalence toward temporality enacted by Thoreau's choice of narrative form to write nonnarratively.

While Thoreau's violation in his own excursion of the form's narrative potential constitutes what is perhaps a mostly unconscious ambivalence toward temporality, this violation also constitutes a conscious critique of travel writing as a genre, a critique which is explicit in both Walden and A Week and which specifically repudiates sequential narrative representation and advocates instead "dehistoricized" mythic representation. In Walden Thoreau disparages his sometime resorting to travel writing rather than reading the Iliad: "I read one or two shallow books of travel in the intervals of my work, till that employment made me ashamed of myself, and I asked where it was then that / lived."<sup>20</sup> In A Week, although he praises Alexander Henry's Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories, he praises the book because of its exceptional relationship to its form, which is chiefly that the book effects an extraction of things temporal into an atemporal, extra-historical realm: "What is most interesting and valuable in it. . . is not the materials for that history of Pontiac, or Braddock, or the Northwest, which it furnishes; not the annals of the country, but the natural facts, or perennials, which are ever without date. When out of history truth shall be extracted, it will have shed its date like withered leaves" (A Week, 177; Thoreau's emphases). Or as Thoreau reads the book, it does so, fulfilling his desire to experience time not shallowly on the surface of a linear sequence of days or years, but as if outside of any calendrical accounting of time and in the timeless, primordial depth of nature's cyclical

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<sup>20</sup> Henry David Thoreau, Walden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 177; Thoreau's emphasis. Hereafter in the text as Walden.

regeneration. To pierce the narrative surface of history, to plunder, to excise, to extract and then to reassemble these extractions in some atemporal way is the desire in much of his reading and writing in A Week. Such reading and writing are explicitly the means toward a satisfaction unavailable day to day in his historical moment:

This generation has come into the world fatally late for some enterprises. Go where we will on the *surface* of things, men have been there before us. . . It is all superficial living. . . We do not avoid evil by fleeing before it, but by rising above or diving below its plane; as the worm escapes drought and frost by boring a few inches deeper. The frontiers are not east or west, north or south, but wherever a man *fronts* a fact." (A Week, 248; Thoreau's emphases.)

To write not narratives of human practice in history but nonnarratives of confrontational consciousness outside of temporality is the controlling impulse of Thoreau's disruption of narrative with nonsequential, often disjunctive mediation in A Week. River travel itself becomes a metaphor of Thoreau's process of consciousness and composition as Thoreau represents himself getting off the earth, off the ground of history, the scene of sensuous human activity and instead penetrating, merging into a fluid space and time within nature but outside of history. Rivers

are the natural highways of all nations, not only levelling the ground and removing obstacles from the path of the traveller, quenching his thirst and bearing him on their bosoms, but conducting him through the most interesting scenery, the most populous portions of the globe, and where the animal and vegetable kingdoms attain their greatest perfection.

I had often stood on the banks of the Concord, watching the lapse of the current, an emblem of all progress, following the same law with the system, with time, and all that is made; the weeds at the bottom gently bending down the stream, shaken by the watery wind, still planted where their seeds had sunk, but ere long to die and go down likewise; the shining

pebbles, not yet anxious to better their condition, the chips and weeds, the occasional logs and stems of trees that floated past, fulfilling their fate, were objects of singular interest to me, and at least I resolved to launch myself on its bosom and float whither it would bear me. (A Week, 13)

Although he sees the current as an agent and an emblem of progression, his simultaneously seeing the river as a bosom, a safe, sustaining maternal space, renders the river also an agent and an emblem of psychological regression. He wants, impossibly, to be in time but not of it, to be in some cosmic realm of time but not in history.

Just as Thoreau's gesture of choosing a narrative form to break repeatedly with nonnarrative meditation indicates simultaneously a repudiation of temporality and yet its seduction of him too, so does Thoreau's excerptive process, or style, itself. Sundquist analyzes Thoreau's multifaceted notion of cultivation and finds that Thoreau's writing is a phallic gesture which implicates Thoreau in the historical ground he tries, by launching himself onto a river, to escape. According to Sundquist, Thoreau's stylus is "a tool of cultivation, a literary plow which is at once a brutal weapon of incision and an instrument of insemination" which places Thoreau in direct relation to other American texts that "link eroticism and regeneration with acts of totemic violence."<sup>21</sup> The nonnarrative style wrought by Thoreau's stylus, then, serves him to break into and out of temporality by breaking out of narrative form. Moreover, style enables him to deny complicity in historical violence by producing a mythic "world elsewhere" as Poirier calls the imaginary places commonly created by American writers who would locate meaning outside of history.<sup>22</sup> Finding

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<sup>21</sup> Sundquist, Home as Found, 59.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Poirier, A World Elsewhere, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966).

temporal experience and its narrative representations lacking, Thoreau resorts to a recreation of mythic consciousness, which Peter Brooks notes that many moderns have done. Myth for moderns serves as a "providential plot" in which to subsume individual experience and thus render it significant as a repetition of a story with established meaning,<sup>23</sup> or, in effect, extra-historical meaning.

Thoreau's resort to myth in A Week is not only a major stylistic process and product but also a major subject of its nonnarrative meditation. Like Emerson, who, according to L. C. Johnson, finds fault with "the perpetual self-preservation of the traveller" unable to "forget himself and yielding to the new world of facts that environ him, utter without memory that which they say,"<sup>24</sup> Thoreau, reading and writing within and yet against travel narrative in writing A Week, advocates reading and writing mythology because it transcends the personal and the temporal:

mythology is only the most ancient history and biography. So far from being false or fabulous in the common sense, it contains only enduring and essential truth, the I and you, the here and there, the now and then, being omitted. . . We moderns, on the other hand, collect only the raw materials of biography and history, "memoirs to serve for a history," which itself is but materials to serve for a mythology. (A Week, 49-50)

Although in Walden Thoreau admits that "it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking" (Walden, 3), in A Week he wants to obscure this ontological necessity and so he frequently omits the first person and instead refers without clear individuation to himself and his brother in terms like "the one" and "the other."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 280.

<sup>24</sup> Johnson, Thoreau's Complex Weave, 6.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, A Week, 100.

Just as the personal is to be transcended, so is the concrete factuality of nature: "Books of natural history aim commonly to be hasty schedules of God's property, by some clerk. . . .They do not in the least teach the divine view of nature, but the popular view. . . .A work should contain pure discoveries, glimpses of terra firma, though by shipwrecked mariners, and not the art of navigation by those who have never been out of sight of land" (A Week, 79-80). Thoreau wants to see as a god or a god-like mythic hero like Odysseus sees, not as ordinary man ordinarily sees, and this vision means getting off the earth, taking to water, or as he also does, going to mountain tops where clouds as well as distance obscure terrestriality. Even if shipwrecked or otherwise stranded, gleanings of perception will remain, pure discoveries, extractions, distillations of divine consciousness outside of temporality to be reassembled nonnarratively as atemporal myth.

Ultimately the best travel is not travel at all but reading classical authors: "That highway down from Homer and Hesiod to Horace and Juvenal is more attractive than the Appian. Reading the classics, or conversing with those old Greeks and Latins in their surviving works, is like walking amid the stars and constellations, a high and by way serene to travel" (A Week, 183). Thoreau finds it better still to appropriate parts of classical and other writing into his own, as Emerson does in his essays. Through quotation, Thoreau figures himself first as a reader but almost simultaneously as a writer too. This dual maneuver, in fact, partly constitutes what Julie Ellison in her study of Emerson calls a paradigmatic plot for romantic writers of nonfictional prose:

In the "earliest" phase (not necessarily corresponding to the beginning of the essay), the imagination of the figure I will call the "reader" projects its powers onto the "writer" in order

to recognize in that figure its own alienated authority. Overwhelmed by what appears to be an external source of inspiration, the reader reacts with defensive aggression. He draws on the higher criticism, comparative mythology, or some other hermeneutic process to disintegrate the individual author, replacing him with less threatening collectivities. Like Emerson during his post-graduate school education, he learns to dissolve texts into their sources. He writes by reassembling the fragments of tradition--that is, by quoting.<sup>26</sup>

This plot in effect elaborates Brooks's providential plot in specific relation to Thoreau as he is influenced by Emerson. Similar to Emerson, then, Thoreau's world elsewhere consists of perceptions objectified into a seeming "materiality of thoughts and words," which according to Ellison render the world "into a collection of metaphors, all vehicles for the same tenor." In this process of seizing and seemingly solidifying perceptions, the reader-writer experiences a "sensation of power between one momentarily frozen percept and the next, in the instant of undoing their artificial importance. . .[as the] mind discovers that it is greater than the thoughts it entertains."<sup>27</sup> Thoreau explains the process and plot of such mastery in this way: "books are the society we keep; to read only the serenely true; never statistics, nor fiction, nor news, nor reports, nor periodicals, but only great poems, and when they failed, read them again, or perchance write more" (A Week, 78).

By incorporating such gestures as these, Thoreau's nonnarrative style signifies a denial of being understood primarily as sensuous human activity and signifies instead an opposite understanding, an attitude that Lukacs calls an intensely lyrical subjectivity. In its most solipsistic

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<sup>26</sup> Julie Ellison, Emerson's Romantic Style (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 77.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.



expression, lyrical subjectivity finds any effort to realize itself in temporal experience humiliating if not altogether hopeless and, in the same aggressive means discerned by Brooks and Ellison, Lukacs notes too that this intensely lyrical subjectivity "snatches fragments out of the atomised chaos which is the outside world and melds them down. . .into a newly created, lyrical cosmos of pure interiority."<sup>28</sup> One of A Week's most discretely narrative episodes, the Saddleback ascent, enacts the conflict of lyrical subjectivity with temporality and points to the difficulty of achieving and maintaining such an attitude in the realm of sensuous human activity or even in narrative representation. In other words, the dialectical interplay between nonnarrative and narrative within the episode illuminates in little the dialectic of the larger book.

Just prior to the Saddleback episode, Thoreau has begun "Tuesday" with a one-paragraph narration of his and his nameless companion's morning preparations in the fog. Thoreau breaks the narrative with the second paragraph, in which he begins to meditate on the relation of fog and mist to the perception of truth. Fog is a local and temporary illusion, not universal and permanent, although it creates the illusion. As if to show proof, this meditation leads Thoreau to recall that on top of Saddleback he saw this often hidden truth manifested when, stationed above the clouds, he saw the sun rise. "As we cannot distinguish objects through the dense fog," Thoreau begins the Saddleback digression, "let me tell this story at more length" (A Week, 147). So the narrative in inception is illustrative of meditation, subordinate to it, indicative of the priority of lyrically subjective consciousness over temporal event.

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<sup>28</sup> Georg Lukacs, Theory of the Novel (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 114.

Only within the narrative itself, considered apart from its relation to the preceding and proceeding text, does Thoreau seem more or less equally engaged in sensuous experience and transcendence of that experience simultaneously. As McIntosh observes, Thoreau struggles to be both empiricist and idealist,<sup>29</sup> displaying a characteristically romantic conflict between two oppositional tendencies that generate the episode's "complexity and nervousness."<sup>30</sup> This strained, momentary convergence of conflicting desires is also what gives Thoreau satisfaction and seems to impel the narrative toward the climax of the sunrise. While camped near the summit the night before, Thoreau exults that an act as ordinary as reading "scraps of newspapers. . .at a vast advantage" enables him to experience, and not just envision through contemplation, a unity of the sensual and temporal with atemporal, subjective essence: "commerce is really as interesting as nature. The very names of the commodities were poetic and as suggestive as if they had been inserted into a pleasing poem." Indeed, the scraps of newspaper "seemed a divine intervention, by which not mere shining coin, but shining and current thoughts, could be brought up and left there" (A Week, 150, 151).

This tenuous convergence of conflicting tendencies persists unresolved throughout the episode, according to McIntosh, but McIntosh analyzes the episode most closely only up to the moment of sunrise and not subsequently. Even as the narrative moves toward sunrise, however, idealist and empiricist tendencies diverge more than converge. For as Thoreau continues to narrate, he moves toward abstracted contemplation, but his narrative cannot sustain the drive toward this end and begins to break into meditation. The narrative,

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<sup>29</sup> McIntosh, Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist, 158.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

then, leads toward the visionary consciousness of intense lyrical subjectivity yet simultaneously to its dissipation as Thoreau aggressively tries to retrieve vision by means of and for atemporal meditation from the temporal, from the narrative which cannot sustain such consciousness. He tries first to retrieve the dissipating vision with meditative appropriation of others' texts and finally by salvaging the Saddleback digression itself to illustrate his own renewal of the prior meditation that the digression interrupted.

As the sun rises, Thoreau discovers "the new world into which I had risen in the night, the new terra firma perchance of my future life." Yet this is no terra firma at all but somewhere beyond place and time: "There was not a crevice left through which the places we name Massachusetts or New York could be seen, while I still inhaled the clear atmosphere of a July morning--if it were July there. . . .It was such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise" (A Week, 153). Thoreau goes on to write of the sunrise that, "It was a favor for which to be forever silent to be shown this vision," and thus expresses not only awe for the experience but perhaps also anxiety about his power to sustain his narrative of it as well, for within three sentences, as if to demonstrate narrative defeat, he interjects a quotation which deflects the achievement of transcendence within temporal experience onto its achievement through poetry, or abstracted, subjective consciousness, instead:

As I had climbed above storm and cloud, so by successive days'  
journeys I might reach the region of eternal day, beyond the  
tapering shadow of the earth; ay,

"Heaven itself shall slide,  
And roll away, like melting stars that glide  
Along their oily threads."

But when its own sun began to rise on this pure world, I found myself a dweller in the dazzling halls of Aurora, into which poets have had but a partial glance over the eastern hills, drifting amid the saffron-colored clouds, and playing with the rosey fingers of the Dawn, in the very path of the Sun's chariot, and sprinkled with its dewy dust, enjoying the benignant smile, and near at hand the far-darting glances of the god. (A Week, 153-54)

That no poet has seen fully what he sees at first makes him superior to them by virtue of temporal, empirical experience. But Thoreau's disruption of his narrative displaces the visionary experience from temporal experience and simultaneously exposes the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of maintaining such consciousness in time.

Thoreau compounds his sense of defeat by admitting that "my muse would fail to convey an impression of the gorgeous tapestry by which I was surrounded" (A Week, 154), but then he tries by quoting aggressively to simulate this elusive visionary consciousness. This gesture fails too, however, as his successive interjections beginning disjunctively with "But" emphasize:

Here, as on earth, I saw the gracious god

"Flatter the mountain-tops with sovereign eye,

Gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy."

But never here did "Heaven's sun" stain himself.

But, alas, owing, as I think, to some unworthiness in myself, my private sun did stain himself, and

"Anon permit the basest clouds to ride  
With ugly wrack on his celestial face,"--

for before the god had reached the zenith the heavenly pavement rose and embraced my wavering virtue, or rather I sank down again into that "forlorn world," from which the

celestial sun had hid his visage. . . (A Week, 154)

Thoreau's subsequent and final quotation is a further admission of defeat in his desire to incorporate ideality not only in temporality or in its narrative representation but even in lyric, meditative consciousness:

"How may a worm that crawls along the dust,  
Clamber the azure mountains, thrown so high,  
And fetch from thence thy fair idea just,  
That in those sunny courts doth hidden lie,  
Clothed with such light as blinds the angel's eye?  
How may weak mortal ever hope to file  
His unsmooth tongue, and his deprostrate style?  
O, raise thou from his corse thy now entombed exile!"  
(A Week, 154)

Idealist subjectivity proves at best only momentarily possible in temporal experience or in its narrative representation, and, even in meditation proves possible only as, paradoxically, defeated yet hopeful desire.

Thoreau concludes the Saddleback digression with a brief narrative paragraph. Much like the episode itself, however, the paragraph moves from desire for temporal incorporation of ideality to frustration of that desire and then finally to meditation:

In the preceding evening I had seen the summits of new and yet higher mountains, the Catskills, by which I might hope to climb to heaven again, and had set my compass for a fair lake in the southwest, which lay in my way, for which I now steered, descending the mountain by my own route, on the side opposite to that by which I had ascended, and soon found myself in the region of cloud and drizzling rain, and the inhabitants affirmed that it had been a cloudy and drizzling day wholly.  
(A Week, 154-55)

Thus encapsulated, thus condensed and distilled, the Saddleback narrative now can figure in Thoreau's resumed meditation on the relation of perception of truth to obscuring agents like fog, mist, and other aqueous vapors in

embedded, fragmentary form as an image of the ephemerality of youthful aspiration. Subsuming the narrative into meditation, Thoreau glosses: "The most stupendous scenery ceases to be sublime when it becomes distinct, or in other words limited, and the imagination is no longer encouraged to exaggerate it. . . .Nature is not made after such fashion as we would have her" (A Week, 156). Yet such aspiration even if frustrated in experience may subsequently serve in distilled form to purify and infuse the more mature mind and its meditative travels:

So near along life's stream are the fountains of innocence and youth making fertile its sandy margin; and the voyageur will do well to replenish his vessels often at these uncontaminated sources. Some youthful spring, perchance, still empties with tinkling music into the oldest river, even when it is falling into the sea, and we imagine that its music is distinguished by the river-gods from the general lapse of the stream, and falls sweeter on their ears in proportion as it is nearer to the ocean. As the evaporations of the river feed thus these unsuspected springs which filter through its banks, so, perchance, our aspirations fall back again in springs on the margin of life's stream to refresh and purify it. (A Week, 157)

The Saddleback narrative, then, becomes a parable, a verbal icon to illustrate the larger meditation that envelopes it.

Thoreau's extravagant process of fragmenting and appropriating narrative into a distilled, residual illustration for meditation points to the transcendentalist insistence upon perception as experience, as being itself, especially visual perception. Emerson's representation of himself as a transparent eyeball that annihilates empirical being and replaces it with sheer seeing is the most notable emblem of seeing as true, essential being, but Thoreau's final iconic use of his narrative enacts convolutedly the same idealist desire. In this convolution, not only does Thoreau enact being as

seeing, but he also points to a particular and prevalent intellectual manifestation of the economic process of rationalization or reification, the process of breaking formerly unified activities into distinct parts, including, according to Jameson, quantifying mental activities so that they become semi-autonomous, especially the sensory functions, and more particularly, the sense of sight. This seeming autonomy of the visual sense produces styles in art which often abandon any interest in the given objects of the temporal world and instead represent "the exercise of perception and the perceptual recombination of sense data as an end in itself." Jameson calls such production "an aestheticizing strategy" which is any strategy that attempts to represent the world "in terms of perception as a semi-autonomous activity."<sup>31</sup> This strategy and its products simultaneously serve to enact consciousness alienated from a rationalized daily life yet also to constitute "a Utopian compensation for everything lost" such as "the place of quality in an increasingly quantified world, the place of archaic feeling amid the desacralization. . . the place of sheer color and intensity within the grayness of measurable extension and geometrical abstraction."<sup>32</sup>

While Thoreau's style in A Week does not abandon all interest in the constituted objects of the temporal world, the nonnarrative, disjunctive imagistic quality of the book has led many readers to describe it as a mosaic.<sup>33</sup> Thoreau produces not a narrative of a time and place, as the title and narrative genre of travel writing would suggest, but a nonnarrative

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<sup>31</sup> Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 227, 229, 230.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 236, 237.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Howarth, The Book of Concord, 31; John Hildebidle, Thoreau, a Naturalist's Liberty (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983, 48; L. C. Johnson, Thoreau's Complex Weave, 225; James McIntosh, Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist, 44.

meditation composed mosaic-like of fragmented perceptions, shards of consciousness, to look at. In this way, Thoreau locates meaning outside of time, outside the scope of sensuous human activity and its narrative representation, and in some static, would-be made-up mythical place, nowhere and yet anywhere, dense with the material of time and yet somehow not of it. As such, A Week is finally less ethical or epistemological than aesthetic in its concerns. "Myth," Kermode explains in distinguishing between myths and fictions, "is a sequence of radically interchangeable gestures" while "fictions are for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change."<sup>34</sup> Thoreau's choice of a narrative form to write against and out of and into myth, into an artifact of and for detached aesthetic contemplation, reveal that when he wrote A Week, he wanted not so much to find things out but to find a way out of things.

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However motivated A Week may be by Thoreau's desire to escape history for a mythical world elsewhere, the text of Walden as published in 1854 as well as Thoreau's writing, reading, and travel during but especially after his 1845-1847 stay at Walden point to a life increasingly given to

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<sup>34</sup> Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 39.



finding things out, to knowing and affirming the value of temporal experience by probing human and natural history alike. His literary production while at Walden embodies this tension between escaping temporal things and exploring them. While his completion of A Week for its 1849 publication demonstrates mostly a desire to escape, his composition of the essay, "Ktaadn, and The Maine Woods" as well as a first draft of Walden chart a tentative shift toward exploration of the temporal. With regard to Thoreau's reading, Sattelmeyer discovers that by 1850 Thoreau's reading in the classics, poetry, and oriental religion declines, and he becomes systematic in his study of natural history, early American history, and North American Indian history, the three major subjects of the last decade of his life (1852-1862). Thoreau's reading of travel writing persists, often indistinguishable from more formal natural or civil historical studies,<sup>35</sup> studies which themselves are integrally related. According to Sattelmeyer, Thoreau's epistemology entails for any object of study "giving the sum of its histories, so to speak, and attempting to write a diachronic natural science in which the discoveries of the present day do not invalidate but rather take their place in succession with those of the past."<sup>36</sup> This epistemology and its method produce, then, "a distinctive mode of natural history writing in America, one that placed equal emphasis on the natural and the historical."<sup>37</sup> This distinctiveness is apparent not only in the late natural history essays such as "Wild Apples" and "The Succession of Forest Trees" (both presented as lectures in 1860) as Sattelmeyer shows, but

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<sup>35</sup> Sattelmeyer, Thoreau's Reading, 65, 66.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

also, in Hildebidle's view apparent as a basic method variously informing most of Thoreau's writings, even when his purposes are not scientific.<sup>38</sup>

Just as the constancy of Thoreau's reading of travel literature and his gradual shift away from the classics, poetry, and oriental texts in favor of civil and natural history indicate an increasing engagement with temporal experience as such, so too do his excursions, including the stay at Walden, and the journeys which, from the time of the Walden sojourn, become more frequent and often more arduous than, certainly, life at Walden, or the 1843 trip to Staten Island, and more strenuous too than the 1839 Concord and Merrimack trip. These trips include journeys to the Maine woods in 1846, 1853, and 1853; to Cape Cod in 1849, 1850, 1855, and 1857; to Canada in 1850 as an extension of a Cape Cod trip; and, finally, to Minnesota in 1861. Of all Thoreau's travels, perhaps the 1846 trip to Maine, which occurred about midway through his stay at Walden, is the most significant in its effect on his life and work. Although I will not look until later in my study at the narratives of this and two subsequent trips to Maine, which constitute The Maine Woods, the fourth and final book that Thoreau, as he was ill and dying, prepared for publication, a brief consideration of some of the scholarly speculation about the trip and Thoreau's earliest accounts of it are relevant to my examination of narrative in Walden.

Thoreau's first trip to Maine engages him with a much less domesticated nature than he previously had experienced. Especially his ascent of Mt. Katahdin, an ascent that he is only the sixth white man to make, introduces him to a wildness in nature that seems in its utterly alien materiality to defy absolutely his ability to account for it by subjecting the

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<sup>38</sup> Hildebidle, Thoreau, a Naturalist's Liberty, 5.

experience to his accustomed lyrically meditative mode of apprehension and representation. Although Frederick Garber discerns in none of Thoreau's works any "flexibility sufficient to take in Ktaadn," this finding seems determined more by Garber's rather static view of Thoreau as being basically always a romantic who primarily is engaged in redeeming experience by imaginative transcendence, however uneasy the occasional resistance of some experience to that enterprise may have made him.<sup>39</sup> By contrast to Garber, William Howarth explicitly and Robert Sattelmeyer implicitly afford a more dynamic and plausible view of the relation of Thoreau's first trip to Maine to Walden and other writing.

Noting that within three days of Thoreau's return from Maine to Walden Pond in September, 1846, Thoreau wrote a detailed chronological summary of the trip and then, until December, expanded the account to a total of a hundred and sixty-eight pages in his journal, Howarth observes that in contrast to nature in A Week and Walden, not only does this journal account point to a nature so wild that "previous seasons in his life seem 'unsubstantial and invisible,'" but this journal account is concomitantly more narrative and factual, thus marking a significant change in Thoreau's writing style and form.<sup>40</sup> In 1848, Thoreau revised this journal account into the lecture and essay published as "Ktaadn, and the Maine Woods" in five installments in Union Magazine, the New York Tribune, and The Student from July, 1848, to January, 1849, a period in which he continued to work on Walden. Howarth sees in this essay the beginning of the mature prose style of Walden and subsequent writing, a style characterized by greater realism than in writing such as A

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<sup>39</sup> Frederick Garber, Thoreau's Redemptive Imagination (New York: New York University Press, 1977), especially the chapter, "The Wild and the Good," 66-128.

<sup>40</sup> Howarth, The Book of Concord, 41.

Week as Thoreau "works *with* scenes and events rather than *against* them by inventing conceits. In this way, then, according to Howarth, "Ktaadn," teaches Thoreau how to write Walden.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, Sattelmeyer's assessment of the relations among Walden's parts suggests that Thoreau's travel, along with his reading shifts, from at least the Walden sojourn forward, clearly register in his writing. Sattelmeyer points out that "Economy" and "Where I lived and What I Lived For" were mostly finished in the first Walden draft of 1846-1847, whereas Thoreau wrote most of "The Pond in Winter," "Spring," and all of "Conclusion" between 1851 and 1854, a period in which, having by this time already traveled not only twice to Cape Cod but once also to Canada, he traveled a second time to Maine. In their concern with natural phenomena, these later parts of Walden, then, according to Sattelmeyer show Thoreau's increasing involvement in the study of natural history as he understood it to include civil history too.<sup>42</sup> That Walden's form is more narrative than A Week's articulates the altered content of Thoreau's work and life. That is, by contrast with A Week, which in its predominant nonnarrative meditation embodies, like a mosaic or some similar spatial and visual object, Thoreau's repudiation of temporal being for a kind of mythical, atemporal consciousness, Walden, with its more frequent narrative, embodies Thoreau's increasing engagement in temporal, sensuous human activity and affirms the value of practical consciousness.

And yet, although Walden is more narrative than A Week, more affirmative of practical consciousness, it is finally just as lyrically

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 46; Howarth's emphases.

<sup>42</sup> Sattelmeyer, Thoreau's Reading, 76.

visionary too, and so preemptory of any narrative counter-authorization of sensuous human activity as such. For while much of Walden narratively represents temporal experience and so asserts the authority of being as social and historical substance, narrative often becomes symbolic of atemporal, transcendental consciousness and so asserts the authority of detached contemplation as being. Such symbolic narrative as well as nonnarrative meditation serve finally not to repudiate temporal experience as thoroughly as in A Week but nevertheless to give preeminence to ahistorical consciousness. It is as if this dialectical relation in Walden between, on the one hand, narrative that is representational of sensuous human activity and, on the other hand, nonnarrative meditation and narrative that is symbolic of pure consciousness, embodies the tension between Thoreau's life as actually lived and life as thought to be lived according to an Emersonian paradigm of disembodied contemplation as being. In other words, Walden is at once programmatically transcendental and yet, in some of its narrative representation of human and natural history, subversive of that program too; it is at once in advocacy of and yet in antagonism to the man and the movement that from at least as early as 1850, Thoreau becomes increasingly independent of.<sup>43</sup>

A brief look at a passage about fish from Walden's "The Pond in Winter" as it contrasts with a passage about fish in the Concord River from A Week's "Saturday" reveals in part a major difference between the two texts in Thoreau's use or non-use of narrative as well as reveals in part the narrative dynamics of Walden itself. In A Week, the passage on fish is a nonnarrative, descriptive catalog of the species which inhabit the Concord, and it is part of

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<sup>43</sup> Howarth, The Book of Concord, 59.

a larger meditation on the survival of certain occupations, like fishing, endowed for Thoreau with mythical value by virtue of primitiveness, perennial persistence, and capacity ritualistically to regenerate spirit. Of a fisherman he calls "The Walton" of the Concord, Thoreau remarks that, "His fishing was not a sport, nor solely a means of subsistence, but a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world, just as the aged read their Bibles" (A Week, 22). This observation leads him into the catalog of fish and its rationale:

Whether we live by the seaside, or by the lakes and rivers, or on the prairie, it concerns us to attend to the nature of fishes, since they are not phenomena confined to certain localities only, but forms and phases of the life in nature universally dispersed. The countless shoals which annually coast the shores of Europe and America are not so interesting to the student of nature, as the more fertile law itself, which deposits their spawn on the tops of mountains, and on the interior plains; the fish principle in nature, from which it results that they may be found in water in so many places, in greater or less numbers. The natural historian is not a fisherman, who prays for cloudy days and good luck merely, but as fishing has been styled, "a contemplative man's recreation," introducing him profitably to woods and water, so the fruit of the naturalist's observations is not in new genera or species, but in new contemplations still, and science is only a more contemplative man's recreation. (A Week, 22)

Thoreau's interest is not so much in fishes as natural phenomena but instead in the correspondence of natural phenomena to nonphenomenal cosmic principle. Accordingly, then, Thoreau presents the details of the Concord fish in a rather lengthy (about ten pages) nonnarrative catalogue form, a form which points less to sensuous human or natural activity as such than it illustrates the fertility, or as he calls it, "fish principle in nature." In other words, Thoreau's catalogue in its factual descriptiveness enacts what Lukacs

calls "a process of abstraction" or reification of temporal experience into discrete quantities devoid of historical context.<sup>44</sup> The rather amorphous catalogue form itself attests to a stylistic pattern that according to Kenneth Burke results when "the appeal of form retreats behind the appeal of information"; that is, "[a]trophrophy of form follows hypertrophy of information"<sup>45</sup> as Thoreau abstracts temporal phenomena to illustrate for purposes of detached contemplation the correspondence between nature and transcendent, governing spirit.

Although at the end of the passage, Thoreau ceases to catalogue and rather reinstates the fish momentarily into temporality by declaiming the consequences for them of the dam at Bellerica, yet his dominant impulse remains ahistorical, in fact lyrical. For Thoreau, in an extended (about one full page) apostrophe, which echoes Milton's and the Gospels' evocations of transcendent spiritual forces of rectification, addresses the shad:

Poor shad! where is thy redress? When Nature gave thee instinct, gave she thee the heart to bear thy fate? Still wandering the sea in thy scaly armor to inquire humbly at the mouths of rivers if man has perchance left them meanwhile, merely stemming the tide there, in danger from sea foes in spite of thy bright armor, awaiting new instructions until the sands, until the water itself, tell thee if it be so which is thy faith, in this backward spring, turned adrift, and are *not* factories, in these days. Armed with no sword, no electric shock, but here Shad, armed only with innocence and scales easy to be detached. I for one am with thee, and who knows what may avail a crow-bar against that Bellerica dam?--Not despairing when whole myriads have gone to feed those sea monsters during thy suspense, but still brave, indifferent, on easy fin there, like shad reserved for higher destinies. Willing to be decimated for man's behoof

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<sup>44</sup> Georg Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 5-7.

<sup>45</sup> Kenneth Burke, Counter-Statement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 144.

after the spawning season. Away with the superficial and selfish phil-*anthropy* of men,--who knows what admirable virtue of fishes may be below low-water-mark, bearing up against a hard destiny, not admired by that fellow-creature who alone can appreciate it! Who hears the fishes when they cry? It will not be forgotten by some memory that we were contemporaries. Thou shalt ere long have thy way up the rivers, up all the rivers of the globe, if I am not mistaken. Yea, even thy dull watery dream shall be more than realized. If it were not so, but thou wert to be overlooked at first and at last, then would not I take their heaven. Yes, I say so, who think I know better than thou canst. Keep a stiff fin, then, and stem all the tides thou mayst meet. (*A Week*, 32; Thoreau's emphases)

While Thoreau proceeds immediately to call for destroying the dam, he has already placed rectification outside of history, beyond the mediacy of human beings. His apostrophic form itself emphatically renders any mediation of the problem more a potential of desire and imagination than of actual practice. As Culler explains apostrophe, it is the characteristic triumph of the lyric force as opposed to the narrative,<sup>46</sup> and its major role is "to will a state of affairs, to call it into being by asking. . . objects to bend themselves to your desire. . . .to make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces. . . .[for] the apostrophizing poet identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces."<sup>47</sup> So for Thoreau in the catalogue of Concord fishes, change like the levelling of a dam occurs mostly if not entirely in desire and imagination, out of the sequence of time, and if in time at all, in some fabulous place of seeming timelessness, like the apostrophically lyrical text itself. According to Culler, "Apostrophe resists narrative because its *now* is not a moment in a temporal sequence but a *now* of discourse, of writing. This temporality of

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<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 149.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.



writing. . . seems to be that toward which the lyric strives."<sup>48</sup> Thoreau's apostrophic style mutes and renders moot his abrupt juxtaposition of apostrophe with the meditation that follows from his next statement: "At length it would seem that the interests, not of the fishes only, but of the men of Wayland, of Sudbury, of Concord, demand the levelling of that dam" (A Week, 32).

This subjunctive, or tentative, injunction to destroy the dam as well as his ensuing references to particular hardships caused by the dam are further undercut by Thoreau's concluding the entire passage on fish with an exultation and exaltation of natural creatures' power to survive temporal devastation. Seeing oxen stranded by dammed water, Thoreau finds them "standing patient, gazing wishfully meadowward, at that inaccessible waving native grass, uncut but by the great mower Time, who cuts so broad a swathe without so much as a wisp to wind around their horns" (A Week, 32). What people actually do seems much less consequential to Thoreau than, certainly, nature's power to regenerate itself. What people actually do seems less powerful too than a sheer power of mind which, in Thoreau's imagination and desire, can will something to change and, in mere desire and will, evoke and simulate change, substituting imaginative simulation, for real, practical reform. In other words, wishing something so substitutes for actually making something so.

By contrast with this passage from A Week about Concord fish, the passage on the fish of Walden from "The Pond in Winter" differs mainly in its narrative instead of lyric or meditative nonnarrative. The passage is part of a narrative about Thoreau's "morning work," in which he observes a fisherman

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 152.

while he draws water from the pond. Initially, the narrative represents fishing as an actual practice by men who, much like the fishers of Concord, are practitioners and conduits of primitive skills and instinctive, timeless knowledge and value:

Early in the morning, while all things are crisp with frost, men come with fishing reels and slender lunch, and let down their fine lines through the snowy field to take pickerel and perch; wild men, who instinctively follow other fashions and trust other authorities than their townsmen, and by their goings and comings stitch towns together in parts where else they would be ripped. They sit and eat their luncheon in stout fear-naughts on the dry oak leaves on the shore, as wise in natural lore as the citizen is in artificial. They never consulted with books, and know and can tell much less than they have done. The things which they practice are said not yet to be known. Here is one fishing for pickerel with grown perch for bait. You look into his pail with wonder as into a summer pond, as if he kept summer locked up at home, or knew where she had retreated. How, pray, did he get these in mid-winter? O, he got worms out of rotten logs since the ground froze, and so he caught them. His life itself passes deeper in Nature than the studies of the naturalist penetrate; himself a subject for the naturalist. The latter raises the moss and bark gently with his knife in search of insects; the former lays open logs to their core with his axe, and moss and bark fly far and wide. He gets his living by barking trees. Such a man has some right to fish, and I love to see Nature carried out in him. The perch swallows the grub-worm, the pickerel swallows the perch, and the fisherman swallows the pickerel; and so all the chinks in the scale of being are filled. (Walden, 283-84)

Unlike in A Week, Thoreau does not abstract the fish or fishers into an illustration of an idea or principle. Rather, by means of narrative instead of lyric, he points to the interrelated roles of two different types of men in natural and civil processes, critiquing and yet affirming aspects of both types' roles.

Although Thoreau does not break completely from this narrative line in Walden as he often does by means of quotation or apostrophe in A Week, nevertheless for the same lyrical purposes, he does abruptly shift the narrative from one that points to actual human practice or natural processes to a narrative that is increasingly symbolic of detached, contemplative consciousness:

Ah, the pickerel of Walden! when I see them lying on the ice, or in the well which the fisherman cuts in the ice, making a little hole to admit the water, I am always surprised by their rare beauty, as if they were fabulous fishes, they are so foreign to the streets, even to the woods, foreign as Arabia to our Concord life. They possess a quite dazzling and transcendent beauty which separates them by a wide interval from the cadaverous cod and haddock whose fame is trumpeted in our streets. They are not green like the pines, nor gray like the stones, nor blue like the sky; but they have, to my eyes, if possible, yet rarer colors, like flowers and precious stones, as if they were the pearls, the animalized *nuclei* or crystals of the Walden water. They, of course, are Walden all over and all through; are themselves small Waldens in the animal kingdom, Waldenses. It is surprising that they are caught here,--that in this deep and capacious spring, far beneath the rattling teams and chaises and tinkling sleighs that travel the Walden road, this great gold and emerald fish swims. I never chanced to see its kind in any market; it would be the cynosure of all eyes there. Easily, with a few convulsive quirks, they give up their watery ghosts, like a mortal translated before his time to the thin air of heaven.

(Walden, 284-85)

Narrative, then, becomes a vehicle of vision in a way that it seems not to do in A Week when, for example, with the Saddleback ascent Thoreau shifts to nonnarrative meditation to try to sustain his vision. And yet in Walden, the transcendent vision that Thoreau makes the goal of his symbolic narrative, in a different way than in A Week but to the same effect, valorizes the

authority of atemporal, detached contemplation, or the lyric, over practical consciousness and any narrative mode that points to temporal being.

As Buell explains of Thoreau's narrative strategy in Walden, it is part of a larger rhetorical appeal to the reader, "a validation of the speaker's claims to authority rather than a report of how a formerly desperate man found a new life through nature although the latter interpretation may be inferred from Thoreau's biography."<sup>49</sup> In other words, Thoreau "dehistoricizes" experience, renders it atemporal, even when, as he more often does in Walden than A Week, he uses a narrative form. For even with narrative, in Walden Thoreau uses a language of transcendence. Whenever, according to Burke, "we consider things in terms of a broader scope than the terms for those particular things themselves. . . .wherever there are traces of that process, there are the makings of Transcendence."<sup>50</sup> And yet that much of Walden is narrative and more often than A Week seems to consider things in terms of those particular things themselves perhaps explains the greater power of Walden to critique individual and collective "lives of desperation." For Walden, unlike A Week, does not merely represent a mosaic of consciousness,<sup>51</sup> a mythical world elsewhere from which to contemplate excerpted, objectified fragments of experience for purposes more aesthetic than epistemological or ethical, although Walden does, in part, do this. But Walden also represents practical consciousness by means of narrative that initially, if not finally, points to sensuous human activity as such and so enacts personal and social reform simultaneously as both attitude and

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<sup>49</sup> Buell, Literary Transcendentalism, 306.

<sup>50</sup> Kenneth Burke, Language as Symbolic Action (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 200.

<sup>51</sup> Hildebidle, Thoreau, a Naturalist's Liberty, 48, notes that Margaret Fuller was perhaps the first reader to call Walden's style a mosaic, for which she faulted rather than praised it.

activity, consciousness and practice. If transcendent consciousness finally achieves preeminence in Walden, its preeminence does not negate the validity, even the necessity, of sensuous human activity and practical consciousness.

Another way to characterize the dialectical interplay between narrative and lyrical forces in order to show how the latter dominates without obliterating the former is to talk about the interplay in terms of an opposition between centripetal and centrifugal forces. Tony Tanner in Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men observes in American romanticism "a gravitation toward empty space" that seems to be a constant force. Sometimes this motion is an explicit desire and goal, as when Emerson writes in "The Poet" that narcotics "are auxiliaries to the centrifugal tendency of man, to his passage into free space, and they help him escape the custody of that body in which he is pent up, and of the jail-yard of individual relations in which he is enclosed." Other times, desire for centrifugal motion is implied by its enactment in the text, often through imagery, as for example with Thoreau's vision in "Spring" of the ever more distantly soaring hawk which symbolizes Thoreau's own disembodied, expanding consciousness. Whether explicit or implicit, this persistent "centrifugal tendency" demonstrates "a dilation of self" which ultimately can be either a diffusion to the point of dissolution into the environment or, like a spider spinning its web, an expansion of self that incorporates its environment. Either consequence of Tanner's sense of centrifugal motion enacts the preeminence of detached, atemporal consciousness over temporal sensuous human activity.<sup>52</sup>

William Least Heat Moon, in a paper on travel writing entitled "Journey into Kansas," provides a clarifying revision and elaboration of Tanner's notion

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<sup>52</sup> Tony Tanner, Scenes of Nature, Signs of Men (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 28-29.

of centrifugalism and on the role of its counter motion, centripetalism, too. Heat Moon associates centripetal force with travel and writing which exists "primarily to explore the soul of the traveler," and, correspondingly, he associates the opposite, or outward, centrifugal motion with writing which moves from "an inward-turning spiral. . . toward a discovery of self that opens out to other lives and new places." An unchecked centripetal motion leads to solipsism, or "primacy of self," subjective consciousness, while a centrifugal propensity leads to engagement with place and others, or "primacy of fact."<sup>53</sup> Heat Moon's use of these concepts of motion differs from Tanner's in delineating more clearly the potential for and the dynamics of lyrical, or atemporal meditative consciousness and temporal, practical consciousness, for Tanner's sense of centrifugal motion comprehends the same motion to be a metaphor only of different versions of lyrical consciousness, or what Heat Moon calls primacy of self. This comprehension obscures instead of illuminates a dichotomy that itself seems to point to a more paradigmatic dichotomy, the dichotomy of a metonymic semantics of contiguity and a metaphoric semantics of similarity as articulated by Roman Jakobson. That is, the more centripetal or impelled toward subjective, contemplative consciousness a text, the more metaphoric or diffuse in possible meaning it is, while, by contrast, the more centrifugal or impelled to situate self in temporal place and in relation to others a text, the more metonymic or concentrated in possible meaning it is.

But whether examining the dichotomy in terms of lyric versus narrative, centripetal versus centrifugal, or metaphoric versus metonymic,

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<sup>53</sup> William Least Heat Moon, "Journeys into Kansas," first delivered as a paper at a session on "Contemporary American Travel Writing," at the Modern Language Association Convention, San Francisco (December, 1987).

what David Lodge advises of the terms metaphor and metonymy pertains to the other categories as well: "we are not discussing a distinction between two mutually exclusive types of discourse, but a distinction based on dominance. The metaphoric work cannot totally neglect metonymic contiguity if it is to be intelligible at all. Correspondingly the metonymic text cannot eliminate all signs that it is not available for metaphorical interpretation."<sup>54</sup> So both A Week and Walden, then, are process and product of two dichotomous discourses, but as a look at parts of Walden's "The Pond in Winter" will show, the centripetal or metaphoric quality that decidedly dominates A Week, though still dominant in Walden nevertheless is mitigated much more than in A Week by the greater force of Walden's centrifugal impulse and metonymic discourse.

Two passages of two paragraphs each at the close of "The Pond in Winter" pertain to a discrete set of events, the process of ice-cutting, and compactly enact an interplay between, on the one hand, centripetal force and metaphoric discourse and, on the other hand, centrifugal force and metonymic discourse, that is characteristic of the same interplay throughout Walden. As he begins to narrate events of ice-cutting, Thoreau signals a centripetal impulse toward contemplative consciousness by emphasizing the unlocatability of these men and their activity in ordinary, experiential place and time by referring to the ice-cutters with a term from classical myth and by a series of negations which further dislocate and atemporalize actors and action:

In the winter of '46-7 there came a hundred men of  
Hyperborean extraction sweep down on to our pond one  
morning, with many car-loads of ungainly-looking farming

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<sup>54</sup> David Lodge, The Modes of Modern Writing (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 111.

tools, sleds, ploughs, drill-barrows, turf-knives, spades, saws, rakes, and each man was armed with a double-pointed pike-staff, such as is not described in the New-England Farmer or the Cultivator. I did not know whether they had come to sow a crop of winter rye, or some other kind of grain recently introduced from Iceland. As I saw no manure, I judged that they meant to skim the land, as I had done, thinking the soil was deep and had lain fallow long enough.

(Walden, 294)

Thoreau proceeds to expand his baffled consciousness, a move which, although it enables him to critique satirically and humorously the mercantile motives of the men and their employer, also enables him even more to advocate his baffled, detached attitude itself. He abuts event with preeminent though uncomprehending consciousness chiefly by means of the disjunctive conjunction "but" and a final dislocating and atemporalizing classical reference:

They said that a gentleman farmer, who was behind the scenes, wanted to double his money, which, as I understood, amounted to half a million already; but in order to cover each one of his dollars with another, he took off the only coat, ay, the skin itself, of Walden Pond in the midst of a hard winter. They went to work at once, ploughing, harrowing, rolling, in admirable order, as if they were bent on making this a model farm; but when I was looking sharp to see what kind of seed they dropped into the furrow, a gang of fellows by my side suddenly began to hook up the virginal mould itself, with a peculiar jerk, clean down to the sand, or rather the water, -- for it was a very springy soil, -- indeed all the *terra firma* there was, and haul it away on sleds, and then I guessed that they must be cutting peat in a bog. So they came and went every day, with a peculiar shriek from the locomotive, from and to some point of the polar regions, as it seemed to me, like a flock of arctic snow-birds. But sometimes Squaw Walden had her revenge, and a hired man, walking behind his team, slipped through a crack in the ground down toward Tartarus, and he who was so grave before suddenly became but the ninth part of a man, almost gave up his animal heat, and was glad to take refuge



in my house, and acknowledged that there was some virtue in a stove; or sometimes the frozen soil took a piece of steel out of a ploughshare, or a plough got set in the furrow and had to be cut out. (Walden, 294-95)

In these ways, then, Thoreau's narrative points within, toward self, more than without, toward particular temporal activity as such. Coincidentally, this narrative passage suggests that a psychological motivation for this impulse away from temporality is an oedipal desire yet fear of females, for he figures Walden as an alluring source of sustenance, a womb-like place, yet also unpredictably devouring, a vagina dentata. Not just freedom from temporality but safety from temporality's main agent, generative sexuality, impels Thoreau to withdraw into contemplation as being.

That Thoreau not only gives preeminence to detached contemplative being but also ambivalently probes the dichotomous modes of apprehension enacted by centripetal, metaphoric semantics as opposed to a more centrifugal, metonymic semantics becomes more fully evident with the next, or second, paragraph of this passage. For the phrase, "To speak literally," which opens the subsequent paragraph, calls attention less to the more centrifugal, more metonymic direction that the narrative now takes or to any experience it represents than to consciousness itself and, more specifically, to the dynamics of the dichotomous relation of one major mode of perception and being in the world with another. Even so, more than in the prior paragraph, the second paragraph's more literal and less metaphoric narrative simultaneously shows more exactly what and not simply that he is criticizing. The men of "Hyperborean extraction" turn out to be "a hundred Irishmen, with Yankee overseers," and in contrast to the implement-laden Hyperboreans' defiance of description in the New England Farmer or the Cultivator, these ice-cutters' stacked cakes, "thirty-five feet high on one side and six or seven

rods square. . .[with] hay between the outside layers to exclude the air," seem familiar, resembling "the abode of Winter, that old man we see in the almanac" (Walden, 295-96).

Just as the more centrifugal movement and more metonymic narrative discourse produce a more specific representation of ice-cutting, so Thoreau's criticism of ice-cutting achieves more specificity of time and place too:

They calculated that not twenty-five per cent. of this would reach its destination, and that two or three per cent. would be wasted in the cars. However, a still greater part of this heap had a different destiny from what was intended; for, either because the ice was found not to keep so well as was expected, containing more air than usual, or for some other reason, it never got to market. This heap, made in the winter of '46-7 and estimated to contain ten thousand tons, was finally covered with hay and boards; and though it was unroofed the following July, and a part of it carried off, the rest remaining exposed to the sun, it stood over that summer and the next winter, and was not quite melted till September 1848. Thus the pond recovered the greater part. (Walden, 296)

So although giving preeminence to being as atemporal consciousness in the prior paragraph and at the beginning of this paragraph, Thoreau nevertheless mitigates the preeminent authority of being as atemporal consciousness by means of a narrative representation of temporal activity as such and a related critique that is at once specific as to time and place, yet general in principle. Somewhat paradoxically, the oedipal fear of the previous paragraph is less manifest in this second paragraph, as if allayed when Walden, along with other things, is located in actual time and place; female fury is more frightening in consciousness than in practical experience.

Thoreau's attenuation in this "literal" paragraph of the authority of being as consciousness of the previous paragraph, is only momentary, however, as

the last two paragraphs of "The Pond in Winter" show. These paragraphs recapitulate the claims of competing authority in the same dichotomously related semantic forms but now in reverse direction, shifting not from a centripetal to a centrifugal impulse, not from a metonymic to a metaphoric narrative, but instead from centrifugal and metonymic back to centripetal and metaphoric. These moves and often this pattern persist throughout Walden and maybe as much as any other means of composition enable Thoreau to advance a romantic, visionary program and yet depart, or at least detour, from that program a ways too, in a direction opened perhaps by Mt. Katahdin and his initiatory experience into natural processes and things that defy comprehension except in terms of sheer yet stupendous facts. In Walden, however, natural processes and things figure for Thoreau in a more typically romantic way, a way characterized by Robert Langbaum as a reliance on temporal, sensual experience to test its congruence with imaginative apprehensions of undifferentiated, unanalyzed, and seemingly immediate "life of things."<sup>55</sup>

In this test, as the closing paragraphs of "The Pond in Winter" reveal, sensuous human activity comes to seem ephemeral, unreal, and so necessarily to give way to the fabulous truth of consciousness, as detached from time and place as centripetal, consciousness-turned desire permits. Watching the ice-cutters, Thoreau increasingly is "reminded" that compared with what is in mind and seemingly out of time and place, all such entities and activities are merely of passing, paltry value:

Thus for sixteen days I saw from my window a  
hundred men at work like busy husbandmen, with teams

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<sup>55</sup> Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 22-24.

and horses and apparently all the implements of farming, such a picture as we see on the first page of the almanac; and as often as I looked out I was reminded of the fable of the lark and the reapers, or the parable of the sower, and the like; and now they are all gone, and in thirty days more, probably, I shall look from the same window on the pure sea-green Walden water there, reflecting the clouds, the trees, and sending up its evaporations in solitude, and no traces will appear that a man has ever stood there. Perhaps I shall hear a solitary loon laugh as he dives and plumes himself, or shall see a lonely fisher in his boat, like a floating leaf, beholding his form reflected in the waves, where lately a hundred men securely labored.

Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, or Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. (Walden, 297-98)

"Thus" Thoreau begins each of these two final paragraphs and so signals metaphoric discourse. The ice-cutters prove to be Hyperboreans after all, mythic men from hot, sunny places now rendered mythic, too, by Thoreau's metaphoric narrative of his own myth-making and myth-partaking consciousness:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial; and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions. I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Bedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water jug. I meet his servant come to draw water for his master, and our buckets as it were grate together in the same well. The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges. With favoring winds it is wafted past the site of the fabulous islands of Atlantis and the Hesperides, makes the periplus of Hanno, and, floating by Ternate and Tidore and the mouth of the Persian Gulf, melts in the tropic gales of the Indian seas, and is landed in ports of

which Alexander only heard the names. (Walden, 298)

Veering to and fro, centripetally then centrifugally, and then again and finally centripetally, writing metaphorically then metonymically, then again and finally metaphorically, throughout Walden Thoreau gives preeminence to being as atemporal consciousness. In the disembodied consciousness of intellect, he partakes of womb-like waters so dispersed and diffused as to be everywhere and nowhere, safe.

Walden, then, for all Thoreau's factual specificity about the place, his measuring and surveying, listing and accounting, is anywhere and any time that someone like Thoreau proves by experiment "that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. . . .If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them" (Walden, 323-24). And although "building foundations" engages him increasingly in sensuous human activity and engages him simultaneously, by writing narratively, in avowing the authority of temporal social and historical being, nevertheless in Walden, like the artist of Kouroo, Thoreau wants to escape the temporal more than to situate himself fully within it. For Walden seems to bring Thoreau to the same sense of his artist, "that in an imperfect work time is an ingredient, but into a perfect work time does not enter" since "for him and his work, the former lapse of time had been an illusion" (Walden, 326-27). Moreover, as Thoreau finally writes, the achievement through metaphorical language of lyrical consciousness allows him not simply to escape the temporal and human but to approach creative divinity: "I delight to come to my bearings. . .to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may, --not to live in this

restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century, but stand or sit thoughtfully as it goes by" (Walden, 329-30). That is, in Walden he mostly desires still to detach himself from natural and civil history, to observe from some transcendent vantage more than to participate, to repudiate the validity of temporal practice and process as such, and to simulate detached, contemplative consciousness as being. And yet Walden's more narrative style, especially its more centrifugal or metonymic narrative, situates Thoreau more within the realm of temporal things than the nonnarrative lyrical style of A Week. It is as if in Walden -- and maybe this is the greatest source of the text's appeal -- more than any other of his four books, Thoreau comes closest to being both ways at once, bound by history and its necessities yet free of history, too, inside consciousness that seems cosmically timeless and also benevolent, as history, whether personal, social, or natural, cannot consistently be.

## Chapter 2. Thoreau's Traditional Place in American Literature and the Challenge of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods

A Week, and even more so, Walden constitute the canonical Thoreau, the Thoreau who is represented in anthologies, studied academically, enshrined within and without academic settings as a kind of cultural hero, and imitated often by people who travel or settle somewhere temporarily and produce corresponding written accounts. The more temporally engaged Thoreau of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, the works which give preeminence to practice instead of being as consciousness remain relatively unconsidered. The 1987 anthology, The Harper American Literature, for example, while presenting a sampling of Thoreau's work that includes an early (1843) essay, "Paradise to be Regained," the better known "Resistance to Civil Government" and "A Plea for Captain John Brown," a late (1859) essay, "Wild Apples," thirty pages of journal excerpts, and one page from The Maine Woods, gives much greater space (eighteen pages) to an excerpt from A Week and to Walden in full. The editorial commentary at once uncritically reasserts the now conventionally accepted status of A Week and Walden and yet unwittingly reveals the insufficiency of any appreciation of Thoreau and his writing based primarily on these two books.

The Harper commentary conveys that only two hundred copies of A Week's total of two thousand were sold and, similarly, that Walden "was liked but not greatly and . . . received relatively little cultural attention. . . until the 1930s. . . [when] people recognized how advanced his program for the good life was."<sup>1</sup> Although acknowledging that Thoreau spent fifteen years after the

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<sup>1</sup> The Harper American Literature, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 1222.

stay at Walden during which time he was involved "with social and literary matters" and with travel that resulted in several posthumous publications, the editor nevertheless seems to construe Thoreau's "program for the good life" mainly from A Week and Walden, taking at face value Thoreau's meditative, metaphorical subordination in these two works of practice to detached consciousness:

Thoreau said he scorned the need to travel far. Unlike the young Richard Henry Dana, Herman Melville, or the men who were just then setting out for the California gold fields, Thoreau insisted that the best traveling is done while staying home, exploring the cosmography of the imagination. Yet Thoreau made three forays into Maine, where he encountered forests and mountains far rawer than anything he could see in the gentler areas around Concord. Parts of the Maine experiences with Indians, moose, and mountains were published in magazines during his lifetime. The Maine Woods, the book version, appeared [posthumously] in 1864. Four trips to Cape Cod, one to Canada, and a long trip to Minnesota the year before his death also occurred during the years after he left Walden Pond. (Like many Transcendentalists, he was not averse to contradicting himself at times. Journeys to California were despicable; trips north or to Minnesota were worthy endeavors.) Each of these excursions, except the Minnesota trip, resulted in a book published posthumously: Cape Cod (1865) and A Yankee in Canada (1866).<sup>2</sup>

Although this excerpt glances at the interplay between being as temporal practice and being as atemporal, lyrical consciousness in Thoreau's life and writing, it resorts to what has long been a cliché about contradiction instead

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. Somewhat misleadingly, the commentary does not indicate that Thoreau himself prepared only two of the posthumous books for publication, Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, and basically in this order even though Cape Cod was published before The Maine Woods. Ellery Channing prepared A Yankee in Canada for its 1866 publication on the basis of its first three chapters as published by Putnam's in 1853 and its last two chapters as retained by Thoreau in working draft, according to William Howarth, The Book of Concord, 69–70. Primarily because Thoreau did not prepare A Yankee in Canada for book publication and secondarily because it is not set in the United States, I have excluded it from my study.



of probing such contrariety either in Thoreau or in the cultural canonization of certain of his works and not others.

In just this way, the commentary proceeds recurrently to glance at the insufficiency of the canonical view of Thoreau only to gloss that insufficiency with a distillation of some facet of that standard view. For example, "Thoreau dealt with the life of the spirit"<sup>3</sup> yet "Thoreau lived so busy a life, filled with so many activities that kept him in almost constant give-and-take with the everyday world, that it might seem surprising he had time for solitary meditations on the simplified life dedicated to contemplating eternal and universal truths."<sup>4</sup> Or for another example, "Hitherto neglected writings -- including journals, A Week, and such essays as "Wild Apples" -- are the subject of the appraisals they deserve"<sup>5</sup> and yet Walden and the preeminence that it gives being as consciousness over being as temporal practice nevertheless prescribes a perpetuation of a rather fixed reading of Thoreau:

None of these newer evaluations threatens the place of Walden. It remains secure as one of the American master-works. What is gained, however, in going beyond the conventional views of Thoreau is a better appreciation of how exactly he responded to the "voice" that pointed him toward his special vocation as a writer. The recent emphasis in the criticism points up the literary means he used to present the fact that we live perilously and paradoxically between heaven and earth -- between "the higher laws" and "brute neighbors". . . . But if Thoreau discovered means that save the soul, he did not fully know how to bring his discoveries to bear upon his own existence, or -- most crucial to him as a writer -- exactly how to make convincing contact with readers who are indifferent to the dangers surrounding them. However,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 1223.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1224.

in Walden, A Week, and other works, we find Thoreau working hard to convert into a confident prose style the anxieties we all feel in the face of universal paradoxes. . . .most of all, how to celebrate the unique attributes of the American democrat who must aspire to live in the heavens yet acknowledge the muddy depths and demands of the everyday world.<sup>6</sup>

By this reading, each of Thoreau's works is rendered one work, which seems to be a kind of composite of Walden and A Week. Nor does this reading aptly represent the extent to which Thoreau's acknowledgment in his first two books of "the muddy depths and demands of the everyday world" is largely for the purpose of repudiating and transcending this dimension of experience.

Much like the Harper anthology, Frederick Garber's essay, "Henry David Thoreau," in the 1988 Columbia Literary History of the United States casts Thoreau and his writing mainly in terms of Walden and A Week. According to Garber, the "fundamental" Thoreau is a Thoreau whose "radical act of consciousness" is an attempt to "be at home in the world. . . the main business of Thoreau's life, the single and central vocation to which all other forms were subsidiary."<sup>7</sup> Garber sees A Week and Walden as especially exemplary of Thoreau's search for a home in terms true to "an essential Thoreauvian paradox" which, as Thoreau writes in Walden make "indifferent all times and places."<sup>8</sup> In accordance with this formulation, and despite acknowledging that Cape Cod and The Maine Woods "show a nature profoundly inimical to Man"<sup>9</sup> and the need to look more closely at these works in Thoreau's thought, Garber glosses Thoreau's life and work after Walden in terms prescribed by Walden:

He took to surveying for a living, demarcating the lands of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1224-25.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Garber, "Henry David Thoreau," in Columbia Literary History of the United States, ed., Emory Elliott et. al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 399-400.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 407.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 409.

others while he spent the better part of his making maps of the self, charts of the inner world that were segments of the 'home-cosmography' he spoke of in the last chapters of Walden. And there were other cartographies as well, other phenomena that became inner as the landscapes of Maine and Cape Cod, Minnesota, and Canada, became the stuff of the self's home places.<sup>10</sup>

So Garber, like the Harper commentary, hearkens to a need to give a greater reading to works like Cape Cod and The Maine Woods and yet seems to reinscribe any reading of Thoreau in terms of Walden's and A Week's enactments of consciousness mapping itself.

Even more recently than The Harper American Literature or the Columbia Literary History, in a 1989 essay in American Literature Lawrence Buell looks at Thoreau's canonical status not just in terms of Walden's premier place but also in terms of Thoreau as "the closest approximation to a folk hero that American literature has ever seen"<sup>11</sup> and Walden "as a site of pilgrimage and a prototype for imitation."<sup>12</sup> Over the course of this essay, Buell reinforces the monolithic status of Walden in the literary canon and of Walden as a prototypical pilgrimage, and yet he also indirectly reveals fissures in this monolith. According to Buell, Walden's canonical status inheres in Concord's prior significance to the transcendentalists as a sacred grove in superior opposition with the "profane metropolis" of Boston and Cambridge despite the urbanity of many of the intellectuals and despite the ways that Concord itself registered many features of early industrial capitalism, like increased manufacturing, banking, and railroad transportation

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 408

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Buell, "The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage: The Structure of an American Cult," American Literature 61 (May 1989): 175.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 176.

and commerce.<sup>13</sup> The setting of Thoreau's most famous excursion and resultant book, then, as well as others' subsequent imitations of his project were "an intensification of a Ilminoid structure extant from the time Margaret Fuller started visiting the Emersons in the 1830s." With Walden, Concord's "pastoral mystique redoubled," and due both to the book's growing fame and to the proximity of the Boston and Fitchburg Railroad, by the 1870s Walden Pond had become a shrine.<sup>14</sup>

Also instrumental to Thoreau's achievement of canonical status, Buell explains, was the publishing establishment of Houghton and The Atlantic. Houghton-Mifflin's antecedent, the Ticknor and Fields enterprise, was the literary agency chiefly responsible for promoting the greatest number of premodern American writers traditionally thought to be major, including Thoreau. Eclipsing Horace Greeley, Thoreau's main publishing champion during his lifetime, Ticknor and Fields established Thoreau's reputation with Walden, promoted posthumous publication of a series of articles in The Atlantic during the 1860s as well as reviews of Thoreau's posthumous books, published excerpts from Thoreau's journals in the 1880s and 1890s, publishing the journal in full in 1906, and in addition published authorized editions of Thoreau's other work.<sup>15</sup> In helping to establish Thoreau, then, this publication simultaneously helped to enshrine not only Walden but Concord and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 183. Buell observes that Concord was able "to maintain the appearance of a small village in the face of nearby urban buildup." For greater elaboration on the economic development of this place and period, see Leonard N. Neufeldt, The Economist: Henry David Thoreau and Enterprise (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 25-27 especially, and John D. Richardson, Henry David Thoreau: A Life of the Mind (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 15-16.

<sup>14</sup> Buell, "Thoreauvian Pilgrimage," 194.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 196-97.

particularly Walden Pond as a prototypical locus of the inextricably linked values of "pastoralism and counterculturalism."<sup>16</sup>

Yet within this monolithic canonical structure, fissures appear at this juncture and other points in the essay where Buell seems most to assert solidity. For one, what specifically are "pastoralism and counterculturalism" in Walden and the sojourn that produced it and gave rise to its imitation? Except to describe Thoreau's stay at Walden as "the most memorable example of the civilized person's withdrawal to a simpler state of existence for spiritual refreshment. . .an apotheosis of a pastoral retreat that was inherent in the earliest institutionalization of Transcendental Concord as a cultural shrine. . .that was itself a heightened form of a root paradigm manifested in many world cultures,"<sup>17</sup> Buell does not further elucidate the terms. In a certain way, it is beside the point of his essay, which is to document that canonical status of Walden and of Thoreau as a kind of saint who is emulated by reader-pilgrims for whom it is also largely beside the point to probe the countercultural pastoralism of Thoreau's text, or, as it were, doctrine.

Yet that it is beside Buell's point to examine Thoreau any more closely than many of the pilgrim-imitators points to the complicity of Thoreau's major critics in fostering a sacral attitude toward Walden which not only inhibits greater critical scrutiny of the social and psychological implications of its and its author's famed counterculturalism but, as Buell's essay together with the Harper anthology and the Columbia Literary History show, also inhibits reading Thoreau in ways not prescribed by some sort of canonical, reverential reading of Walden. Further, such an attitude obscures seeing Thoreau in relation to writers like, for example, James Agee, William Least

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 188-89.

Heat Moon, John McPhee, and Ann Zwinger, instead of mainly writers like John Muir, John Burroughs, Edward Abbey, or Annie Dillard, whose relation to Thoreau is more obviously and simply imitative in life project if not necessarily in writing style. However, the uncritical vision of Thoreau that Buell finds in many pilgrim-readers also typifies many scholar-readers who adhere to Walden's canonical preeminence and Thoreau's own sanctification. For example, Buell observes of Vena and Bradford Angier, authors of At Home in the Woods, that their recurrent invocations of Thoreau as a kind of saint show how for such readers "it's not so much the specific doctrinalization of Thoreau as saint that counts but the elevation of Thoreau to the status of model or prototype of whatever sort."<sup>18</sup> Is this not true too of readers who seem to read any work by Thoreau according to Walden as a kind of prototype? Similarly, in Muir's 1893 pilgrimage to Walden, Buell finds in Muir's willingness to overlook features of the landscape at odds with his expectations a representative "tendency to over-pastoralize Walden."<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, don't many academic readers too "over-pastoralize" or "over-Waldenize" Thoreau and so, as James McIntosh observes, almost inevitably see Thoreau as an Emersonian idealist?<sup>20</sup> Doesn't Buell's observation of Muir that he "was just as capable of Thoreau of editing the bald facts in order to make his symbolic world luminous"<sup>21</sup> inadvertently and insufficiently define the pastoralism and counterculturalism of the Thoreau of Walden and his devotees? How is this gesture of making the symbolic world luminous countercultural? To what extent does Thoreau's own

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>20</sup> James McIntosh, Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Buell, "Thoreauvian Pilgrimage," 194.

insistence on the importance of detached consciousness and its luminous symbolism over practical consciousness in Walden invite a kind of willfully ignorant faith in the findings of any such consciousness? And more particularly, in relation to Thoreau's canonical status, is this capacity to edit bald facts in order to illuminate a symbolic world also inadvertently pertinent to many of Thoreau's academic readers who seem to read Thoreau almost exclusively in terms of Walden, editing out "the bald facts" of works like Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, works which point to a different Thoreau, a Thoreau no longer as in Walden or A Week chiefly concerned with consciousness mapping itself but rather with mapping place more as place, including mapping natural and human others more distinctly as others and less as the undifferentiated ephemera of the expansive consciousness of a detached, solitary self?

Although Buell concludes his essay by questioning rhetorically whether people like the authors of At Home in the Woods "are closer to understanding the kingdom of Henry than those who have fathomed him mainly on the level of his rhetorical sophistication,"<sup>22</sup> Buell's sacral diction only underscores what his entire essay seems unintentionally to imply, that Thoreau is as much an object of uncritical worship for scholars as for imitators and that his generation depends almost exclusively upon Walden. So, monolithic as Walden's canonical status may be, it is also a flimsy one, standing less upon what it includes than upon what it excludes: the more temporally engaged living and writing of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, the last and only books besides A Week and Walden that Thoreau himself composed, books which enact a practical involvement with temporal human and natural activity that

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 199.

Walden, in some of its metonymic narrative passages sketches, only to subsume into the metaphoric language of lyrical consciousness.

Quentin Anderson is one of the few readers of Thoreau to point out the major inadequacies in the prevalent critical response to Thoreau. That these inadequacies have remained largely unaddressed in the almost twenty years since Anderson articulated them in a July 4, 1971, review of Princeton University Press's publication of the first of the modern authoritative editions of Thoreau's work only makes Anderson's brief but incisive critique of Thoreau and his canonical status all the more pertinent. Observing that "the Thoreauvians have an impulse to keep Thoreau at a timeless Walden," Anderson probes who this Thoreau is and joins his voice with a similarly remote and almost lone voice of Mark Van Doren who wrote in 1916 that Thoreau's advocacy of "pure expansion of the pure self" denies the temporal, social and familial condition of being. Like Emerson, Anderson explains, Thoreau's project in Walden is "to possess the whole world in his own imagination," democratically yet autocratically granting others "the same right to be the center of the whole world."<sup>23</sup>

Anderson relates Thoreau's project to an aggressive, infantile attitude borne of unresolved oedipal desire yet fear of the mother, a side of Thoreau

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<sup>23</sup> Quentin Anderson, "Thoreau on July 4," New York Times Book Review (July 4, 1971), 1, 16. In addition to Sundquist's writing on A Week in Home as Found, recent critics whose views of Thoreau accord more with Anderson's include David Leverenz, Manhood and the American Renaissance (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), especially 22-25, and Michael T. Gilmore, American Romanticism and the Marketplace (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), especially chapter two, "Walden and the Curse of Trade," 35-51. Leverenz, p. 24, provides an encapsulation of his view of Thoreau in relation to Gilmore's: "For Gilmore, Thoreau's attempt to transform his autobiography into seasonal myth and universal metaphor abstracts his text from history. Paradoxically, the abstracting process brings back the reification and commodification he wants to flee. I would add that the market for Thoreau includes not just profits and products but male rivalry, the competitive arena in which he and especially his father so conspicuously failed to measure up. What Thoreau fears is more than being made to feel like a thing or a machine; it's being made to feel ugly, despised, physically loathsome and emotionally helpless."



and of human experience in general which Thoreau's expansive consciousness attempts to subsume and which most criticism has ignored<sup>24</sup> as much as it has ignored the social implications of the canonical Thoreau's subordination of temporal practice to detached consciousness:

Thoreau had a vision of great power and inclusiveness. It is but half-rendered in "Walden," from which he excludes the dangerous and problematical questions of the generation of both men and sentences from the mud of existence. We have seized on his "Walden" persona, ignoring (for this purpose) the "Journal" and the letters, to make a figure who would fulfill our fantasy, answer to our emotional need. On this abstracted persona most current Thoreau scholarship depends. Readers are licensed to do with books what they will, and we may say in defense of those who have used "Walden" for solace that Thoreau invited the reading most have given it. If we haven't accorded it historical meaning it is in part because, in "Walden," Thoreau offered himself and danced away so that our pursuit of him is a ballet of the American imagination circling about the time when we most nearly possess the whole world, the undifferentiated world of childhood. The passionate attachment to this image of Thoreau substantiates the presence of a cult with roots in the past. But critics, scholars and historians have a distinct mandate they have failed to carry out in Thoreau's case.<sup>25</sup>

The devotional readers of Thoreau according to Walden, then, as Anderson makes explicit in his critique, demonstrate a complicit omniverousness of desire to possess through perception a world undifferentiated from the perceiving self. So, much like what Carolyn Porter finds in Emerson's relation to society, Walden and Thoreau's canonical status on its basis are less

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<sup>24</sup> Exceptions whom Anderson points out (besides Mark Van Doren) include Raymond D. Gozzi, author of an unpublished (1957) dissertation; since Anderson's essay, Gozzi has edited a collection of essays (including revised excerpts from his dissertation), Thoreau's Psychology (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983). Also since Anderson's essay, Richard Lebeaux has published a two-volume psychological biography of Thoreau, Young Man Thoreau (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977) and Thoreau's Seasons (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), from which I draw at certain points in my study.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, "Thoreau on July 4," 18.

subversive of an American culture of individual and collective acquisitiveness than supportive of it.

Anderson more fully explores and critiques the psychological and social implications of the Thoreau of Walden as this attitude is demonstrated by Emerson, Whitman, and James in his book, The Imperial Self, published the same year as his review of Thoreau. Characterizing the attitude common to these writers as "the imperium of one's own consciousness,"<sup>26</sup> Anderson associates the infantile desire to subsume the world into consciousness not only with oedipal conflict but also with a general sense of the failure of social and familial fathers as economic changes during the Jacksonian era caused instability in "class, office, and occupation," thereby undermining patriarchal authority, whether secular or ecclesiastical, and engendering an aggressive assertion of an individual, imperialistic consciousness.<sup>27</sup> By expanding consciousness, Emerson and Thoreau in A Week and Walden try to recover through incorporation the power of the fathers "into the self, asserting that there need be no more generation, no more history, but simply the swelling diapason of the self."<sup>28</sup> This effort to incorporate world into consciousness "represents a redistribution of emotional forces in the face of threatening change" and "is founded on but must not be confused with a regression to the infantile stage in which world and self are coterminous."<sup>29</sup>

For Thoreau, self and world seem coterminous not only on the level of the nonnarrative and metaphorically narrative writing of A Week and Walden but also at the level of images of the body in relation to natural settings.

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<sup>26</sup> Quentin Anderson, The Imperial Self (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 47.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, especially chapter one, 3-58.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

Perhaps the single most recurrent body image in A Week is an infantile one of Thoreau gliding "over the broad bosom of the Merrimack"

(A Week, 65), or "entering the state of New Hampshire on the bosom of the flood" (A Week, 68), or working up the river "beholding from its placid bosom a new nature and new works of men" (A Week, 89), or even more graphically suggestive of an infant and mother,

With our heads so low in the grass, we heard the river whirling and sucking, and lapsing downward, kissing the shore as it went, sometimes rippling louder than usual, and again its mighty current making only a slight limpid, trickling sound, as if our water-pail had sprung a leak, and the water were flowing into the grass by our side. The whine, rustling the oaks and hazels, impressed us like a wakeful and inconsiderate person up at midnight, moving about, and putting things to rights, occasionally stirring up whole drawers full of leaves at a puff. There seemed to be a great haste and preparation throughout Nature, as for a distinguished vision; all her aisles had to be swept in the night, by a thousand hand-maidens, and a thousand pots to be boiled for the next day's feasting; -- such a whispering bustle, as if ten thousand fairies made their fingers fly, silently sewing at the new carpet with which the earth was to be clothed, and the new drapery which was to adorn the trees. And then the wind would lull and die away, and we like it fall asleep again. (A Week, 271)

Nature, like an ideal mother, seems to exist solely for her infant child and so arrays and keeps herself in perpetual preparedness to satisfy the child's oral needs. Lebeaux characterizes Thoreau's relation to nature in A Week as not only infantile but, by means of images which suggest immersion in amniotic fluidity such as the images of fish that Thoreau often seems to identify with, frequently embryonic.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lebeaux, Thoreau's Seasons, 8.

A similar infantile relation with nature personified as a mother persists for Thoreau in Walden. "Paddling gently" on the pond, the reflected clouds, the fish, and Thoreau are all "floating as in a balloon," enveloped in a sphere of protective amniotic-like fluid" (Walden, 189-90). Along with the previously discussed ice-cutting passage, passages like this reveal that Walden Pond often is a female space like a vagina or a womb, alluring even if also potentially threatening.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, in an interesting development of A Week's image of an infantile Thoreau listening to fairies clothe mother earth, one of the few explicitly personal reminiscences in Walden shows Thoreau at last getting old enough to do for mother nature what the fairies in A Week or other agents at Walden like Johnswort get to do:

When I was four years old, as I well remember, I was brought from Boston to this my native town, through these very woods and this field, to the pond. It is one of the oldest scenes stamped on my memory. And now to-night my flute has waked the echoes over that very water. The pines still stand here older than I; or, if some have fallen, I have cooked my supper with their stumps, and a new growth is rising all around, preparing another aspect for new infant eyes. Almost the same Johnswort springs from the same perennial root in this pasture, and even I have at length helped to clothe that fabulous landscape of my infant dreams, and one of the results of my presence and influence is seen in these bea leaves, corn blades, and potato vines. (Walden, 155-56)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Lebeaux, Thoreau's Seasons, 40, discusses images of the pond as both mother and lover, making Thoreau both son and lover.

<sup>32</sup> The name, Johnswort, may suggest Thoreau's oedipal competition with his brother and father, both named John. Lebeaux, Young Man Thoreau, 198-99, makes much of the possible significance of name-association in relation to Thoreau's brother in Cape Cod's first chapter, "Shipwreck," which features the wreck of the St. John. Lebeaux's discussion of A Week in Young Man Thoreau, 58ff., explores even more fully Thoreau's relation to his brother with whom he took the Concord and Merrimack trip and for whom the book is an elegy. Lebeaux also works with name-association in relation both to Thoreau's brother and father in the John Brown essays in Thoreau's Seasons, 323-31.

Much as the pond is both mother and lover, so too is the surrounding earth. Likewise, Thoreau reciprocates by being an agent of fertility, a husband, even as he is also still the child, receiving oral satisfaction and sustenance. And here at Walden, now, at last, he is alone with his mother-lover. Images of the body both in A Week and Walden, then, both of which were written during Thoreau's stay at Walden Pond (A Week in its first published form and Walden in its first full draft) along with the predominantly metaphorical style of both books demonstrate the strength of Thoreau's desire to escape temporal social and personal problems and, as Lebeaux explains, return to a pre-oedipal, pre-rivalry past, to the maternal breast, to the womb."<sup>33</sup>

If these works represent the canonical Thoreau's pastoralism and counterculturalism, to turn again to questions begged by Buell and many other such readers, what is the nature of this pastoralism and how is it countercultural? The psychological and social implications of the preeminence of an infantile, imperial consciousness achieved by Thoreau's metaphorical style reveal Thoreau's pastoralism to be less simply "the most memorable American example of the civilized person's withdrawal to a simpler state of existence for the sake of spiritual refreshment," as Buell terms it,<sup>34</sup> than a much more attenuated process of "putting the complex into the simple" as Empson shows pastoralism to do.<sup>35</sup> In A Week and Walden, Thoreau tries to obviate psychological and social problems by detaching himself from the trivial and attempting to make life meaningful primarily through an expansion of consciousness, through an exercise in desire to escape the limitations of the personal and historical ordinary, a gesture

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<sup>33</sup> Lebeaux, Young Man Thoreau, 214.

<sup>34</sup> Buell, "The Thoreauvian Pilgrimage," 188.

<sup>35</sup> William Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral (New York: New Directions, 1974), 22.

which Empson finds typical of pastoral: "The feeling that life is essentially inadequate to the human spirit, and yet that a good life must avoid saying so, is naturally at home with most versions of pastoral; in pastoral you take a limited life and pretend it to be the full and normal one, and a suggestion that we must do this with all life, because the normal itself is limited."<sup>36</sup>

Underlying one of Thoreau's better known proclamations in Walden that, "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection but to brag as lustily as Chanticleer in the morning," Quentin Anderson points out, is a prior draft's statement, "I could tell a pitiful story respecting myself. . .with a sufficient life of failures, and flow as humbly as the very gutters."<sup>37</sup> While Cape Cod and The Maine Woods invert the common pastoral feeling that life is inadequate to the spirit and assert rather the inadequacy of the spirit to practical life, in the writing of A Week and Walden as in his life at Walden, the site of much of this writing, Thoreau tries to compensate for the spiritual inadequacy of life as ordinarily lived by thinking his way out of it, by imagining that consciousness is being. The Thoreau of Walden, then, according to Lebeaux, relocates the pastoral from history where it is unachievable to its traditional location in consciousness and so maintains "an internal moratorium, a 'middle landscape' between childhood and adulthood, in the face of hard historical fact."<sup>38</sup>

In this way, the Thoreau of Walden and readers who keep him there in effect assert what Harry Berger identifies as a destructive rather than a regenerative pastoral, a pastoral which argues for a personal and social status quo instead of challenges it for the purpose of reform and renewal:

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 114-15.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, "Thoreau on July 4," 17.

<sup>38</sup> Lebeaux, Young Man Thoreau, 218. In this observation, Lebeaux makes explicit his concurrence with Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 264-65.

The green world seems to possess two essential qualities: first, since it is only metaphorically a place or space, it embodies a condition whose value should not remain fixed, but should rather emerge according to the temporal process of which it is a part. It appears first as exemplary or appealing and lures us away from the evil or confusion of everyday life. But when it has fulfilled its moral, esthetic, social cognitive, or experimental functions, it becomes inadequate and its creator turns us out. Those who wish to remain, who cannot or will not be discharged, are presented as in some way deficient. Thus the second quality of the green world is that it is ambiguous: its usefulness and dangers arise from the same source. In its positive aspects it provides a temporary haven for recreation or clarification, experiment or relief; in its negative aspects it projects the urge of a paralyzed will to give up, escape, work magic, abolish time and flux and the intrusive reality of other minds.<sup>39</sup>

Though Thoreau leaves Walden "for as good a reason as I went there. . . I had several more lives to live and could not spare any more time for that one" (Walden, 323), he intends not to leave Walden as a condition of consciousness by means of which he controls time, space, and others. He invites others to shape and subordinate practice to vision as he does in his injunction to build castles in the air first and foundations under them second; his canonical status suggests that most of his readers have complied.

In contradistinction to most of his readers, however, Thoreau did leave Walden, did in effect gradually render Walden, like Walden, temporary and render himself and that resort less psychologically and socially deficient than if he had not. Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, the only other books that Thoreau himself composed for publication, account perhaps more than anything else he wrote for another, fuller life, a life given much more affirmatively to temporality, to person and social practice over detached yet

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<sup>39</sup> Harry Berger, Jr., "[Utopia: Game, Chart, or Prayer?]," in Sir Thomas More, Utopia, trans. and ed. by Robert M. Adams (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 212.

controlling consciousness. Moreover, these books' narrative, metonymic language replaces the mostly nonnarrative and metaphorical language of A Week and Walden to enact a life in which spirit, or consciousness, must strive to be adequate to ordinary, practical experience. While Thoreau prepared these books for publication before he died on May 6, 1862, the composition of the various parts of each book dates from September, 1846, during his stay at Walden when he wrote in his journal about his first trip to Maine.<sup>40</sup> The journal account served as the original basis for "Ktaadn,"<sup>41</sup> published in Union Magazine at the end of 1848 and later, after extensive revisions,<sup>42</sup> as the first section of the 1864 book, The Maine Woods. Between his first Maine trip in 1846 and his death in May, 1862, Thoreau traveled to Maine twice more, in 1853 and 1857, as well as to Cape Cod in 1849, 1850, 1855, and 1857. In 1855, the year of Walden's publication, Thoreau published the first four chapters of Cape Cod; between 1857 and his death, he revised this material and the rest of what would comprise the final book, but due to an 1858 dispute with the publisher, Putnam's, about unconventional religious sentiment, he did not publish the book or make any known effort to do so during his life. As for the parts of The Maine Woods in addition to the 1848 "Ktaadn," Thoreau wrote a first version of the third part, "The Allegash and East Branch," by January, 1858, but did not publish it before his death out of regard for the privacy of Joe Polis, the Indian guide whom the work features. "Chesuncook," the second part of The Maine Woods, first appeared in The Atlantic in the summer of 1858 while the book's fourth and final part, an

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph Moldenhauer, "Afterword," in Henry David Thoreau, The Maine Woods (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 351-75, is the main source of this composition history. In my study I use this edition of Thoreau's text and refer to it hereafter in my text as TMW.

<sup>41</sup> Howarth, The Book of Concord, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Moldenhauer, "Afterword," 352.



appendix, Thoreau prepared shortly before his death for the book's posthumous publication. Of these compositions, according to Moldenhauer, "Chesuncook" and "The Allegash and East Branch" were the major objects of Thoreau's final writing efforts.<sup>43</sup> Thoreau's last book as a book, then, is The Maine Woods although it was published in 1864, ahead of the 1865 Cape Cod. In my discussion of the books, I will follow Thoreau's final chronology of composition, not the chronology of publication in order to highlight kinds and degrees of development.

Yet while it may be possible to discover various types or degrees of psychological or social development, I do not want to argue that Cape Cod or The Maine Woods shows a Thoreau who in contrast to the Thoreau of A Week or Walden resolves his oedipal problems and the related difficulties of situating himself within his social time and place in the sense of overcoming and eliminating such problems. Rather, I want to argue that when, as demonstrated in metonymic narrative language, practical consciousness achieves preeminence over detached, atemporal consciousness, Thoreau achieves a substitute satisfaction in and by means of practice for the inherently unsatisfiable desires of his regressive, willful expansions of contemplative consciousness and its metaphoric language. For if Thoreau, as Lebeaux argues, makes much of independence in Walden because he cannot fully confront his dependence upon the Concord community, his family, and especially his mother, who with his sisters brought food to Thoreau almost every Saturday night during his stay at Walden,<sup>44</sup> Thoreau's life after Walden suggests more that he accepts his dependence and in this way paradoxically

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>44</sup> Lebeaux, Thoreau's Seasons, 48-49, and Young Man Thoreau, 26-27.

achieves a greater psychological independence than the strained, idealized independence purportedly achieved in Walden. Except for living briefly at Emerson's house after leaving Walden in the fall of 1847, Thoreau lived with his parents and his one surviving sibling, a sister, Sophia, and spent his time writing, lecturing, traveling, surveying, and working with his father to manufacture pencils. And even though, as Lebeaux shows, Walden and many of its symbols fabricate for Thoreau a womb-like protection against unpleasant historical realities, including personal mortality,<sup>45</sup> and that this denial gives way by about 1855 when in conjunction with an illness, Thoreau begins to acknowledge time not as cosmically cyclical but linear, directed toward death,<sup>46</sup> and also to perceive, especially in his travel to Cape Cod and Maine, that experience is not necessarily analogous to transcendent spiritual truth,<sup>47</sup> metaphors of impossible oedipal desire and fear nevertheless persist in the predominantly metonymic narrative language of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods. "The Shipwreck, the first chapter of Cape Cod, for example, shows the ocean washing up wrecked boats and dismembered bodies only voraciously to engulf them again. Along with this suggestion of a devouring female, the nurturing mother continues to reside in nature as, for example, in "Ktaadn" where Thoreau writes, "It was as if we sucked at the very teats of Nature's pine-clad bosom in these parts" (TMW, 27).

Nevertheless, in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods nature comes to seem no longer essentially feminine for Thoreau as it is in A Week and Walden. If, as Diana Fuss argues, essentialism is constructed and, conversely, constructionism is a sophisticated form of essentialism in its

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<sup>45</sup> Lebeaux, Thoreau's Seasons, 214.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

essentialization of history, then Thoreau's notion of what is essential and how to apprehend it changes.<sup>48</sup> In A Week and Walden, essences like nature's motherliness precede and transcend temporal experience; in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, essence defies prior definition and develops as it is constituted and discovered in temporal practice. Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, then, do not indicate that Thoreau eliminates his psychosocial problems but instead indicate a Thoreau who finds satisfaction through practice more than through exertions of consciousness. Thoreau's shift from metaphorical language toward the more metonymic language in his last two books is in Lacan's terms a shift away from metaphor as the "enigmatic signifier of sexual trauma" toward "no other derangement of instinct than that of being caught in the rails -- eternally stretching forth toward the *desire for something else* -- of metonymy."<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps even more than the shift from metaphor to metonymy, Thoreau's coincidental shift away from nonnarrative to narrative indicates that although he first seeks freedom through expansions of consciousness disengaged from time, from place as particular place, and from others, he increasingly finds that true freedom is more real than ideal, more incorporate within time and place as particular place and site of actual practice than outside of time and within incorporeal consciousness. For as Paul Ricoeur explains of narrative's reciprocal relation to temporality, temporality is "that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity" while narrativity is "the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Diana Fuss, Essentially Speaking (New York: Routledge, 1989), especially her introduction and first chapter.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Lacan, Écrits (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 166-67, his emphases.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," in On Narrative, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 165.

So Thoreau's metonymic narrative writing in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods enacts Thoreau's acceptance of and affirmative engagement with himself and others as particularly, practically, temporally situated. Moreover, Thoreau's shift toward metonymic narrative signals a movement for him not just psychologically and socially but epistemologically and ethically too, for as Ricoeur also explains, in narrative the world "is apprehended from the angle of human praxis rather than from that of cosmic pathos. What is resignified by narrative is what was already presignified at the level of human acting."<sup>51</sup> Integral to Ricoeur's notion of narrative as a resignification of practice is his notion of plot not as an episodic recounting of a series of events but an "intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story"<sup>52</sup> so that in following a plot, a reader follows "the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time."<sup>53</sup> Writing narratively and metonymically in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, Thoreau locates himself in temporality and seeks not as in his other two books to escape personal and social history for some attitude of cosmic pathos, for myth-like, atemporal consciousness but instead to aim for what he can know and how he can judge when consciousness proceeds from rather than precedes or even precludes practice, others' practice as well as his own. As the language of Ricoeur's analysis conveys, plot's various figurations embody epistemological and ethical activity and awareness at once.

Ironically, the freedom from the oppressions of family and society that Thoreau tries first to find in visionary, atemporal consciousness and its metaphorical language, he instead finds increasingly in the circumscription of

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<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 81.

<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, "Narrative Time," 167.

<sup>53</sup> Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, vol. 1, 54.

such consciousness as he accomplishes it in one of the many modes of practice that he disparages implicitly in A Week and explicitly in Walden: travel and travel narrative. It is as if he allows himself to do something he wanted all along to do rather than conforming his life and writing to some ideal. However, neither in Cape Cod nor in The Maine Woods does Thoreau altogether repudiate the validity, even the necessity of the transcendental imagination. Watching boats off Cape Cod, Thoreau meditates,

It is remarkable that men do not sail the sea with more expectation. Nothing memorable was ever accomplished in a prosaic mood. The heroes and discoverers have found true more than was previously believed, only when they were expecting more than their contemporaries dreamed of, or even themselves discovered, that is, when they were in a frame of mind fitted to behold the truths.<sup>54</sup>

But if Thoreau here ascribes priority to visionary consciousness, much more often throughout Cape Cod he circumscribes its role. For example, in "Provincetown," the book's final section, Thoreau critiques historical accounts of early expeditions to Cape Cod, faulting English accounts for ignoring French; he concludes his critique with faulting the English pilgrims most of all for misrepresenting the place due to a preconceived vision:

All accounts agree in affirming that this part of the Cape was *comparatively* well wooded a century ago. But notwithstanding the great changes which have taken place in these respects, I cannot but think that we must make some allowance for the greenness of the Pilgrims in these matters, which caused them to see green. . . . They naturally exaggerated the fairness and attractiveness of the land, for they were glad to get any land at all after that anxious voyage. Everything appeared to them the color of the rose, and had the scent of juniper and sassafras. (CC, 200; Thoreau's emphasis)

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<sup>54</sup> Henry David Thoreau, Cape Cod (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 95; hereafter in the text as CC.

So while Thoreau may sometimes ascribe priority to visionary consciousness, much more often throughout Cape Cod he circumscribes its role not only in explicit assertions which emphasize the limits of imaginative perception and even language itself but also in his predominantly metonymic narrative style, which gives preeminence to practice over consciousness.

In these ways, then, Cape Cod shows a Thoreau who, as Howarth observes, shifts away from a narrow preoccupation with self-definition toward a concern for broader issues of history and culture,<sup>55</sup> indeed a Thoreau for whom, according to Hildebidle, "history is not only relevant. . . [but] inescapable."<sup>56</sup> This inescapability pertains to civil and natural history alike as Cape Cod shows Thoreau representing history as "what is" more than what is past.<sup>57</sup> The natural environment he finds is rich both in multiplicity and particularity and sufficient to foil any impulse to subsume the place within the metaphors of an expansive consciousness. The interior "is an exceedingly desolate landscape. . . .a succession of hills and valleys, now wearing an autumnal tint. . . .The pitch-pines were not commonly more than fifteen or eighteen feet high. The larger ones were covered with lichens, -- often hung with the long gray *Usnea*" (CC, 101). Visiting a lighthouse, Thoreau experiences firsthand some of the commonly reported difficulties of calculating time and space:

I saw that this was a place of wonders. In a sea turn or

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<sup>55</sup> Howarth, The Book of Concord, 134.

<sup>56</sup> Hildebidle, Thoreau, a Naturalist's Liberty, 137.

<sup>57</sup> Sattelmeyer, Thoreau's Reading, 43. It is within this context of Thoreau's understanding of the process of writing history that Sattelmeyer reads the critique in "Provincetown" of the English pilgrims' history of Cape Cod, which I discuss above, as an effort "to create a . . . conception of America as the gradual unfolding of a drama of discovery and imaginative appropriation by the European mind" (99). In contradistinction to Sattelmeyer, I take this passage as well as similar ones in The Maine Woods as demonstrations of Thoreau's desire to experience any place apart from any conceptions, any constrictive linguistic constructions of it.

shallow fog while I was there next summer, it being clear overhead, the edge of the bank twenty rods distant appeared like a mountain pasture in the horizon. I was completely deceived by it, and I could then understand why mariners ran aground in such cases, especially in the night, supposing it to be far away, though they could see the land. Once since this, being in a large oyster boat two or three hundred miles from here, in a dark night, when there was a thin veil of mist on land and water, we came so near to running on to the land before our skipper was aware of it, that the first warning was my hearing the sound of the surf under my elbow. I could almost have jumped ashore, and we were obliged to go about very suddenly to prevent striking. The distant light for which we were steering, supposing it a light-house five or six miles off, came through the cracks of a fisherman's bunk not more than six rods distant. (CC, 137)

Such surprises and amazements persistently challenge his preconceptions about the place and, accordingly, his efforts to make experience conform to consciousness.

Not only is Cape Cod a "place of wonders" but in contrast to his sense of the wonderful in A Week and Walden, in Cape Cod the wonderful is one with, not at odds with, the trivial in both natural and human life:

The sea-shore is a sort of neutral ground, a most advantageous point from which to contemplate this world. It is even a trivial place. The waves forever rolling to the land are too far-travelled and untameable to be familiar. Creeping along the endless beach amid the sun-squawl and the foam, it occurs to us that we, too, are the product of sea-slime. It is a wild rank place, and there is no flattery in it. Strewn with crabs, horse-shoes, and razor-claws, and whatever the sea casts up, -- a vast *morgue* where famished dogs may range in packs, and crows come daily to glean the pittance which the tide leaves them. The carcasses of men and beasts together lie stately upon the shelf, rotting and bleaching in the sun and each tide turns them in their beds, and tucks fresh sand under them. There is naked Nature, -- inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray. (CC, 147; Thoreau's emphasis)

While the excremental imagery of this passage appears more saliently in Walden's "Spring," here in Cape Cod it is not, as Poirier interprets it to be in Walden, part of Thoreau's process of "taking visionary possession of the things to which the words allude," not his "effort in style to make the rational, physical, mundane side of a given experience inseparable from its visionary aspects,"<sup>58</sup> but instead, it is now part of a process to relinquish vision as possession, to desist from possession through perceptions abstracted and reimposed, to submit to the separability of vision's aggressive, acquisitive desire from the mundane, even brutal, facts of physical, temporal necessity. Further unlike Walden's "Spring" where Thoreau personifies nature as having "some bowels, and there again is mother of humanity," here he divests nature of clothing, of human personification altogether and renders it rather more animal, and simultaneously divests himself of that visionary mode of consciousness by which he would keep himself eternally a child, free in the mythic realm of mother nature, safe forever from time and death. Writing narratively in both Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, Thoreau not only admits the role of temporality in natural and human experience alike but admits as well the inevitability of death. History as it leads to death, then, renders the trivial wonderful.

In Cape Cod, Thoreau in fact parodies the visionary consciousness given preeminence in A Week and Walden, and he does so in a way that seems clearly to parody Emerson's transparent eyeball too. Passing a "charity house" for stranded people, Thoreau and his companion

put our eye, by turns, to a knot-hole in the door, and after long looking, without seeing, into the dark -- not knowing how many shipwrecked men's bones we might see at last, looking

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<sup>58</sup> Poirier, A World Elsewhere, 88, 89.



with the eye of faith, knowing that, though to him that knocketh it may not always be opened, yet to him that looketh long enough through a knot-hole the inside shall be visible, -- for we had had some practice at looking inward, -- by steadily keeping our other ball covered from the light meanwhile, putting the outward world behind us, ocean and land, and the beach -- till the pupil became enlarged and collected the rays of light that were wandering in that dark, (for the pupil shall be enlarged by looking; there never was so dark a night but a faithful and patient eye, however small, might at last prevail over it,) -- after all this, I say, things began to take shape to our vision, -- if we may use this expression where there was nothing but emptiness, -- and we obtained the long wished for insight. (CC, 59-60)

Although Hildebidle analyzes this passage and its allusions to Matthew and Milton as an extended pun, "Be a pupil and you are at the same moment both student and see-er," by which Thoreau shows that insight depends on not seeing outward things, Hildebidle, as Thoreau's readers often do, explicitly bases his interpretation on Walden's emphasis on visionary insight.<sup>59</sup> So Hildebidle overlooks that the "wished for insight" of this passage is the wish to see what actually is there to see, especially if what is there to see is a kind of nothing which as nothing has palpable epistemological and moral import. To be a seer would be to miss this sight or insight into the inside, a potential mistake of detached, visionary consciousness which Thoreau here makes the object of ironic treatment in order to suggest that the exercise of a scrupulous pupil supersedes that of a seer. For what they finally see is "the wreck of all cosmical beauty within," an absence, a nothingness which compels the realization of "how cold is charity! how inhumane humanity!

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<sup>59</sup> Hildebidle, Thoreau, a Naturalist's Liberty, 136-37. Hildebidle reads this incident as "the moment he went to the Cape for, or at least a moment he went to the Cape to rediscover, another chance to 'link my facts to my fable' (Walden, 184). . . .a gathering of the ways in which the world's methods and the world's authorities may be used by the man seeing a kind of 'insight and far-sight' (Walden, 288).

This, then, is what charity hides!" (CC, 60) The irony in his assertions that through faith, vision will at last prevail, that things will shape themselves to vision unfolds as Thoreau narrates how vision shapes itself to things, even to nothing. Thoreau concludes his narration of this event by reporting that his companion tells him he lacks sentiment. Thoreau's reply, "I did not come for a sentimental journey," is demonstrated not only in statement but in narrative itself as it emplots him in temporal practice and the consciousness attendant to, not abstracted from, practice.

If language as the vehicle of visionary consciousness is implicitly and unquestionably adequate in A Week and Walden, in Cape Cod language becomes inadequate to convey the unsentimental wonderful within the trivial. "The places which I have described may seem strange and remote to my townsmen," Thoreau writes toward his narrative's end, "yet step into the cars, and in six hours you may stand on those four planks and see the Cape. . .

which I have so poorly described" (CC, 111-12). The remedy for the inadequacy of language is what, all along, the narrative has been calling for, to experience the place, the people there, and oneself in practice: "If you had started when I first advised you, you might have seen our tracks in the sand, still fresh, and reaching all the day from the Nauset Lights to Race Point, some thirty miles, -- for at every step we made an impression on the Cape, though we were not aware of it, and though our account may have made no impression on your minds. But what is our account? In it there is no roar, no beach birds, no tow-cloth" (CC, 212). There is no adequate substitute for experience, then, no way for language apart from practice to impart, or in Ricoeur's terms to refigure by configuration in plot what practice prefigures, and no time like the present for practically finding things out:

this shore will never be more attractive than it is now. Such beaches as are fashionable are here made and unmade in a day, I may almost say, by the sea shifting its sands. Lynn and Nantasket! this bare and bended arm it is that makes the bay in which they lie so snugly. What are springs and waterfalls? Here is the spring of springs, the waterfall of waterfalls. A storm in the fall or winter is the time to visit it; a light-house or a fisherman's hut the true hotel. A man may stand there and put all America behind him. (CC, 214-15)

If Thoreau in Cape Cod renders practice prior to consciousness and its language, he also makes it finally beyond language. For practice seems finally to promise freedom from consciousness, one's own or others, which means being free in and by means of practice from language, from even a single constraining word of it, from a name, like America, which might force false sight and hence perverse practice too.

This gesture in language to urge the insufficiency of language and the need to be through with it, from time to time to leave off, directly challenges the use value of language in Walden as Stanley Cavell interprets it. According to Cavell, in Walden self-knowledge for Thoreau is a continuous activity of placing himself in the world, and writing understood as an accounting of this process is "not a substitute for . . . life but a way of prosecuting it."<sup>60</sup> But in Cape Cod, while writing may help prosecute life, it also impedes its prosecution. Thoreau dispells this impediment through enacting and arguing for practice as it includes writing that points finally not to language and the consciousness articulated by language so much as back to practice itself apart from language as the more fundamental basis of knowledge and ethics. Practice sometimes must put language and its concepts, its constructions, behind it. For in Cape Cod Thoreau does not use language ultimately to

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<sup>60</sup> Stanley Cavell, The Senses of Walden (New York: Viking, 1972), 60.

displace the self into language, a displacement which Cavell acknowledges in a concluding observation, "Walden was always gone, from the beginning of the words of Walden."<sup>61</sup> Instead of Walden's displacement of self from place and practice into consciousness and the language that creates consciousness, then, in Cape Cod Thoreau effects a situation of self in place as place, both as it has been and yet has not been named, in practice as it precedes and supersedes accounts of it. In other words, experience for Thoreau in Cape Cod no longer is reified as in A Week and Walden but rather is concrete, tractable, subject to his and others' making.

The same desire to engage concretely in temporality, the same rendering of practice preeminent to consciousness and its language informs The Maine Woods. In "Ktaadn," the first narrative of the book, which centers on Thoreau's ascent of Mt. Ktaadn, it is not so much, as Richardson says, that Thoreau does not insist on the Promethean myth which he uses,<sup>62</sup> but that Thoreau insists on the inadequacy not only of this myth or the biblical or Miltonic myths he also invokes, but of language itself due to language's potential to impose preconceived, perhaps false notions upon experience. "Vast, Titanic, inhuman nature has got him at a disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty," Thoreau writes, and his use of third person itself signals not only his differentiation of self from place, from a nature that is "but a stepmother" (TMW, 64), but also signals that a prior sense of himself is giving way to a new one. "Perhaps I most fully realized that this was primeval, untamed, and forever untameable

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>62</sup> Richardson, Myth and Literature in the American Renaissance, 13.

*Nature*, or whatever else men call it, while coming down this part of the mountain," Thoreau elaborates his increasingly explicit insistence on the power, in fact the necessity of practice to defy the dominance of consciousness and its language:

It is difficult to conceive of a region uninhabited by man. We habitually presume his presence and influence everywhere. And yet we have not seen pure Nature, unless we have seen her thus vast, and drear, and inhuman, though in the midst of cities. Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there, the form and fashion and material of their work. This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhand-sold globe. It was not lawn, nor pasture, nor mead, nor woodland, nor lea, nor arable, nor waste-land. It was the fresh and natural surface of the planet Earth, as it was made forever and ever, -- to be the dwelling of man, we say, -- so Nature made it, and man may use it if he can. Man was not to be associated with it. It was Matter, vast, terrific, -- not his Mother Earth that we have heard of, not for him to treat on, or be buried in, -- no, it were being too familiar even to let his bones lie there -- the home this of Necessity and Fate. There was there felt the presence of a force not bound to be kind to man. (TMW, 70)

Residual metaphors of oedipal desire to escape temporality for the fabricated fulfillment of detached consciousness remain but give way to a sense of such desire's impossibility and accept instead the more real satisfaction of temporal practice enacted in metonymic language. Here such stylistic gestures as the linguistic reflexivity of "There was there" point less to style and expansions of consciousness by means of style than away from style and instead toward a particular place and the particular power of that place to defy devices of consciousness to escape or dominate it.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Sharon Cameron in her book, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), sees in Thoreau's journal much the same project that I see in Cape Cod and

Place compels scrupulous attention to it as a place apart from all human constructions of it, as does Thoreau's person itself:

Perchance where *our* wild pines stand, and leaves lie on their forest floor in Concord, there were once reapers, and husbandmen planted grain; but here not even the surface had been scarred by man, but it was a specimen of what God saw fit to make this world. What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, -- *that* my body might, -- but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! -- Think of our life in nature, -- daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, -- rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! Contact! *Contact!* *Who* are we? *Where* are we?

(TMW, 71; Thoreau's emphases)

Here language serves best to register as much as possible of temporal experience, including questions about its most concrete yet mysterious, most trivial yet wonderful details, the answers to which seem to lie, if anywhere, less in language than in the temporal practice that the questions pointedly indicate.

So although the primeval qualities of his experience on Katahdin momentarily evoke myth and the desire for being as consciousness, much more

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The Maine Woods. She discovers that Thoreau's journey "writes human beings out of the picture and makes them virtually marginal," in an effort to "write about nature. . . divorced from the mind's symbolizing procedures" (11, 47). Of Thoreau's four books, Cameron, like most readers of Thoreau, relates only Walden to her study of Thoreau's journal, finding them to be in antithetical relation to each other, with Walden "suggesting that nature realizes our beliefs" and the Journal "suggesting that nature replaces beliefs with *alternative* pictures" (147, her emphasis). Although Thoreau's Journal is outside the scope of my study, I would assume that over the course of the years that Thoreau kept it, from 1837-1861, it probably registers much the same development charted in his four books, also composed and recomposed, in and outside of the journal, over approximately the same period of time, 1839-1862; reading the Journal in relation to all four books, then, probably would show it to be at once a less uniform effort and a less anomalous project than Cameron's main thesis seems to imply.

frequently Thoreau demonstrates the compelling power of place to lead him to differentiate himself from place and to differentiate particular temporal features of place, including the people there. For example, he sees in George McCauslin of Kennebec a "man of dry wit and shrewdness, and a general intelligence which I had not looked for in the backwoods" or looked for even less often in Concord or other towns near Boston, "for always the pioneer has been a traveller, and, to some extent, a man of the world; and, as the distances with which he is familiar are greater, so is his information more general and far reaching than the villager's" (TMW, 22). Similarly, he sees in the place not the static, timeless qualities of a mythic site but a place which calls for people to explore and chart as it exists in time, in present personal and social practice, comprehensible neither in myth nor in the sketchy nomenclature of exploration to date:

Have we even so much as discovered and settled the shores?  
Let a man travel on foot along the coast, from the  
Passamaquoddy to the Sabine, or to the Rio Bravo, or to  
wherever the end is now, if he is swift enough to overtake  
it, faithfully following the winding of every inlet and cape, and  
stepping to the music of the surf -- with a desolate fishing  
town once a week, and a city's port once a month to cheer him,  
and putting up at the light-houses, when there are any, and tell  
me if it looks like a discovered and settled country, and not  
rather, for the most part, like a desolate island, and No-man's  
land. (TMW, 82)

"Ktaadn" echoes Cape Cod in calling for the priority of practice in the fullness of its temporal concreteness apart from human constructions of it.

A similar echo in "The Allegash and East Branch," the third narrative of The Maine Woods, reiterates the same priority but also articulates one of the bases of Thoreau's interest in his Maine Indian guides: their knowledge through experience that eludes the comprehension of a European American's

consciousness such as his own. The dialogic language that leads to Thoreau's articulation of his desire to know as the Indian, Joe Polis, knows, enacts not only Thoreau's practical engagement with place and person but in contrast to the mostly metaphoric, centripetal, and monological language of A Week and Walden,<sup>64</sup> enacts simultaneously a larger social engagement through, as Bakhtin terms it, "a dialogical heteroglossia, in which is embodied the centrifugal forces in the life of a language."<sup>65</sup> Much like Heat Moon's sense of centrifugalism and centripetalism, for Bakhtin centripetal language is both a product and producer of a unitary "verbal-ideological centralization and unification" while centrifugal language is both a product and producer of diversity, of "decentralization and disunification."<sup>66</sup> As Thoreau's language becomes more centrifugal, more dialogically heteroglossic, as it does in "The Allegash and East Branch," Thoreau moves perhaps more than in any other of his works away from the confines of detached, self-serving consciousness toward greater practical engagement with community. Passages like the following enact this movement as Thoreau represents himself on his last trip to Maine in relation to Joe Polis and indicates the preeminence of practice over consciousness as practice centrifugally encompasses yet differentiates others' practice; heterogeneous practice instead of homogeneous consciousness, then, becomes the basis for an epistemology and an ethics to inform and be informed by ongoing practice:

Pointing southeasterly over the lake and distant forest,  
he [Polis] observed, "Me go oldtown in three days." I asked him  
how he would get over the swamps and fallen trees. "O," said

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<sup>64</sup> Poirier, A World Elsewhere, 20, for example, cites Walden as one of several American books which "not even when they permit a dialogue, is there allowance made for a style that is not the characteristic style of the author."

<sup>65</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 273.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.



he, "In winter all covered, go anywhere on snow-shoes, right across lakes." When I asked how he went, he said, "First I go Ktaadn, west side, then I go Millinocket, then Pamadumcook, then Nickaton, then Lincoln, then Oldtown," or else he went a shorter way to the Piscataquis. What a wilderness walk for a man to take alone! None of your half-mile swamps, none of your mile-wide woods merely, as on the skirts of our owns, without hotels, only a dark mountain or a lake for guide-board and station, over ground much of it impassable in summer.

It reminded me of Prometheus Bound. Here was travelling of the old heroic kind over the unaltered face of nature. From the Allegash, or Hemlock River, and Pongoquahem Lake, across great Apmoojenegamook, and leaving the Nerlumskeechticook Mountains on his left, he takes his way under the bear-haunted slopes of Souneunk and Ktaadn Mountains to Pamadumcook and Millinocket's inland seas, (where often gull's-eggs may increase his store,) and so on to the forks at Nickatou, (nia soseb "we alone Joseph" seeing what our folks see,) ever pushing the boughs of the fir and spruce aside, with his load of furs, contending day and night, night and day, with the shaggy demon vegetation, travelling through the mossy graveyard of trees. Or he could go by "that rough tooth of the sea," Kineo, great source of arrows and of appears to the ancients, when weapons of stone were used. Seeing and hearing moose and caribou, bears, porcupines, lynxes, wolves, panthers. Places where he might live and die and never hear of the United States, which make such a noise in the world, -- never hear of America, so called from the name of a European gentleman.  
(TMW, 235-36)

While it seems apt that Indians in general may represent psychologically for Thoreau pre-oedipal brotherly allies in retreat from oedipal conflict, as Lebeaux conjectures,<sup>67</sup> or apt too as Sayre speculates, that Indians sometimes represent rebellion against the fathers,<sup>68</sup> the dialogical narrative of The Maine Woods renders particular Indians like Louis Neptune in "Ktaadn," Joe Aitteon in "Chesuncook," but especially Joe Polis, whose portrayal in "The

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<sup>67</sup> Lebeaux, Thoreau's Seasons, 12.

<sup>68</sup> Robert F. Sayre, Thoreau and the American Indians (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 146.

Allegash and East Branch" Lebeaux calls Thoreau's richest and most vivid,<sup>69</sup> more salient for the practical knowledge and skills they embody and impart to Thoreau. As Sattelmeyer finds, Thoreau's growing fascination with particular Indians is based on his desire to be guided "toward some wisdom gained through the apprehension of nature that had been lost by civilized people."<sup>70</sup> With Polis, Thoreau experiences an other, a place, and a time freer than otherwise from the domination of his and his society's most common and most constricting practices and linguistic constructions upon that practice. Though in Walden Thoreau explicitly aspires to knowledge through extravagance, fearing "lest my expression may not be extra-vagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. . . .for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression" (Walden, 324), in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods he seeks experience outside of language, finds a place where "America" and the "United States" are unheard of. That is, he discovers experience extravagant of language instead of language extravagant of experience to be the truer ground and object of knowledge.

Coincident with this discovery, Thoreau not only demonstrates but makes explicit his skepticism about the authority of visionary consciousness, finding in it now a greater potential to mislead than to guide to knowledge. Although in "The Allegash and East Branch," traveling with Polis mostly liberates Thoreau into temporal engagement, nevertheless he sometimes finds that,

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<sup>69</sup> Lebeaux, Thoreau's Seasons, 305, makes this observation

<sup>70</sup> Sattelmeyer, Thoreau's Reading, 100.

Wild as it was, it was hard for me to get rid of the associations of the settlements. Any steady and monotonous sound, to which I did not distinctly attend, passed for a sound of human industry. The waterfalls which I heard were not without their dams and mills to my imagination, -- and several times I found that I had been regarding the steady rushing sound of the wind from over the woods beyond rivers as that of a train of cars, -- the cars at Quebec. Our minds anywhere, when left to themselves, are always thus busily drawing conclusions from false premises. (TMW, 203)

Only when one does not leave mind to itself and its self-enclosing, world-subsuming maneuvers, but temporalizes and situates it in practice prior to and yet sometimes beyond even linguistic descriptions do place and the natural and human life of that place become important in and of themselves.

In "Chesuncook" too Thoreau makes this connection clear:

Humboldt has written an interesting chapter on the primitive forest, but no one has yet described for me the difference between that wild forest which once occupied our oldest townships, and the tame one which I find there today. It is a difference which would be worth attending to. The civilized man not only clears the land permanently to a great extent, and cultivates open fields, but he tames and cultivates to a certain extent the forest itself. By his mere presence, almost, he changes the nature of the trees as no other creatures does.  
(TMW, 151)

Nature, then, is no longer subservient to the willfulness of consciousness, no longer primarily an occasion for the exercise of consciousness, but a real, vital entity whose relation to human beings is necessarily one of reciprocity:

The Kings of England formerly had their forests "to hold the king's game" for sport or food, sometimes destroying villages to create or extend them; and I think that they were impelled by a true instinct. Why should not we, who have removed the king's authority, have our national preserves, where no villages need to be destroyed, in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be "civilized off the face of the earth," -- our forests, not to hold the king's

game merely, but to hold and preserve the king himself also, the lord of creation, -- not for idle sport or food but for inspiration and our own true recreation? or shall we, like villains, grub them all up, poaching on our own national domains? (TMW, 156)

Thoreau advocates here not merely an ecological practice but engages in a remaking of western cultural history. He relinquishes possession, desists from omniverous acquisition, yet paradoxically gains a world, a world of his, in conjunction with others', preserving.

Part II. Thoreau and Contemporary Writers of Nonfiction Narrative Prose of  
Place: From the Importance of People in Relation to Place  
Toward the Imperative of Place Apart from People

Chapter 3. James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men

Thoreau's four books chart two different attitudes toward place and time. A Week and Walden enact a lyrical displacement of self into atemporal consciousness through metaphorical, nonnarrative style while Cape Cod and The Maine Woods effect a replacement of self into space and temporal practice through metonymic narrative style. Rather than resist and try to escape history as he does in A Week and Walden, Thoreau gives in to time in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods. In other words, eros overpowers thanatos, as Thoreau gradually is given less by what Freud calls the instinctive "urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things" than he is impelled by "external and diverting influences," that is, by time itself, for "[i]n the last resort, what has left its mark on the development of organisms must be the history we live in and of its relation to the sun."<sup>1</sup> Libidinal narcissistic instincts, such as a desire to return to the womb, which motivate lyrical detachment from temporal practice give way to eros, "which seeks to force together and hold together the portions of living substance,"<sup>2</sup> which seeks, that is, to make self cohere with others in space and time.

Or, to turn again to Poirier's findings in A World Elsewhere, A Week and Walden are among those "American books. . .written as if. . .history can give no life to 'freedom,' and as if only language can create the liberated place," books

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

which demonstrate "an expansion of self" in which "there is less a tendency to criticize existing environments. . . than an effort to displace them," to substitute an "imaginary" or "invented environment" for an actual or "provided environment."<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Cape Cod and The Maine Woods invert this attitude by situating or replacing a less expansive and more fully engaged self in a particular, historically provided environment. In other words, Thoreau moves away from A Week's and Walden's avowal of the authority of detached, atemporal consciousness to Cape Cod's and The Maine Woods' avowal of the authority of temporal practice.

While the authority of experience permits Thoreau freedom from the static alienation of his transcendentalist affirmation of being as consciousness, the authority of experience, however, is not unproblematic. As Diana Fuss explains, experience is not simply an unmediated given, as in the tradition of Aristotelian empiricism but rather, as poststructuralist analyses reveal, experience is itself constructed, is "a product of ideology. . . . a sign mediated by other signs."<sup>4</sup> Amplifying her explanation, Fuss endorses Jonathan Culler's observation of the duplicitous status of the authority of experience: "it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced -- an indispensable point of reference, yet never simply there."<sup>5</sup> So Thoreau's avowal of the authority of experience does not put him home free, so to speak, not even his efforts in his last two books to posit some realm of pure, unmediated experience beyond linguistic constructions as a basis for knowledge and ethical judgment. And for all his desire to arrive at such a place, Thoreau in the very act of writing, or promulgating his own

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<sup>3</sup> Poirier, A World Elsewhere, 5-8.

<sup>4</sup> Fuss, Essentially Speaking, 114.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

linguistic constructions, admits his awareness of the impossibility of this desire. Yet at the same time, Thoreau nevertheless seeks this freedom in the act not merely of writing but of writing narratively, for narrative perhaps more than any other form of writing mitigates even as it manifests the constructedness of experience. By means chiefly of plot as mimesis of practice and temporal values,<sup>6</sup> narrative constructions, or reconstructions, of experience point to experience apart from linguistic constructions of it and yet demonstrate the dependence of experience constructed as such upon narrative, upon narrator. Thoreau as narrator in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, then, renders himself responsible to and for personal and social temporal experience rather than casts himself in refusal of such responsibility, in repudiation of temporality, and desirous of escape as in A Week and Walden.

This dialectic of refusal and displacement through nonnarrative lyrical consciousness versus responsibility and replacement through narrative practical consciousness informs Thoreau's four books and illuminates not only Thoreau's writing and life but much contemporary American nonfiction prose of place as well. My interest in relating the dialectic between lyrical and practical consciousness in Thoreau's four books to several contemporary works is twofold. First, I want to build on my reading of Thoreau in terms of all four of his books in order to see his relation to several writers that reading him almost exclusively as the author of Walden obscures. And second, I want in light of my exploration of Thoreau further to explore how the diminishment or destruction of the natural and human ecology of places during our contemporary period gives rise to a literature of place which attempts

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<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, Time and Narrative, vol. 1, xi.

less to displace the self, less to escape through nonnarrative lyrical consciousness than narratively to re-place the self in historical time and place, to criticize, to gainway such diminishment or loss. In other words, as with Thoreau himself, the more acutely concerned a contemporary writer seems to be with ecological loss to economic development, the more narrative and critically engaged with temporal practice his or her writing is.

Probably more than any other single work of contemporary nonfiction prose of place, James Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men reproduces the dialectic developed during the course of Thoreau's four books. Although Agee, who published Famous Men in 1904 and died in 1955 at the age of forty-five, is not contemporary with William Least Heat Moon, John McPhee, Ann Zwinger, or Edward Abbey, the fact that Famous Men began to receive much attention only upon its reissue in 1961 effectively makes this book contemporary for purposes of this part of my study, which focuses on selected works of the past thirty years. Agee's project in Famous Men is to represent as comprehensively and truthfully as possible the experience of the tenant families, based on his and Walker Evans' stay with them in the summer of 1936. But due largely to Agee's nonnarrative style, his book's most salient feature is its representation of Agee's own consciousness. This achievement is similar to Thoreau's in A Week and especially in Walden where despite the factuality of catalogs of fish, plants, lists, or tables of accounts, Thoreau makes his own transcendental consciousness preeminent. And while Agee's notions of the inadequacy of language in Famous Men are much like Thoreau's in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, the greater nonnarrative bulk of Agee's book reinscribes language's limitations upon apprehension and representation rather than mitigates these limitations as Thoreau does in his last two books



by means of narrative. So even though Agee reiterates his awareness of and desire to embody as truthfully as possible the brutal degradation to human life of agricultural tenantry's form of servitude to capitalism, his predominantly nonnarrative style works against his chief aim.

Agee is not just skeptical of linguistic constructions upon experience, as Thoreau is in his last two books, but in fact is contemptuous of language as a means to apprehend or represent truth. The section, "A Definition," for example, makes explicit the deficiency of language merely to define with historical and economic accuracy the crucial terms of tenant or sharecropper. Though he compounds such problems with language in choosing to use words to compose a book, Agee cautions his readers "that you should so far as possible forget that this is a book. . . .it is simply an effort to use words in such a way that they will tell as much as I want to and can make them tell of a thing which happened and which, of course, you have no other way of knowing."<sup>7</sup> This statement is as close as Agee comes to acknowledging the constructedness of any experience, the mediation of experience by some sign system or other, for elsewhere throughout the book Agee aspires to make words do what he assumes that a symphony or, especially, the camera can do; that is, to present, not represent, immediate, not mediate, experience as truth:

'For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the

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<sup>7</sup> James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 246. Hereafter in the text as FM.

effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.

This is why the camera seems to me, next to unassisted and weaponless consciousness, the central instrument of our time; and is why in turn I feel such rage at its misuse: which has spread so nearly universal a corruption of sight that I know of less than a dozen alive whose eyes I can trust even so much as my own.' (FM, 11)

To match the camera's seemingly palpable fidelity to the concrete factuality of temporal practice is Agee's aim with words. Accordingly, then, as J. A. Ward shows, through "some of the most exhaustive, if not excessive, accumulations of sheer data on record. . . . Agee pushes language in the direction of photography, always stressing the stillness and motionlessness of the objects observed."<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Agee demonstrates the capacity of the camera, compared with "weaponless consciousness," to be a weapon, to freeze or kill into stillness.

It is primarily this static quality of Agee's style that serves to subvert his aim to embody against all odds particular temporal experience with words:

Words cannot embody; they can only describe. But a certain kind of artist, whom we will distinguish from others as a poet rather than a prose writer, despises this fact about words or his medium, and continually brings words as near as he can to an illusionment of embodiment. (FM, 238)

For in aspiring to embody truth as a camera seems to do, Agee's nonnarrative representation of data together with his frequent and almost equally exhaustive meditations on his method make perception, specifically Agee's perception, preeminent and synonymous with being. Led by his sense that photographs and his own poetics of photographic language can embody truth, Agee diverts himself and subverts his work from chiefly representing the

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<sup>8</sup> J. A. Ward, *American Silences* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 83.

experience of the three tenant families and from criticizing the economic conditions of that experience. He instead does what Susan Sontag says a photographic compulsion almost inevitably does; he makes "experience itself into a way of seeing."<sup>9</sup> Echoing Emerson, Agee too casts himself as "a bodiless eye" (FM, 187), not present in time and place as a participant but outside of place and time as transcendent perception itself. According to Ward, such a moment of perception is "the Ageean 'stillpoint'. . .the apprehension of the mystical oneness of the cosmos and the unique individual self."<sup>10</sup>

A similarly transcendental "still point," this time auditory as well as visual, concludes the book and seems to be a climactic, intense moment. Hearing some animal sound far from the porch where he is situated, Agee imagines that the animals are foxes. He associates the foxes mainly with the universal need to communicate despite the ultimate futility of any such attempt. In developing this association, once again Agee uses an image of the disembodied eyeball as the whole, harmonious state of being to which erotic love aspires even though erotic love makes the goal impossible:

Out of this violence of flesh and of total mutual confidence it is not possible to withdraw into that quieter sphere of apposition in which the body, brain and spirit of each of you is all one perfectly focused lens and in which these two lenses devour, feed, enrich and honor each other; it is not possible because the violence blurs, feathers and distorts the essential constituency of the lens. And it is then, living in flushes of memory of a thing more excellent than you may much hope to share between you again, that with scarcely conscious bravery and sorrow, and with measureless compassion, love must assume itself to be established and alive between you. There will be goodness and joy between you again, with wisdom and

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1977), 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ward, *American Silences*, 87.

luck a great deal, more than enough, but not all the kind regard nor all the love within the scope of existence will ever restore you what for a while, and only that you might lose it in the blind service of nature, you had.

In the sound of these foxes, if they were foxes, there was nearly as much joy, and less grief. There was the frightening joy of hearing the world talk to itself, and the grief of incommunicability. (FM, 468-69)

The foxes' cries are emblematic of a kind of transcendental insight into the doomed potential of love to effect communication, to make lovers ideal perceivers. Entanglement proscribes perception of essence, of truth by proscribing the necessary achievement of withdrawal into "that quieter sphere of apposition" of being "one perfectly focused lens."

Not entanglement but detachment facilitates such apposition, from which follows Agee's aspiration to embody with words a camera's-eye view of experience. Agee's notion of the camera's eye makes the transcendental metaphor of the transparent eyeball literal, incarnate. Although Agee intends by this method to embody the truth of the tenant farmers' lives, the photogaphic method is at odds with this end and so subverts it, becoming an end in itself. In this way, Agee, much like the transcendentalist Thoreau of A Week and Walden, makes hiw own perception his main method and central subject alike. As Ward observes,

The final poetic "harmony," surely meant to be something like a revelation, if not an apotheosis, is solely a private vision. As deeply felt as it is, the cry of the foxes is less a resolution than an appendage. . . . Finally, Famous Men, in spite of Agee's wish to be as objective as a camera, is a very personal reaction -- mainly aesthetic and religious -- to a world in which he must always be alien.<sup>11</sup>

I would argue, though, in contradistinction to Ward, that Agee makes the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

tenant farmers and their experience objects of religious and aesthetic veneration not *in spite of* his aim to be as objective as a camera but *because* of it.

Agee's photographic method reproduces some of the inherent epistemological and ethical limitations of photography as elucidated by Sontag. As Sontag shows, "The Camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque." That is, the camera turns people and experience into objects, into things dislocated from time and place. It is a device "which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery," inspiring aesthetic or religious veneration but not understanding, for "[i]n contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand."<sup>12</sup> So, in aiming to write as if from the vantage of the camera's eye, Agee thwarts his intention to embody an immediate world of experience, "to know these things not as a book looked into, a desk sat down to, a good show caught, but as a fact as large as the air; something absolute and true we were a part of and drew with every breath, and added to with every glance of the eye" (FM, 253). Agee reproduces experience as a collection of things, but without narrative, without mediation that is in and of time, the things have meaning chiefly as objects of his consciousness. For it is Agee's perceiving consciousness that his nonnarrative points to. The title of the book itself emphasizes the status of others as objects of Agee's religious veneration. Throughout the book, in explicit statements and in the use of liturgical terms to head some of its

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<sup>12</sup> Sontag, On Photography, 23.

sections, Agee harps on his reverence for the people he has made the objects more than the subjects of his scrutiny, his true subject being his own scrutiny, his own perceptual process of "praise." As Ward says, "To Agee aesthetics and religion are one."<sup>13</sup>

If the camera's eye method helps to explain Agee's reverence for his objects, it also helps to explain the other side of that reverence, and that is his disregard, even contempt for the animate in favor of the inanimate. Like Evans' photographs in which, as Ward observes, "people seem interchangeable with objects," Agee's writing renders people "as still and motionless. . . .[as] subordinate appendages to the objects. Their identity is felt only indirectly."<sup>14</sup> Indirectly, that is, as objects among many objects of Agee's perceiving consciousness, no more or less valuable than any other thing. Agee makes this value explicit during one of his "still points" of transcendence:

No doubt we overvalue the difference between life and lifelessness. . . .and. . .we may do well to question whether there is anything more marvelous or more valuable in the state of being we distinguish as 'life' than in the state of being of a stone, the brainless energy of a star, the diffuse existence of space. Certainly life is valuable; indispensable to all our personal calculations, the very spine of them: but we should realize that life and consciousness are only the special crutches of the living and the conscious, and that in setting as we do so high a value by them we are in a certain degree making a virtue of necessity. . . (FM, 226-27)

While Ward says, "Agee's preoccupation with the inanimate is not to be interpreted as a belittling of the animate" because for Agee "things derive their beauty from the humans who create and use them,"<sup>15</sup> the scope of Ward's analysis stops short of giving due consideration to the desire for death

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<sup>13</sup> Ward, *American Silences*, 85.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>15</sup> Ward, *American Silences*, 85.

manifest not only in this passage but latent in the insistence upon motionlessness and silence, upon total inertia, in Agee's photographic method. Is not the camera's eye as the perfection of a literally disembodied perception a way to overcome "making a virtue of necessity" which he ascribes to valuing the living and the conscious? Does not the mechanical eye of the camera serve as a metaphor for the inanimate perception, as it were, of objects whose animacy or inanimacy its view makes moot?

If so, this passage and an immediately preceeding one elucidate each other and Agee's ultimately regressive rejection of life for death. Animate life is temporal life, and Agee's "end" is not merely to subordinate the animate or temporal to atemporal consciousness as Thoreau does in A Week and Walden but to make it and any epistemological or moral claims irrelevant, to stand outside of the temporal in a camera-like ecstasy of seemingly inert, inanimate perception:

The dead oak and pine, the ground, the dew, the air, the whole realm of what our bodies lay in and our minds in silence wandered, walked in, swam in, watched upon, was delicately fragrant as a paradise, and, like all that is best, was loose, light, casual, totally *actual*. . . . All the length of the body and all its parts and functions were participating, and were being realized and rewarded, inseparable from the mind, identical with it: and all, everything that the mind touched, was actuality and all, everything that the mind touched turned immediately, yet without in the least losing the quality of its total individuality, into joy and truth, or rather, revealed, of its self, truth, which in its very nature was joy, which must be the end of art, of investigation, and of all anyhow human existence. (FM, 225)

The "end" of Agee's art, investigation, and existence is to return to a kind of inert, inorganic state, to be a thing among things. As such, then, Agee's "end" is the end Freud identifies as the death instinct, the infantile, narcissistic

desire to return to an "earlier state of things." Agee wants not simply to write as a camera embodies but in effect to be a camera, to exist within and as a percipient, mechanical womb.

In addition to these epistemological and psychological issues, Agee's vantage from within the camera's cover, as it were, raises ethical and psychosexual issues as well. Just as the camera is not an ethically neutral instrument but rather is often a tool of aggression in its invasion of others' lives, so Agee in assuming a camera's-eye vantage assumes a violently antagonistic relation not only toward the place and people of whom he writes but toward his readers too. His antagonistic position is remarkable for its thoroughgoing scope and for the sexual terms by which he renders it. Addressing his readers in the first few pages of the book, Agee says that in challenging writing to embody truth photographically, he also challenges his readers' notions of truth and art's relation to truth. His intention to violate his readers' presumably conventional notions explicitly encompasses his concomitant violation of Alabama tenant families who occasion his book. If he fails to violate his readers, then he himself will suffer the violation of his own sexual virility:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.

A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point. . . . As a matter of fact, nothing I might write could make any difference whatever. It would only be a "book" at the best. If it were a safely dangerous one it would be "scientific" or "political" or "revolutionary." If it were really dangerous it would be "literature" or "religion" or "mysticism" or "art," and



under one such name or another might in time achieve the emasculation of acceptance. (FM, 13)

As Agee elaborates his fear of emasculation, however, he shows that it is also a desire: "The deadliest blow the enemy of the human soul can strike is to do fury honor. Swift, Blake, Beethoven, Christ, Joyce, Kafka, name me a one who has not been thus castrated" (FM, 15). His fear that he might be emasculated by his readers is a desire to be as great as those who have been previously emasculated.

Writing as if from the camera's eye, Agee positions himself at a matrix of sado-masochistic violence. In using words to do what he believes words cannot do, he engages in a kind of masochism which pervades his book, necessarily focusing attention not just on Agee's consciousness but on his suffering consciousness. Moreover, Agee's self-inflicted pain together with his gratuitous, or sadistic, violation of his readers, which masks his masochistic desire that his readers violate him as they have great men before him, and, even more, his violation of the tenants whom he tears out of time and place, contrasts boldly with the economically enforced hardship of the tenants. This disparity makes Agee not simply self-indulgent but reprehensibly so.

Place as a fantasy of woman along with actual women of the place serve as special objects of Agee's sado-masochistic aggression. An ascribed, seemingly inherent inaccessibility of any woman constitutes Agee's treatment of all women, whether in fantasy or in practical experience. Agee's description of the Alabama sky early in the book makes the sky a superlatively cruel female in making the sky a mother who flaunts her capacity to feed her children even as she removes herself and refuses to feed:

The sky was withdrawn from us with all her strength.

Against some scarcely conceivable imprisoning wall this woman held herself away from us and watched us: wide, high, light with her stars as milk above our heavy dark; and like the bristling and glass breakage on the mouth of stone spring water: broached on grand heaven their metal fires. (FM, 21)

The sky is a beautiful but dangerously seductive mother, holding out but not giving the milk or water her children need. Moreover, this woman is everywhere, for not only is she the overlying sky but also the underlying ground. Further describing night in Alabama, Agee writes, "Beneath, the gulf lies dreaming, and beneath, dreaming, that woman, that is, the lower American continent, lies spread before heaven in her wealth" (FM, 45).

Much later in the book, Agee, driving alone and in search of a "piece of talk" (FM, 376), passes by a woman he considers a "whore" and instead engages in a fantasy of a sexual encounter with her and then a fantasy of sexual encounters with numerous other country women. He concludes his fantasy by making explicit the previously implicit female inaccessibility that radically informs his relation to imaginary and actual women:

I knew that miles out the red road at the swimming pool there would be girls whose bright legs, arms and breasts in the thick clay water would be comforting to look at as they lolled or lifted, but I knew too that they would be inaccessible, and that I would hate them, and myself, if they were accessible. . . (FM, 380)

Agee gets pleasure from the masturbatory frustration-satisfaction of merely watching, in experience or fantasy, women he cannot or will not engage in intercourse. In other words, his pleasure is the pleasure of a photographer. And his persistent attribution of inaccessibility to women permits him to evade his own photographer-like inaccessibility and its sadistic potential for acting upon his women-objects in addition to the masochistic potential of being acted upon by the women-objects' alluring remoteness. Writing as if

from the photographer's vantage, Agee puts himself within striking distance of all women who seem in effect to be that one woman, overlying and underlying the landscape, pervasively and alluringly present yet inimically remote.

Agee's recollection of and second-person address to Mrs. Ricketts perhaps best shows his sado-masochistic pleasure in his exploitation of the photographer's attitude of veneration yet violation of a female object of his scrutiny. Recounting his and Evans' first meeting with the families, Agee casts himself as Mrs. Ricketts' sympathizer while he makes her husband, Fred Ricketts, and Evans her antagonists, Fred for ordering her and their children to be photographed and Evans for "setting up the terrible structure of the tripod crested by the black square heavy head, dangerous as that of a hunchback; stopping beneath cloak and cloud of wicked cloth, and twisting buttons; a witchcraft preparing, colder than keenest ice, and incalculably cruel" (FM, 364). Yet, as even this brief excerpt's sensuous alliteration, assonance, and rhythm enact, Agee's pleasure in violating her vicariously through Evans and then again in his own prose comes through.

Equally apparent is his simultaneous pleasure in vicariously being the object of the camera's violence while suffering as she suffers:

and to you it was as if you and your children and your husband and these others were stood there naked in front of the cold absorption of the camera in all your shame and pitiableness to be pried into and laughed at; and your eyes were wild with fury and shame and fear, and the tendons of your little neck were tight, the whole time, and one hand continually twitched and tore in the rotted folds of your skirt like the hand of a little girl who must recite before adults, and there was not a thing you could do, nothing, not a word of remonstrance you could make, my dear, my love, my little crazy, terrified child; for your husband was running this show, and a wife does as she is

told and keeps quiet about it: and so there you stood, in a one-piece dress made of sheeting that spread straight from the hole where the head stood through to the knee without belting, so that you knew through these alien, town-dressed eyes that you stood as if out of a tent too short to cover your nakedness. . . (FM, 363-64)

Agee has reduced the overlying woman of the sky and the underlying woman of the ground to the naked, needy person that he, in relation to her, perceives himself to be. That is, he has inverted their positions and relative power.

As Agee's violation of Mrs. Ricketts proceeds, he achieves a sado-masochistic reduction of both his and her status and power. In his final image of the two of them, Mrs. Ricketts is still "little" and though she has some small power to free Agee who now is "a little animal in a trap," the greater power of a final infliction of pain belongs to Agee:

and at length, and just once, a change, a softening of expression; your eyes softened, lost all their immediate dread, but without smiling; but in a heart-broken and infinite yet timid reproachfulness, as when, say, you might have petted a little animal in a trap, beyond its thorn-toothed fierceness, beyond its fear, to quiet, in which it knows, of your blandishments: you could spring free the jaws of this iron from my wrist; what is this hand, what are these kind eyes; what is this gentling hand on the fur of my forehead: so that I let my face loose of any control and it shows you just what and all I felt for you and of myself: it must have been an ugly and puzzling grimace, God knows no use or comfort to you; and you looked a moment and withdrew your eyes, and gazed patiently into the ground, in nothing but sorrow, your little hand now loosened in your dress. (FM, 365-66)

In relation to actual women like Mrs. Ricketts, Agee suffers and enjoys a sado-masochistic revenge upon the powerfully present yet cruelly elusive woman of his fantasy. While Agee writes of Evans, "no doubt Walker would

do what he wanted whether we had 'permission' or not" (FM, 41), Agee is right alongside him, taking perhaps greater license with others in his prose.<sup>16</sup> And yet such license leads not, as he intends, to any photographic embodiment of the "absolute, dry truth" (FM, 234) of particular people's experience in a particular place and time but instead to an embodiment of the metaphoric truths of Agee's own consciousness. The only substantial relief from this displacement into Agee's consciousness comes in the book's most narrative passage, the major part of a chapter entitled "Work." Although relative to the length of the book (almost five hundred pages), "Work" is very short (about twenty-eight pages), more than any other part of the book, this narrative of the tenants' dependence upon harsh natural and economic circumstances points not to Agee's consciousness but to temporal practice. Through a narrative of the tenants' yearly cycle of work, Agee achieves instead of a kind of a kind of atemporal, metaphoric displacement, a metonymic replacement in temporal place and experience. In this way, Agee produces a dialectic between consciousness and practice as compelling as the dialectic developed in the course of Thoreau's four books. Even though Famous Men, like Walden, on the whole gives preeminence to being as consciousness, nevertheless Agee's narrative avowal of the authority of temporal practice as the ground of knowledge and ethics, far from being occluded by Agee's

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<sup>16</sup> Dale Maharidge's and Michael Williamson's Pulitzer prize-winning book, And Their Children After Them (New York: Pantheon, 1989), written as a follow-up examination of the surviving and descendent members of the tenant families of Agee's book, is much more documentary than Agee's text not only about the tenants and their descendants but about Agee and Evans too. Consequently, Maharidge's text reveals to what extent Agee sometimes altered or completely invented events or characterization despite his claims. Maharidge's intention, though, is not to expose or rectify Agee. In his preface, Maharidge explains his sense of his book's relation to Agee's: "At the risk of being accused of oversimplifying the differences between the two works, I offer that I saw my proper role as standing back and observing and that Agee saw his as jumping in and experiencing. I believe the two works can coexist" (xxiii).

lengthier avowal of the authority of consciousness, figures all the more prominently.

Much as Thoreau's narrative writing effects a cessation of his acquisitive appropriation of experience and people as objects of his displaced, atemporal consciousness, so Agee in narrative desists from the violent aggression of his photographic seizure of people that makes them objects more than subjects. Yet in his preliminary remarks to the narrative within "Work," Agee fears that, in contrast to the rest of his book in which his aim to write photographic prose should produce an embodiment rather than an invention or imagination of truth, his decision in "Work" to attempt "to use my imagination a little, as carefully as I can" will produce a "result [that] is sure to be somewhat inaccurate" (FM, 328). The problem, though, is not the presence or absence of construction or mediation of experience but how it is mediated. And in mediating through narrative, Agee simultaneously mitigates even as he makes manifest the necessary construction or mediacy of experience. For narrative's various mimeses of temporal practice and values through emplotment of practice points to experience apart from linguistic or other constructions upon it and yet demonstrates the dependence of experience constructed as such upon narrative and narrator. By means of narrative, then, Agee checks the expansiveness of his own nonnarrative, lyrical consciousness and renders himself critically responsive to a particular temporal human practice in relation to natural and economic processes.

Agee's plot is the cotton tenants' yearly cycle of work that begins in February with clearing the land and moves through the subsequent activities of planting, cultivating, picking, storing, ginning in October, then finally

enduring the winter until time to clear the land again in the new February. "In the late fall or middle February this tenant, which of the three or of the millions I do not care -- a man, dressed against the wet coldness, may be seen small and dark in his prostrated fields" (FM, 328-29), Agee's narrative of the work year begins; and the tenant-actors of this plotted practice, far from being the static objects of Agee's violating camera's eye, emerge more clearly as living, fully human agents engaged collectively and individually in a particular practice and a particular place and time.

Not only does Agee's narrative achieve temporal and spatial replacement instead of displacement, but so does his rhetorical device of second-person pronoun address. "You" seems as much to be Agee addressing himself and not only his readers in order both to situate and ethically implicate every member of society in the experience which he represents:

It is simple and terrible work. Skill will help you; all the endurance you can draw up against it from the roots of your existence will be thoroughly used as fuel to it: but neither skill nor endurance can make it any easier. . . .you are working in a land of sunlight and heat which are special to just such country at just that time of year: sunlight that stands and stacks itself upon you with the severe weight of deep sea water, and heat that makes the jointed and muscled and fine-structured body glow like one indiscriminate oil. . . .also the bag, which can hold a hundred pounds, is filling as it is dragged from plant to plant. . . .and the sack still heavier and heavier, so that it pulls you back as a beast might rather than a mere dead weight: but it is not only this: cotton plants are low, so that in this heat and burden of the immanent sun and of the heavying sack you are dragging, you are continuously somewhat stooped over even if you are a child, and are bent very deep if you are a man or a woman. A strong back is a godsend, but not even the strongest back was built for that treatment, and there combine at the kidneys, and rill down the thighs and up the spine and athwart the shoulders the ticklish weakness of gruel or water, and an aching that is increased in

geometric professions. . . and this is all compounded upon you during each successive day in a force which rest and food and sleep only partly and superficially refresh: and though later in the season, you are relieved of the worst of the heat, it is in exchange at the last for a coolness which many pickers like even less well, since it so slows and chills the lubricant garment of sweat they work in, and seriously slows and stiffens the fingers which by then at best afford an excruciation in every touch. (FM, 338-40)

The pain represented is no longer the gratuitous, self-indulgent pain of Agee's sado-masochistic consciousness. Instead, Agee narratively represents the economically enforced suffering of the tenants, and he rhetorically implicates anyone who reads his book in that hardship.

While representing tenantry as a collective practice, Agee also makes it a matter of individual experience too. As he proceeds with his narrative representation of picking, his differentiation of individuals includes sex and age distinctions:

The two Ricketts boys are all right when their papa is on hand to keep them at their work; as it is, with Ricketts at the saw-mills, they clown a good deal, and tease their sisters. Mrs. Gudger picks about the average for a woman, a hundred and fifty to two hundred pounds a day. She is fast with her fingers until the work exhausts her; 'last half of the day I just don't see how I can keep on with it. George Gudger is a very poor picker. When he was a child he fell in the fireplace and burnt the flesh off the flat of both hands to the bone, so that his fingers are stiff and slow and the best he has ever done in a day is a hundred and fifty pounds. The average for a man is nearer two hundred and fifty. (FM, 343)

Narratively represented more nearly as figures in and of themselves instead of photographic objects within and of Agee's consciousness, though appearing "very small in the field and very lonely, and the motions of their industry. . . so small" (FM, 342), this smallness derives from their being dwarfed by the magnitude of their work and its economic causes and not by Agee's



belittlement of them, however unintended, into things among things. And though Famous Men, like A Week and Walden, is more monological than dialogical, in "Work" by contrast with the greater bulk of the book, a tenant's dialect seems more representative of another human voice than of Agee's condescending consciousness.

Along with people, the metonymy of narrative renders place too in terms less metaphorically symptomatic of Agee's consciousness than in terms of its temporal being and practical significance. Discussing the tenants' direct dependence upon weather, Agee writes,

It is therefore not surprising that they are constant readers of the sky; that it holds not an ounce of 'beauty' to them (though I know of no more magnificent skies than those of Alabama); that it is the lodestone of their deepest pieties; and that they have, also the deep stormfear which is apparently common to all primitive peoples. Wind is as terrifying to them as cloud and lightning and thunder: and I remember how, sitting with the Woods, in an afternoon when George was away at work, and a storm building, Mrs. Gudger and her children came hurrying three quarters of a mile beneath the blackening air to shelter among company. Gudger says: 'You can never tell what's in a cloud.' (FM, 336)

Not unlike the devouring female potential of Walden Pond in the metaphorical, nonnarrative of Thoreau's consciousness, the menacing mother in the sky of Agee's consciousness is dispelled as Agee desists from nonnarrative displacement into consciousness and replaces himself narratively back into temporality and interrelated social and natural processes. Indeed, weather as a natural process combining with economic processes to shape human practice is Agee's focus at the conclusion of his narrative:

the sky descends, the air becomes like dark glass, the ground the clay honeycombs with frost, the corn and the cotton stand stripped to the naked bone and the trees are black, the odors of pork and woodsmoke sharpen all over the country, the long

dark silent sleeping rains stream down in such grieving as  
 nothing shall ever stop, and the houses are cold, fragile drums,  
 and the animals tremble, and the clay is one shapeless sea, and  
 winter has shut. (FM, 347-48)

During such passages as these from "Work," much more than when he tries photographically and nonnarratively to embody experience, Agee achieves his aim. In other words, he achieves primacy of fact simultaneously with its critique.

Even though this achievement is only momentary and in quantity constitutes a small portion of the book, the dialectic between narrative practical consciousness and nonnarrative, lyrical consciousness developed by "Work" stands with undiminished force. It may be the dialectic established chiefly by "Work" that more than any other feature of the book prompts William Least Heat Moon to consider Famous Men as resolving "so originally and richly the centrifugal-centripetal problem of one writer's explorations" and overcoming "the peril of the writer's self destroying the world he wants to present."<sup>17</sup> For the historical world of Agee's narrative representation and simultaneous critique in "Work," though given shorter shrift, constitutes the more compelling ground of knowledge and ethical judgment than the expansive realm of Agee's displaced consciousness. Nor does Agee as a discerning self get lost, as neither does Thoreau in Cape Cod or The Maine Woods. For primacy of fact and primacy of self cannot be separated since, as Heat Moon says, "facts usually carry the spirit."<sup>18</sup> That is, consciousness simultaneously informs and follows practice as it narratively constructs and mediates it.

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<sup>17</sup> Heat Moon, "Journeys Into Kansas," 8.

<sup>18</sup> Heat Moon, by postcard to me (November 12, 1989).

#### Chapter 4. William Least Heat Moon, Blue Highways

Although Agee's Famous Men is Heat Moon's exemplary text, Heat Moon's predominantly metonymic narrative style in Blue Highways resembles Agee's mostly nonnarrative book less than it resembles Thoreau's Cape Cod and The Maine Woods in making temporal practice preeminent to atemporal consciousness. Like Agee, Heat Moon too concerns himself with perception and its relation to consciousness and practice. However, Heat Moon, motivated by loss of a job and a failing marriage to change his life, achieves not displacement into an expansive percipience as being but, like the Thoreau of the last two books, achieves instead placement with an actual environment on a new basis: "A man who couldn't make things go right could at least go. . . .Chuck routine. Live the real jeopardy of circumstance."<sup>1</sup> Blue Highways is a narrative representation of Heat Moon's nearly year-long, backroads trip, clockwise from Columbia, Missouri, around the continental United States and back. While he acknowledges and in part is prompted to travel by his understanding that new perceptions change experience, his journey is motivated even more by the inversion of this promise: "New ways of seeing can disclose new things. . . .But turn the question around: Do new *things* make for new ways of seeing?" (BH, 17) So from the outset, Heat Moon ventures what his journey and narrative method demonstrate: that a new consciousness follows from new circumstances and practice.

Despite his sense of the priority of practice to consciousness, however, Heat Moon vacillates between displacement into an expansive egotism that moots the efficacy of place and practice and, alternatively, release into

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<sup>1</sup> William Least Heat Moon, Blue Highways (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1982), 3. Hereafter in the text as BH.

engagement with others and place that mitigates egotism. Much as Thoreau finds in his Maine Indian guides, Joe Atteon and Joe Polis, a means to learn how to live a more practically satisfactory life, Heat Moon also represents the native American's ways as an alternative to the white man's. The only two books which Heat Moon takes with him on his trip, Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass and John G. Neihardt's biography of Black Elk, Black Elk Speaks, signify Heat Moon's vacillation between the white man's egotistical, often solipsistic consciousness, detached from temporality, and the Indian's more practical consciousness, engaged actively in connecting past, present, and future. Heat Moon himself, as the product of Anglo and native American ancestry, physically embodies the psychological and epistemological dichotomy that he constructs. His alternation between egotistical and practical consciousness constitutes the major dynamic of the book's plot, and his eventual realization that he so alternates marks the turning point of his journey and narrative.

As Heat Moon explains of Blue Highways, "the narrator descends into the topography of the self for half the journey before he realizes the futility of that course."<sup>2</sup> Heat Moon's frequent resort to quotations of Whitman underscore his centripetal descent into a topography of self in expressions of the ego's expansive incorporation of place and others into self such as, for example, "O public road, you express me better than I can express myself" (BH, 38). Simultaneously, certain places and some of the people he meets promote his sense of isolation within a place undifferentiated from self. More than any other type of place, a desert landscape for Heat Moon increasingly thwarts his ability to experience a place distinctly. Only as he reaches the first

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<sup>2</sup> Heat Moon, "Journeys Into Kansas," 5.

desert of his journey is differentiation possible. Upon arriving in the Texas desert West of the Pecos River, he readily perceives the place as richly separate from himself. In fact, he finds it so rich in natural activity that to disprove the common notion, "There's nothing out there," he makes a list of "nothing in particular" (BH, 149) with thirty natural entities or activities that he easily identifies. By night, however, amid "land, wind, stars," he begins to feel "reduced to mind, to an edge of consciousness." When he later reaches the Nevada desert, he feels "as if I were evaporating," becoming one with place in a way that Whitman and Heat Moon through his quotation of Whitman, celebrate: "O to realize space/The plenteousness of all, that there are no bounds,/To emerge and be of the sky, of the sun and moon and flying clouds, as one with them" (BH, 189). The melding of place and self continues until Heat Moon, driving father into the desert, feels entrapped not so much in desert but in desert as an expanse of self:

I looked out the wide window. For an instant, I thought the desert looked back. Against the glass a reflection of an opaque face. I couldn't take my attention from the presence that was mostly an absence. Whitman:

This the far-off depth and height reflecting my own face,  
This the thoughtful merge of myself, and the outlet  
again.

Other than to amuse himself, why would a man pretend to know where he's going or to understand what he sees? Hoping to catch onto things, at least for a moment, I was only following down the highways a succession of images that flashed like blue sparks. Nothing more. (BH, 191-92)

Any effort to differentiate self from place, "to understand" or "to catch onto things," the things of his temporal, spatial experience that might mitigate his egotism, seems futile. The image of his opaque, absently present face

imposes itself on whatever he sees, making place an ephemeral expanse of an ephemeral self.

Heat Moon's own inability to differentiate place from self is compounded by the same futility in many others whom he encounters; they, like Heat Moon, exist within the confines of a narcissistic self. Camped in the Chiricahua Mountains of Arizona, Heat Moon, much like Thoreau in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, desires to move beyond the self and its constructions upon experience into unmediated experience in a place "never dreamed of" (BH, 162). Yet "Boss," a man Heat Moon meets at the campground, confronts him not only with his own difficulty in escaping narcissistic entrapment but also with the same difficulty as it pervades traditional, Anglo-dominated culture. Of Boss, Heat Moon observes that he "embraced one crisis after another because they gave him significance. . . .He had so lost belief in a world outside himself that, without crisis, he had nothing worth talking about. On and on, the tolling of words revealed his expertise in living a life that baffled him" (BH, 165). Heat Moon's naming the man "Boss of the Plains" indicates at once the oppressiveness and expansiveness of anyone's narcissism and the necessity somehow to engage with place and people differentiated from self.

The "Boss" leads Heat Moon to recall that de Tocqueville in his travels "came to believe one result of democracy was a concentration of each man's attention on himself" (BH, 168). As Heat Moon travels and contends with his own and others' narcissism, his findings accord with de Tocqueville's and perhaps enlarge upon them. American cultural narcissism manifests itself even in the physical arrangements of social settings. Sitting at the Oil City Bar in Browning, Montana, for example, Heat Moon observes that in contrast to English bars which commonly are built "in circles or horseshoes or right

angles. . .to get another face in your line of sight," in American bars, a straight counter usually faces a mirror so that whatever else there may be to look at, like liquor bottles, an American also "stares into his own face" (BH, 266).

For Heat Moon, the way out of entrapment in narcissistic consciousness is a continual process of resistance; insight into this process is the most important discovery of his journey. The process of resistance inheres in Heat Moon's metonymic narrative style itself since it is this style which has the greatest potential through plot's mimesis of temporal practice and values to point to place and others as distinct from the self even as it demonstrates the necessary dependence of any experience upon the mediation of a narrator and narrative. That Heat Moon in Blue Highways seems to eschew metaphorical, lyrical language invites ascribing to him a narrative disposition, an inherently practical consciousness. In other words, incipient in Heat Moon's metonymic narrative style itself are simultaneously his desire for a way out of narcissism and his grasp of a means to achieve that desire.

Concomitantly, this desire and its potential satisfaction are manifest also in Heat Moon's acting to change his life physically. He decides to *do* differently, specifically to travel, to wonder sometimes aimlessly, to err, to blunder instead of to stay put and merely speculate on how he might *see* things differently. Heat Moon is not at first aware that he specifically desires a way out of egotistical entrapment, for only as he travels does he discover the problems of narcissism and thus the need to overcome it. So only gradually does he articulate that, in fact, from his journey's beginning, a desire to escape narcissistic entrapment largely though implicitly has motivated his travel. This articulation arises not just from meeting others

who seem trapped within themselves but also from meeting people whose practices seem to free them from the confines of the narcissistic self. These freer people are the ones whom Heat Moon photographs and so graphically as well as narratively foregrounds. The textual placement of these photographs within the narrative serves along with the narrative itself to elucidate the temporal and spatial discreteness of the people and the places where they live, to differentiate them from the topography of Heat Moon's self. This function contrasts with that of Walker Evans' photographs in Famous Men which, placed apart from Agee's narrative and never specifically elucidated, represent people and place more as objects of Evans' or Agee's consciousness than as distinct, temporally situated entities themselves. That Heat Moon writes dialogically, rather than monologically as Agee does, also represents others as being discrete from Heat Moon's own consciousness.

In Blue Highways, among those whom Heat Moon foregrounds is Madison Wheeler of Nameless, Tennessee. Wheeler represents for Heat Moon a man whose life demonstrates a satisfactory accord between past and present, between self and others, and between self and place that Heat Moon himself is seeking. Wheeler explains to Heat Moon why he has continued to farm in a place that most people left long ago: "Factory work's easier on the back, and I don't mind it, understand, but a man becomes what he does. Got to watch that. That's why I keep at farmin', although the crops haven't ever thrive. It's the doin' that's important. . . .Satisfaction is doin' what's important to yourself. A man ought to honor other people, but he's got to honor what he believes in too" (BH, 31). When Heat Moon subsequently comes to a crossroad where, "Home was a left turn, right was who knows," he echoes Wheeler's, "A man becomes what he does" (BH, 38) as he turns right. That is, meeting and talking with



Wheeler helps Heat Moon to move farther out of his habitual self-concern toward the possibility for a new, more practical consciousness.

In addition to Wheeler, Kendrick Fritz, a Hopi college student in Cedar City, Utah, in his own way also represents for Heat Moon the achievement of the same accord of conflicting factors. Heat Moon speculates to Fritz, "I guess it's hard to be a Hopi in Cedar City -- especially if you're studying bio-chemistry. . . .I mean, difficult to carry your Hopi heritage into a world as technological as medicine is." Fritz replies, "My heritage is the Hopi Way, and that's a way of the spirit. Spirit can go anywhere. In fact it has to go places so it can change and emerge like in the migrations. That's the whole idea" (BH, 187). Fritz's life and insights demonstrate for Heat Moon how spirit, or consciousness, necessarily thrives upon the dynamics of engagement with others as differentiated from self, and, conversely, languishes in the stasis of the repetitive, habitual gestures of egotistical entrapment. Moreover, the encounter provides Heat Moon with an affirmative answer to the initial, impelling question of his journey, that is, whether new things bring about new consciousness. According to a Hopi tenet of human evolution, "A human being's greatest task is to keep from breaking with things outside himself" (BH, 186). This task, as Heat Moon has already begun to discover, is mostly a matter of practice. The crux of this practice is, in Heat Moon's terms, to counter the centripetal impulse to descend into self with a centrifugal impulse to move, in practice and hence in consciousness, out of self toward things.

In the psychological terms of Freud and Lacan, the crux is between *thanatos* and *eros*, between the metaphors of impossible desire and the metonymy of a more practically and temporally engaged consciousness, which

he had been moving toward all along. About halfway through his journey, as he waits for rain to stop in Lookingglass, Oregon, Heat Moon becomes fully, explicitly aware that this conflict has motivated his journey. Up to now, the term "blue highways" has signified for Heat Moon the color on old American maps of back roads "where a man can lose himself" in contrast to the major, most direct routes in red. During the rain, Heat Moon reads Black Elk, to whom

the blue road is the route of "one who is distracted, who is ruled by his senses, and who lives for himself rather than for his people." I was stunned. Was it racial memory that had urged me to drive seven thousand miles of blue highway, a term I thought I had coined?

That's when something opened like a windowshade unexpectedly rattling up in a dark room. A sudden new cast of light. What need for a man to make a trip to Lookingglass, Oregon, when he's been seeing his own image across the length of the country? . . . My skewed vision was that of a man looking at himself by looking at what he looks at. A man watching himself: *that* was the simulacrum on the window in the Nevada desert.

Hadn't I even made a traveling companion of the great poet of the ego, the one who sings of himself, who promises to "effuse egotism and show it underlying all," who finds the earth in his own likeness? . . . Money half gone, I'd come up with a bit of epistemological small change. (BH, 220; Heat Moon's emphasis)

Although his realization amounts epistemologically to "small change," it comes to much more in use value.

That is, Heat Moon has altered his habits enough so that he comprehends what his initial motivation for the journey (the question of whether new things make for new ways of seeing) and his narrative representation of the journey themselves grasped without his knowing:

A man lives in things and things are moving. He stands apart in such a temporary way it is hardly worth speaking of. If that perception dims egocentrism, that illusion of what man is, then it also enlarges his self, that multiple yet whole

part which he has been, will be is. Ego, craving distinction, belongs to the narrowness of now; but self, looking for union, belongs to past and future, to the continuum, to the outside. Of all the visions of the Grandfathers the greatest is this: To seek the high concord, a man looks not deeper within -- he reaches farther out. (BH, 241)

"Reaching farther out" as the phrase apprehends temporal, personal practice, including his narrative mediation of experience, constitutes for Heat Moon the process of resistance to his own narcissism as well as a critique of cultural narcissism. The journey ends, but the process of resistance and critique enacted by Heat Moon's narrative persists:

A human being[is]. . .very form depends not on repetition but upon variation from old patterns. In response to stress, biological survival requires genetic change; it necessitates a turning away from doomed replication. And what of history? Was it different?

Egymology: *educate*, from the Latin *educare*, "lead out."  
(BH, 400; Heat Moon's emphases)

Blue Highways, then, leads to and out of one place after another in order to end openendedly, *in transit*, in an endless process of changing practice. Heat Moon uses narrative to demonstrate that this process is a matter of individual and collective life and death.

## Chapter 5. John McPhee and Several Narratives

As with *Heat Moon* and in contrast to Agee, little similarity exists between John McPhee and the Thoreau of *A Week* and *Walden*. In fact, McPhee implicitly associates himself with the Thoreau of *The Maine Woods* in *Survival of the Bark Canoe*, a narrative about McPhee's travel in Maine in the company of Henry Vaillancourt, canoe-maker, in search of bark. McPhee casts Thoreau's travel in terms of its relation to Thoreau's writing, which is essentially the same relation of McPhee's travel to his own writing process.<sup>1</sup> McPhee writes of Thoreau's travel and writing in Maine that,

He had in his pack some pencils and an oilskin pouch full of scratch paper -- actually letters that customers had written to his family's business, ordering plumbago and other printing supplies. On the backs of these discarded letters he made condensed, fragmentary, scarcely legible notes, and weeks later, when he had returned home to Concord, he composed his journal of the trip, slyly using the diary form, and writing at times in the present tense, to gain immediacy, to create the illusion of paragraphs written -- as it is generally supposed they were written -- virtually in the moments described. With the advantage of retrospect, he reconstructed the story to reveal a kind of significance that the notes do not reveal. Something new in journalism. With the journal as his principal source, he later crafted still another manuscript, in which he further shaped and rearranged the story, all the while adhering to a structure built on calendar dates. The result, published posthumously in hardcover form, was the book he called *The Maine Woods*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> William Howarth, ed., *The John McPhee Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), xi-xviii, describes McPhee's methods and stages in writing, from travel and initial notes through final draft.

<sup>2</sup> John McPhee, *The Survival of the Bark Canoe* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 36. Hereafter in the text as *Bark Canoe*.

Like the later Thoreau, McPhee practices a very similar journalism and nowhere seeks displacement through nonnarrative into the metaphors of an atemporal, detached yet dominating consciousness. Rather, his narratives demonstrate a desire for placement in conjunction with people engaged consciously and actively with place. Far from representing the repetitious (in Freud's terms, death-seeking) maneuvers of his own consciousness, McPhee by means of metonymic narrative simultaneously represents his own and others' practice and the consciousness that informs and so helps to construct practice while it yet follows from, or is constructed by, practice too. In "North of the C. P. Line," McPhee makes explicit the desire which all his narratives imply and variously enact: "There is a lot of identification, even transformation, in the work I do -- moving along from place to place, person to person, as a reporter, writer, repeatedly trying to sense another existence and in some ways to share it."<sup>3</sup>

Even when, as in "North of the C. P. Line," traveling with and writing about a man also named John McPhee (a Maine forest and game warden who contacted McPhee through The New Yorker and, having major interests in common as well as their names, they decided to meet), unlike the Thoreau of A Week and Walden and unlike Agee, McPhee does not appropriate or subsume others or place into his consciousness but rather, like the Thoreau of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods and like Heat Moon, sustains the discreteness of self and other. John McPhee's narrative of his time with John McPhee in the Maine woods articulate in its conclusion the discreteness of self and other (person or place) which his narratives scrupulously maintain:

As anyone might, I wish I knew what he knows -- and wish

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<sup>3</sup> McPhee, "North of the C. P. Line," in Table of Contents (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), 249.

not merely for his knowledge but for his compatibility with the backcountry and everything that lives there. I envy him his world, I suppose, in the way that one is sometimes drawn to be another person or live the life of another character encountered in fiction. Time and again, when I think of him, and such thoughts start running through my mind, I invariably find myself wishing that I were John McPhee.<sup>4</sup>

But as his narrative makes clear, he is the John McPhee of New Jersey and not the John McPhee of Maine or any other person or some other place and time. At the same time, however, by locating people whose activities and knowledge he wants to participate in himself, McPhee makes character, or subjectivity, "always a shifting, spontaneous state," as William Howarth says.<sup>5</sup> McPhee relates to and narratively represents people primarily in terms of what they do, or, in other words, in terms of how and where they know what they know.

In Rising from the Plains, for example, McPhee represents David Love and the geology of Wyoming as being inextricable. To know David Love is to know Wyoming as David Love does; to know Wyoming geology is to know it as it has shaped and been shaped as a science by David Love. The reciprocity of person and place that Thoreau discovers between Joe Polis and the Maine woods and wants to participate in is the same reciprocity between person and place that McPhee seeks and in rich particularity of personal and natural detail narratively represents. To engage in and represent this reciprocity, McPhee's narrative dialogically incorporates both directly and indirectly the language of companions who, as much as Polis for Thoreau, are indeed his guides. Studying a site in Wyoming with David Love, McPhee writes,

Finding numerous large bones in a meadowy bog, they [David

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 292-93.

<sup>5</sup> Howarth, ed., The John McPhee Reader, xxi.

Love and his brother, Allan] named the place Buffalo Wallows. Indians had apparently driven the bison into the swamp to kill them. One could infer that. One could also see that the swamp was there because water was bleeding from rock outcrops above the meadows. In a youth spent on horseback, there was not a lot to do but look at the landscape. The rock that was bleeding water was not just porous but permeable. It was also strong. It was the same red rock that the granary stood on, and the bunkhouse. Very evidently, it was made of naturally cemented sand. The water could not have come from the creek. The sandstone layers tilted north. They therefore reached out to the east and west. There was high ground to the east. The water must be coming down from there. One did not need a Ph.D. from Yale to figure that out -- especially if one was growing up in a place where so much rock was exposed. Pending further study, his interpretation of Buffalo Wallows was just a horseback guess. All through his life, when he would make a shrewd surmise he would call it a horseback guess.<sup>6</sup>

With phrases like "a horseback guess," Love's language links him with Wyoming no matter where he may be or at what time of his life. Though McPhee does not in the course of Rising use this phrase to express his own participation in Love's relation to Wyoming, in other narratives McPhee does sometimes use others' language in order to engage in their relation to a place. In Coming Into the Country, for example, near the end of his time in Alaska, he, like many of the settlers finds that something as ordinarily ugly as steel drums lose their ugliness and "almost bloom."<sup>7</sup>

Although Ihab Hassan in Selves at Risk faults McPhee's Country for a density of detail and minutiae which he finds finally numbing, and hence attributes to McPhee the motivation of "reportorial curiosity more than

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<sup>6</sup> McPhee, Rising from the Plains (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), 102-103. Hereafter in the text as Rising.

<sup>7</sup> McPhee, Coming Into the Country (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1977), 411. Hereafter in the text as Country.

personal need,"<sup>8</sup> It is McPhee's narrative density of detail that achieves what Hassan elsewhere in his book praises as a prime end of a quest, that is, "some sensuous apprehension of being, beyond egoism."<sup>9</sup> That McPhee's achievement of being beyond egoism comes not in solitude and the metaphorical language of detached consciousness but rather in conjunction with particular people and places perhaps limits Hassan's appreciation of McPhee within the prevailing terms of Selves at Risk. Yet, as in the passage from Rising, it is just this conjunction of self, other, and place and its often densely detailed narrative representation that apprehends a being beyond egoism.

In these ways, then, McPhee makes himself a chief practitioner of nonfiction narrative prose of place as Thoreau develops it in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods. The similarity between McPhee and the Thoreau of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods manifests itself not so much in any book-to-book resemblance as in a similarity of narrative subject, which most generally is the self and others in experiential relation to each other and to place, and in a similarity of narrative strategies and dynamics coincident with a similarity of narratively enacted values.

Much as Thoreau in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods makes experience preeminent to consciousness and its metaphorical language by writing narratively and metonymically against the potential of language, even in names like "America," to impose preconceived, often false notions upon experience, so does McPhee. This desire motivates their travel sometimes to places inhospitable if not completely inimical to human life as well as motivates their use of narrative writing. For, like Thoreau in his last two

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<sup>8</sup> Ihab Hassan, Selves at Risk: Patterns of Quest in Contemporary American Literature (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 93.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 50.



books, McPhee's employment of narrative paradoxically enables him by means of a plot's mimesis of practice and temporal values to point to experience apart from linguistic constructions of it. For both Thoreau and McPhee, the use of narrative paradoxically to construct or represent what eludes construction or representation inheres in another paradox, that of going where one should not go in order to discover some meaning in human existence by experiencing its meaningless, profound superfluity. Like Thoreau on Katahdin where, within a wilderness "vast, and drear, and inhuman. . . savage and awful, though beautiful" (TMW, 70), he confronts the strangeness of his being and so questions, "*Who* are we? *Where* are we?" (TMW, 71) and, implicitly, even *that* he is, McPhee in the Alaskan wilderness similarly finds that,

What had struck me most in the isolation of this wilderness was an abiding sense of paradox. In its raw, convincing, emphasis on the irrelevance of the visitor, it was forcefully, importantly repellent. It was no less strongly attractive -- with a beauty of nowhere else, composed in turning circles. If the wild land was indifferent, it gave a sense of difference. If at moments it was frightening, requiring an effort to put down the conflagratory imagination, it also augmented the touch of life. This was not a dare with nature. This was nature.  
(Country, 89)

Going to dangerous places in order to know and so necessarily to construct what, paradoxically, lies beyond human construction entails simultaneously trying to repress the imagination and thus to go beyond the imagination and its potential to limit movement and understanding.

This suspicion that the imagination limits both physical and mental freedom and knowledge pervades McPhee's narratives, amplifying what in Thoreau's last two books remains incipient. Howarth observes that for McPhee "imagining he knows a subject is a disadvantage, for that prejudice

will limit his freedom to ask, to learn, to be surprised by unfolding evidence."<sup>10</sup> The following excerpts from McPhee's narratives make explicit this valuation of the imagination which he otherwise seems always to imply:

There is more to Maine than exists in the imagination.  
(Bark Canoe, 29)

The river I imagined would have been river enough, but the real one, the actual St. John is awesome and surprising.<sup>11</sup>

The country is wild to the limits of the term. It would demean such a world to call it pre-Columbian. (Country, 51)

It [Alaska] is in no way an extension of what I've known before. The constructions I have lived by ought not, and do not, apply here. Left on my own here, I would have to change in a hurry, and learn in a hurry, or I'd never last a year. (Country, 258)

He [David Love] cares passionately about Wyoming. It may be acupuncture for energy, but it is still Wyoming, and only words and images, in their inevitable concentration can effectively clutter its space: a space so great that you can stand on a hilltop and see not only what Jim Bridger saw but also -- through dimming tracts of time -- what no one saw.  
(Rising, 180-81)

For McPhee, the imagination has the potential not merely to constrain freedom and knowledge, but worse, to destroy place and so destroy the literal ground of knowledge.

In his very first book, The Pine Barrens, McPhee links imagination with the destruction of the area's natural vitality by "mean of vision who could see, and somehow make others see, urban skylines in the pines."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Howarth, ed., The John McPhee Reader, xii.

<sup>11</sup> McPhee, "The Keel of Lake Dickey," in Giving Good Weight (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), 133.

<sup>12</sup> McPhee, The Pine Barrens (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), 125. Hereafter in the text as Barrens.

"Vision," ironically exposed in terms of its capacity to destroy, is the name of the book's final chapter, and it culminates in a passage that echoes one from "Sounds" in Walden where Thoreau with deliberate, noncommittal ambiguity meditates on both the constructive and destructive consequences of the railroad; as machines and commerce in commodities come "up," trees and other living things go "down" (Walden, 121-22). McPhee represents a similar phenomenon less ambiguously:

Meanwhile, up goes a sign -- "Whispering Pines, Two and Three Bedrooms, \$11,900" -- and down go seventy-five acres of trees. Up goes another sign: "Industry!! Jackson Township Has an Abundance of Water!" and another: "Dreamwood Acres, from \$13,900," and another. . . and others. . . At the rate of a few hundred years or even a mile or so each year, the perimeter of pines contracts. (Barrens, 135)

McPhee revises part of Walden according to the discoveries of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods to criticize the destructive consequences of imagination alienated from and yet imposed upon temporal practices and natural processes.

This destructive potential of imagination is the premise of all three parts of The Control of Nature. The destructive potential of imagination impels the vainglory of the Army Corps of Engineers' efforts to control the channel of the Mississippi River" "What we've done here at Old River is stop time. We have in effect stopped time in terms of the distribution of flows. Man is directing the maturing process of the Atchafalaya and the lower Mississippi," says General Thomas Sands in "Atchafalaya."<sup>13</sup> Such vainglory takes life-threatening form in "L. A. Against the Mountains," and it is on this note that McPhee, as ironically and critically as Percy Shelley in

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<sup>13</sup> McPhee, The Control of Nature (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1989), 20. Hereafter in the text as Control.

"Ozymandias," concludes the book. Examining man-made debris deposits in the mountains which during downpours create the danger of deadly, artificial debris flows in addition to the threat of flood, mudslide, and natural debris flows, McPhee writes,

In the V-shaped mountain valley, the deposit rested like an aircraft carrier in dry dock -- a comparison that would be more apt if aircraft carriers were not so small. Debris basins were along its upper flank, there to protect the man-made deposit. Burro Creek passed under it, through a deep culvert a mile long. For twenty million dollars, Los Angeles had returned the rock to the mountains. For twenty million dollars, they had built in Burro Canyon an edifice ten times as large as the largest pyramid at Giza.

(Control, 271-72)

But unlike Giza, the debris pyramid will not slowly erode in the desert wind. Rather, due to civil engineering efforts, it will gather power and combine with natural forces to become a time bomb. The monumental vanity of human imagination never had this power to destroy.

Only rarely does the imagination lead to knowledge. Perhaps only in geology does McPhee find "plenty of room for the creative imagination."<sup>14</sup> He learns when he travels with Karen Kleinspehn in Basin and Range how to geologists, "the roadcut is a portal, a fragment of a regional story, a proscenium arch that leads their imagination into the earth and through the surrounding terrain."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, McPhee subscribes to a scrupulous, sparing use of imagination. In Rising from the Plains, David Love says, "How can you write or talk authoritatively about something if you haven't seen

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<sup>14</sup> McPhee, In Suspect Terrain (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), 66. Hereafter in the text as Terrain.

<sup>15</sup> McPhee, Basin and Range (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), 10.

it? . . . I want to know what's over the next hill" (148-49). Love echoes McPhee in Coming into the Country when McPhee himself says, "There is no substitute for being on the ground, for experiencing a landscape close at hand, for feeling the earth underfoot" (166). So imagination is constructively useful as a part of temporal human practice and not, as it were, apart from temporality, not abstracted from temporality and then imposed upon it. In writing, then, it is metonymic narrative that gives to the imagination its appropriate role as narrative, itself a kind of construction, seeks paradoxically to point toward temporality apart from all constructions of and upon it.

At the same time, McPhee's narrative, like Thoreau's, necessarily demonstrates the dependence of experience constructed as such upon narrative, upon narrator. In turn, this very contingency of narrative in McPhee's hands as in the later Thoreau's calls attention less to narrator, less to language or consciousness detached from practice than to human practice and natural processes in particular places. In Lacan's terms, McPhee seems unswervingly "caught in the rails of metonymy," for no metaphors signifying a desire for impossible, infantile satisfaction appear. Instead of rendering place and others as parts of his consciousness, instead of subsuming the world into his own consciousness, McPhee renders himself and his narrative as being incorporate with the temporal world. At most, his writing is not an alternative to temporality but an instrument for trying to represent and understand it. A passage from In Suspect Terrain suggests McPhee's deliberateness in his narrative deflection of focus onto temporal practice. Traveling with geologist Anita Harris, McPhee assesses what an artistic composition such as a painter's landscape or, by implication, a narrative of place can show and do:

In round numbers, then, the age of the river was a hundred and fifty million years. The age of the Water Gap rock was four hundred million years. Another fifty million years before that, the Taconic mountains appeared. The river 150, the rock 400, the first ancestral mountains 450 million years before the present -- these dates are so unwieldy that they might as well be off a Manchu calendar unless you sense the pace of geologic change and draw an analogy between, say, a hundred million years of geology and one human century, with its upward-fining sequences, its laminations of events, its slow deteriorations and instant catastrophes. You see the rivers running east. Then you see mountains rise. Rivers run off then to the west. Mountains come up like waves. They arrest, break and spread themselves westward. When they are spent, there is an interval of time, and then again you see the rivers running eastward. You look over the shoulder of the painter and you see all that in the landscape. You see it if first you have seen it in the rock. The composition is almost infinitely less than the sum of its parts, the flickers and glimpses of a thousand million years. (Terrain, 104-105)

Any human composition in painting or in writing is an infinitesimal fragment of the larger continuum of human practice and natural process; any human composition is a mere glimpse at how natural processes surpass human history. At best, a painting or a narrative composition represents a compression of time and place already naturally, geologically compressed to a degree that defies comprehension.

It is this capacity of temporal human and natural activity to defy comprehension that McPhee's narrative paradoxically comprehends. McPhee tries to make wieldy the unwieldy in such a way as to show simultaneously not only that he cannot finally do so but also that, in scrupulous fidelity to the possible, he ultimately does not want to. He aims necessarily for his narratives to be momentary, partial compositions, far less than the sum of the parts of place and activity in place from which the compositions derive.

Not displacement into a world elsewhere but placement in particular place in conjunction with another person, a knowing guide, motivates McPhee's work and narrative writing.

One of McPhee's main narrative methods for achieving the necessary partiality of his compositions in order to effect placement is to suspend rather than to conclude his narratives. McPhee says, "I know where I'm going from the start of a piece. It's my nature to want to know."<sup>16</sup> Although his narratives do not adhere strictly to the chronology of his travel in a certain place, they nevertheless persistently pay what Kermode calls "adequate respect to what we think of as 'real' time, the chronicity of the waking moment."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, chronicity, or temporal situation, seems to be where McPhee is always going. By means of a suspension that seems sudden yet in overall pace not abrupt, not unexpected, McPhee opens more than closes his narratives, makes them give onto and into time and place. This opening occurs when McPhee, much like Thoreau at the end of Cape Cod and in all but the third part of The Maine Woods, shifts from past to present tense narration or when, in much greater enlargement of the dialogic potential in the later Thoreau, McPhee simply stops with a quotation of a companion's present-tense comment. Of McPhee's writings encompassed by the terms of my study, nonfiction narrative prose of place, The Pine Barrens, "The Keel of Lake Dickey," "North of the C. P. Line," and The Control of Nature open onto temporal situation by shifting from past to present tense. The Survival of the Bark Canoe, Coming into the Country, Basin and Range, In Suspect Terrain, and

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<sup>16</sup> Jack Roundy, "Crafting Fact: Formal Devices in the Prose of John McPhee," in Chris Anderson, ed., Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 72.

<sup>17</sup> Kermode, The Sense of an Ending, 54.

Rising from the Plains all open through quotation of a companion's present-tense speech. Less becomes more as and because McPhee's deliberately partial narrative compositions let onto rather than rival place and practice. Narrative stops, but the temporal place and practice represented by narrative persist. It is toward this temporal practice that McPhee's narrative urges. McPhee makes narrative the most urgent writing.



Chapter 6. Ann Zwinger, Run, River, Run

A similar but more understated urgency informs Ann Zwinger's narrative of her canoe travel down the Green River from its source in Wyoming to its confluence with the Colorado River in Utah, Run, River, Run, beginning with the imperative title. If at first the imperative seems to express solely a command that the river continue, in the course of the narrative, the imperative will come to imply that to survive, the river must run from human efforts to control it. Place as it eludes the uses of people interests Zwinger more than place in conjunction with particular people. So although Zwinger, like McPhee, travels with various companions, they do not figure prominently in her narrative as in McPhee's. Nor does Zwinger feature herself very prominently; more self-effacing even than McPhee in rendering practice preeminent to consciousness, toward this end not only does Zwinger, like McPhee, write in a sometimes densely factual style, but she also uses her own illustrations, charts, and diagrams of plants, fossils, topography, and natural processes. Although she does not place bibliographic notes within her narrative, she does append them at the end of her text along with an index. The effect of the appendix and index is similar to that of Thoreau's appendix in The Maine Woods: in tandem with the larger narrative, such compendia insist on the reality of place apart from linguistic constructions of it even while using language to reconstruct it.

Despite the potential for a Burkean hypertrophy of facts in Zwinger's narrative, plot prevents atrophy of form. Zwinger explains that the plot of Run, River, Run basically represents her travel down the Green River as "geographically continuous" but "perforce not chronologically so. . .because of

weather."<sup>1</sup> Although the dense factuality of her plot does sometimes obscure Zwinger's consciousness, her consciousness issues discernibly yet unobtrusively throughout her book, often explicitly in first-person voice, but more often implicitly, in the facts that she features in her narrative, and in the juxtapositions of one mode of factual representation with another.

One of the most effective articulations of Zwinger's practical consciousness by means of juxtaposing several modes of factual representation occurs with her narration of rowing across Fontenelle Reservoir in chapter six. The narrative is factually descriptive of the landscape, and yet Zwinger's choice of diction and documentation is critical of the dam's diminishment of riverine ecology:

The change in the river is surprisingly abrupt. After a running river, the water drags. The only trees are one or two straggly cottonwoods that do not look as if they would last a hard winter. Land along the bank that is submerged when the reservoir is high has been cleared of trees, and there is precious little else growing. The littoral is hummocky and ugly; here, where the gradient is low, a minor fluctuation vertically makes a major transgression horizontally, baring a wide area of shoreline. . . .Dead algae clot the edge of the river and reek. Unbroken by trees, the drone and whine of heavy trucks beat across the mud flats.

A dam raises the river's profile and this shallowing renders the river less competent to carry the sands and silts that it usually transports. Some of the sediment load is deposited where the river slows upon entering the reservoir, destroying the habitat of those animals needing clear, open rock surfaces and well-oxygenated water, such as stonefly and mayfly nymphs and trout. Storage dams may ensnare from 95 to 99 percent of the sediment that, before the dam was built, flowed downstream. As Luna B. Leopold, M. Gordon Wolman, and John P. Miller wrote in *Fluvial Processes in Geomorphology*. . . "These

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Zwinger, *Run, River, Run* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975), 12. Hereafter in the text as RRR.

changes in regimen associated with construction of dams are certainly heroic. It is difficult to conceive of a climatic change producing a change in vegetation on the watershed such that 95% of the sediment would no longer be delivered to the stream system." (RRR, 110-11)

More than any other word in the first paragraph, "transgression" conveys Zwinger's judgment about the ethics of a project which keeps a river from "running." And her quotation in the second paragraph does not merely document the magnitude of the human damage to the environment but with "certainly heroic," it also enables Zwinger to render the reservoir as fatally ironic as McPhee renders the pyramids of debris above Los Angeles.

A paragraph of more explicitly personal criticism concludes chapter six, but enjambs into chapter seven's epigraphic quotation and illustration. The epigraph and illustration, set between the end of one chapter and the beginning of another, sustain and even amplify the narrative of chapter six and its critique instead of suspending it. The last sentences of chapter six, representing the journey through Fontenelle Reservoir, show Zwinger looking at a map that makes the reservoir appear as it does from the air, "an elongated light blue triangle impressed on a white field of barren countryside" (RRR, 111). But she has seen much more closely how the map's image and its suggestion of a kind of pristineness contrast with the actual topography as human use and abuse have altered it: "The triangle spreads over darker blue dashed lines that delineate a once-flowing river, now buried beneath heavy water, silt, and beer cans" (RRR, 111). "Dashed" at once refers to the demarcation of the river channel and yet also reasserts Zwinger's earlier sense of human transgression against place. People have dashed and trashed a river that should run its own, and not some human, course: Run. River. Run.

Immediately following this narrative depiction of contemporary violation of place is an epigraphic beginning for chapter seven, a quotation of an 1877 dispatch from the journalist, Frank Leslie, which shows, in contrast to what Zwinger presently experiences, the pleasure and knowledge possible before the dam:

The buttes around Green River are wonderful in size, shape, and variety; there are towers, castles, and cathedrals, bulbous knobs and excrescences, colossal mushrooms, "giant's clubs" and "giant's teapots," frost, temples, tombs, and shapes of things unknown, possibly, in the heavens above and certainly in the earth beneath; all carved out of rich-red and brown and cream-colored limestone, strata upon strata of varying color. The river sweeps in great curves, washing a white sandy beach with its clear emerald-green waters -- the brightest richest, green that ever flashed in sunlight, caught from the color of the shale over which it runs. Every foot of ground for miles around is rich with fossil flowers, ferns, fishes, and even insects, buried in every layer of shale, waiting for the treasure-seeker's hammer. (RRR, 113)

In this way, Zwinger enlarges her critique of the present by documenting the lost plenitude. Set against this prior abundance is not only the narrative that leads up to the quotation but also an illustration placed just after. Zwinger's drawing of the purple Rocky Mountain beeplant, austere in its pencilled, spikey stalk and scraggly flume of partly open pods, reiterates by virtue of the narrative context the diminishment of a previously great Green River and environs as well as apprehends its human cause.

As her narrative incorporation of both visual and verbal documentation imply, Zwinger, like Thoreau in Cape Cod and The Maine Woods and like McPhee throughout his narratives of place, writes against the potential of the imagination to impose false notions upon empirical experience and thereby to mislead, to limit both physical and mental freedom. Arriving at a point on the

river called Escalante's Crossing, Zwinger recounts how the 1776-1777 expedition of two Spanish priests, Fathers Escalante and Dominguez, produced an erroneous but influential map. Mistaking the Green River for a speculative one assumed to flow uninterrupted to the Pacific, the expedition's cartographer, Miera, named the Green the Rio San Buenaventura:

When Miera plotted the river he made a conjecture, and one that so coincided with what later traders and colonists and explorers wanted to believe that it took seventy years and a major expedition [John Wesley Powell's in 1869] to destroy it. . . . Later map makers copied this river of illusion, often adding fancies of their own. Most of the maps were made in Europe, and in 1804, Humboldt, whose influence as a geographer and essayist was considerable, printed a map in conjunction with his political essay on New Spain and accepted Miera's conjectures. Above my work desk is a map copied from Humboldt. . . . Both the headwaters of the Rio San Buenaventura, shown rising in a ridge of mountains, and the final reach, extending inland from the Pacific coast, are drawn in a firm line. In between there is a hiatus across which is lettered "Partie Inconnue." Running beneath this lettering, a light dotted line connects the two ends of the San Buenaventura. This intermittent line is tentative, yet very precise. It is of such lines that dreams are made. (RRR, 196)

Zwinger here offers in more condensed form a critique of an instance of historical accounting similar to Thoreau's critique in Cape Cod of the speculative English accounts of New England compared with the more empirically accurate ones of the French. Whereas the explorations of the French "gave the world the first valuable maps of these coasts" (CC, 184), the explorations of the English represented the coast as they had imagined it to be rather than as barren as it was: their "greenness. . . caused them to see green. . . Everything appeared to them of the color of the rose, and had the scent of juniper and sassafras" (CC, 200). Both for the Thoreau of Cape Cod

and for Zwinger, conjectures, beliefs, and dreams must be tested empirically in order not to plot illusions and fancies which, though tentative, once set down somehow for others to follow physically or intellectually, seem precise and thus mislead. The power of imaginative constructions to misrepresent and to mislead individuals and societies alike is what the later Thoreau and Zwinger along with McPhee resist. They resist this power not only in assertions but also by writing in a metonymic narrative style, which itself makes practical consciousness preeminent to speculative consciousness.

Zwinger's working against the potential of human constructions to impose imaginary or otherwise preconceived and untested notions upon experience motivates her, as it does the Thoreau of the last two books as well as McPhee, to find inhospitable, even inimical places in an effort to construct, paradoxically, a nonhuman temporality that necessarily eludes human construction. It is an effort metonymically to construct, as it were, natural temporality apart from human consciousness of it, an effort that is the obverse of metaphorically constructing consciousness apart from temporality, which is the major movement of Thoreau in A Week and Walden. For Zwinger, an especially challenging stretch of rapids occasions an effort to construct place and natural processes as if apart from human construction:

The raft bounds into slick and opalescent troughs, into water spun and sprayed into thick loops -- magnificent water, charged with energy, revealing little of what enrages it. Each wave is a watery lion's paw, playfully smacking a gray mouse with strength to spare. It is pure river on the river's terms.  
(RRR, 165)

This is a scene that makes rage and play indistinguishable, a scene that confounds human categories, a scene that brutally renders human life itself irrelevant. The metaphor of a mouse in the paws of a lion makes human life

inconsequential and yet at the same time utters Zwinger's elation at representing the river as if apart and free from human use.

But, as Thoreau finds on Katahdin and McPhee finds in the Alaskan wilderness, the prospect of human annihilation can lead to recoil and personal redefinition as easily as to elated abandon. When Zwinger travels through the Canyons of Lodore, no metaphors like that of the lion and mouse serve to make human extinction tenable:

Looking down into the canyon, I am suddenly depressed. I have a strong sense that canyons are not for people, they're for rivers. Canyons are for going through and coming out of, not for staying in, and now in the chill drizzle of the October evening, I feel the coldness of rock and running water as an ice edge that goes through to the marrow. Perhaps it is the somberness of the canyon, perhaps it is the knowledge of the dangerous rapids: I feel an unease in Lodore I feel nowhere else on the river -- as Powell felt it, "a black portal to a region of doom."

I rationalize that I am cold and hungry and therefore my spirits are low. But there is something beyond low blood sugar. It is the oppression of the bloody rock walls of Lodore itself. (RRR, 161)

Not only does Zwinger resist physical death, but she also resists psychological death, a return to the womb, which the canyons as a black portal or bloody walls threaten. So she negotiates passage through the canyon and the psychological stasis or even death that they signify, moving farther into temporality as it accommodates rather than threatens human practice. She repudiates the human destruction of nature, but she also draws back from nature's possible destruction of herself.

Zwinger, then, like Thoreau in his last two books and like McPhee, urges both a relinquishment of destructive human possession and use of nature, and yet she also urges against individual human extinction in deference to nature.

This dual urge spells a life lived ordinarily in settled places and only extraordinarily, only in passing, in less settled or unsettled places. In other words, this dual urge constitutes a rationale for excursions, for transience into wilderness instead of habitation in order to preserve both the vitality of uninhabited places and the life of the person too. Yet any settlement depends upon and in turn affects the ecology of remote, unpopulated places, so this rationale does not address or redress the ecological problems it exposes. Rather, as the rationale informs Zwinger's narrative, it constitutes the basis of an untenable practice.

Of leaving the river at the end of the journey, Zwinger writes, "I do not want to hear the river ending" (RRR, 279). She does not altogether want to remove herself from the river, and yet she does. Neither does she want the river itself to end, or so the sentence also implies, especially as its last word "ending" evokes the narrative's title, Run, River, Run. This final evocation of the imperative that the river run forever is no rhetorical flourish, for the crux of this concluding turn is a question that Zwinger's narrative, like the later Thoreau's as well as McPhee's, by positing the necessity of place apart from human constructions of and upon it, generate yet beg: if natural life apart from humans is imperative, then is human life optional?



## Chapter 7. Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire

Edward Abbey's Desert Solitaire is the main work of contemporary narrative nonfiction prose of place not to beg the question of whether the imperative perpetuation of natural life makes human life expendable. Abbey, though not without some equivocation, answers affirmatively.

Desert Solitaire, together with Abbey's The Monkey Wrench Gang, a novel which advocates sabotage against miners and developers for the purpose of perpetuating nature apart from human use, in large part inspired the radical environmental group, Earth First! Interestingly but not surprisingly, in looking for Abbey's and this movement's philosophical antecedents in American literature of place, Bill McKibben in his recent book, The End of Nature, sees no link between Abbey's writing and any of Thoreau's. Rather, McKibben looks to John Muir, citing several assertions from Muir's journal of his thousand-mile hike to the Gulf of Mexico which reverentially celebrate alligators and imply that human life is insignificant if not altogether irrelevant."<sup>1</sup> That McKibben sees Abbey as the most prominent exponent of a philosophical tradition expressed by Muir but not Thoreau is due to McKibben's (like many others') neglect of Thoreau as the author of any book but Walden:

he went to the woods to redeem man, not nature. (It is curious, in fact, just how little description of nature Walden contains.) It is an intensely anthropocentric account -- man's desecration of nature worried him less than man's desecration of himself. Nature mattered, but as a wonderful text. "Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature," he pleads, "and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and

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<sup>1</sup> Bill McKibben, The End of Nature (New York: Random House, 1989), 176.

without perturbation." Nature was a lesson.<sup>2</sup>

McKibben's last chapter reveals that he has read The Maine Woods and finds that "Ktaadn" shows "the last stage of the relation of man to nature -- though we had subdued her in the low places, the peaks, the poles, the jungles, still rang with her pure message."<sup>3</sup> McKibben's language, however, which renders nature female, betrays the insufficiency of his reading of "Ktaadn," where Thoreau's own assertions, in conjunction with his metonymic narrative style, qualify and often contradict such representations of nature: "Nature. . . . was Matter, vast, terrific, -- not his Mother Earth" (TMW, 70). But nothing in "Ktaadn" makes McKibben qualify his assessment of Thoreau or Thoreau's relation to Abbey other than on the basis of Walden.

Nor does Abbey associate himself with the Thoreau who wrote Cape Cod or The Maine Woods. In "Down the River with Henry Thoreau," Abbey in fact seems unaware that Thoreau even traveled to Cape Cod or Maine, noting only journeys to Minnesota and Staten Island, and then emphasizing that Thoreau "made a world out of Walden Pond, Concord, and their environs. He walked, he explored, every day and many nights, he learned to know his world as few ever know any world."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, except for writing two works (A Week and Walden) which got little attention, Abbey's Thoreau produced mainly written accumulations of facts, tending toward science and thus providing

more and more information, an indigestible glut of information, and less and less understanding. Thoreau was well aware of this tendency and foresaw its fatal consequences. He could see the tendency in himself, even as he partially succumbed to it. Many of the later *Journals* are filled with little but the enumeration of statistical data. . . . Henry

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 175-76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Abbey, "Down the River with Henry Thoreau," in Down the River (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1982), 45-46. Hereafter in the text as "Down the River."

may have had a long-range purpose in mind but he did not live long enough to fulfill it. Kneeling in the snow on a winter's day to count the tree rings in a stump, he caught the cold that led to his death on May 6, 1862. He succumbed not partially but finally to facticity. ("Down the River," 29-30)

The Thoreau of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, the Thoreau who tries to go beyond human constructions upon place and to suggest, if not quite to posit, the necessity of place to survive apart from human use, is dead to Abbey, perhaps because Abbey cannot see himself or his own work in that Thoreau. And yet Desert Solitaire evokes Thoreau's last two books at least as much as it evokes Walden.

But it is the Thoreau of the first two books, the Thoreau who, like Abbey, renders nonnarrative lyric conducive to libertarian polemic with whom Abbey claims affinity. For Abbey, it is this Thoreau who

becomes more significant with each passing decade. The deeper our United States sinks into industrialism, urbanism, militarism -- with the rest of the world doing its best to emulate America -- the more poignant, strong, and appealing becomes Thoreau's demand for the right of every man, every woman, every child, every dog, every tree, every snail darter, every lousewort, every living thing, to live its own life in its own way at its own pace in its own square mile of home. Or in its own stretch of river. ("Down the River," 36)

Yet Abbey projects himself onto Thoreau, since Walden argues for only part of this libertarian freedom in giving it only to humans, and this more in speculative consciousness than in practice. In contrast to Walden, Abbey's own Desert Solitaire more nearly asserts the competing claims of *all* living creatures upon whatever space they inhabit. Moreover, in seeming finally to give nature a greater claim than humans to this freedom, Desert Solitaire, contrary to McKibben and even to Abbey's own similarly circumscribed reading of Thoreau, probes further than perhaps any other nonfiction narrative of

place the same, though more tentative, direction of Cape Cod and The Maine Woods.

Like The Maine Woods, Desert Solitaire is not a continuous narrative but instead is a collection of mostly narrative essays, all focused on Abbey's experience as a park ranger at Arches National Monument, Utah. As Ann Ronald observes, Abbey adapts Thoreau's cyclical structure in Walden for Desert Solitaire by integrating "a set of experiences into a single 'Season in the Wilderness' . . . noted in the [book's] subtitle."<sup>5</sup> This resemblance to Walden, however, suggests the superficiality of most if not all resemblances between the two books, especially when the content of Desert Solitaire's metonymic narrative is analyzed. The more narratively Abbey writes, the less equivocal he is that natural life is imperative and human life optional. Equivocation comes mostly in moments of nonnarrative polemic which are reminiscent of the Thoreau of A Week and Walden, for polemic, as a type of lyric consciousness, qualifies if not contradicts assertions of the necessity of human expendability in deference to natural life. That is, when Abbey writes nonnarrative polemic, such as in Desert Solitaire's most notable instance of it, "Polemic: Industrial Tourism at the National Parks," he represents his condemnatory consciousness more than practice and renders consciousness preeminent to the continuation or cessation of certain temporal practices like preservation and use of wilderness. Metonymic narrative, in contrast, especially in the Desert Solitaire essays, "Down the River" and "Dead Man at Grandview Point" both in style and assertion argue almost unequivocally that natural life is imperative and human life optional by narratively putting this attitude into practice.

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Ronald, The New West of Edward Abbey. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 66.

"Down the River" represents Abbey's trip with a friend, Ralph Newcomb, down the Colorado through Glen Canyon before it was dammed to make Lake Powell, so the trip literally is an effort to experience place apart from human constructions upon it. Abbey does, however, initially in the narrative point to his consciousness as much as or more than to place by figuring the river and the surrounding wilderness as female when he compares the pleasure of launching their boats to "that first entrance -- from the outside -- into the neck of the womb,"<sup>6</sup> the womb being the "wilderness. . .the womb of earth from which we all emerged" (*Desert*, 189). So the journey, then, means severing "the bloody cord. . .a rebirth backward in time and primeval liberty, into freedom in the most simple, literal, primitive meaning of the word, the only meaning that really counts. The freedom, for example, to commit murder and get away with it scot-free, with no other burden than the jaunty halo of conscience" (*Desert*, 177). But as Abbey's narrative proceeds, such freedom proves speculative more than actual, the license of Abbey's hyperbolic, polemical consciousness which he uses when he wants more than anything else to provoke. These provocative proclamations of libertarian freedom indeed come to seem gratuitous in the context of a narrative which, in its own much more purposeful, direly practical provocation represents the imperative of natural places to persist even at the cost of human extinction. So the narrative makes moot almost any concept of human freedom, but especially the most libertarian.

The desert as Abbey experiences it, much like Zwinger and unlike Heat Moon for whom it easily becomes part of the self's topography, is the place that most powerfully confronts him with the utter inconsequentiality of

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 176. Hereafter in the text as *Desert*.

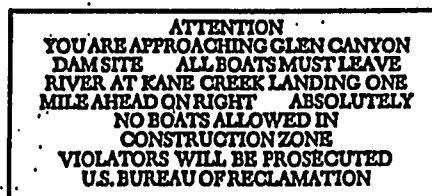
human life. The desert thus leads him to argue that when human practice impinges detrimentally upon the natural processes of a place, then human life, both individually and collectively, is expendable. The desert impels Abbey, in effect, to answer Thoreau's questions on "Ktaadn," asked in response to nature's hostility, "*Who* are we? *Where* are we?" (TMW, 71), with the rejoinder that to ascribe hostility to nature is falsely anthropocentric, that in relation to nature people are irrevocably anomalous and are nowhere that they belong:

Alone in the silence, I understand for a moment the dread which many feel in the presence of primeval desert, the unconscious fear which compels them to tame, alter or destroy what they cannot understand, to reduce that wild and prehuman to human dimensions. Anything rather than confront the antehuman, that *other world* which frightens not through danger or hostility but in something far worse -- its implacable Indifference. (Desert, 216; Abbey's emphases)

Abbey probes Thoreau's position further to find that hostility arises from a human experience of human irrelevance and is an attribute not of nature toward humans but of humans toward nature.

It is hostility that builds dams, constructions which, contrary to socially engineered intention, demonstrate how out-of-place people are. "Down the River" dead-ends with a representation of a billboard, a graphic synecdoche which literally foregrounds his narrative representation of the superfluity and thus the implied expendability of human life:

We are rounding a bend in the river and I see, far ahead on the left-hand shore, something white, rigid, rectangular, out of place. Our boats draft gradually closer and we see the first billboard ever erected in Glen Canyon. Planted in rocks close to the water, the sign bears a message and it is meant for us.



(Desert, 220)

Imposing and obstructive as the sign may be, much like McPhee's pyramid of debris, it is nevertheless a sign more of human impotence and lack of control over nature and each other than of power and dominance. "Planted," the sign signifies the temporariness, the futility, of human constructions, including eventually even constructions like a dam.

Such constructions as the sign and dam along with linguistic ones are what Abbey's narrative almost throughout argues against as it simultaneously argues for the expendability of human life. Like Thoreau, who discovers in Maine places where he "might live and die and never hear of the United States. . . never hear of America so-called" (TMW, 236), and who discovers Cape Cod to be a place where he may "put all America behind him" (CC, 215), even more so Abbey experiences the desert as urging a similar eschewal of linguistic or any other constructions upon place. Abbey's experience is most pronounced during a moment in "Down the River" when he entertains the possibility of the existence of God:

The canyon twists and turns, serpentine as its stream, and with each turn comes a dramatic and novel view of tapestried walls five hundred -- a thousand? -- feet high, of silvery driftwood wedged between boulders, of mysterious and inviting subcanyons to the side, within which I can see living stands of grass, cane, salt cedar, and sometimes the delicious magical green of a young cottonwood with its thousand exquisite leaves vibrating like spangles in the vivid air. The only sound is the whisper of the running water, the touch of my bare feet on the sand, and once or twice, out of the stillness, the clear song of a canyon wren.

Is this at last the *locus dei*? . . . Each time I look up one of the secretive little side canyons I half expect to see not only the cottonwood tree rising over its tiny spring -- the lefty god, the desert's liquid eye -- but also a rainbow-colored corona of blazing light, pure spirit, pure being, pure disembodied intelligence, *about to speak my name*.

If a man's imagination were not so weak, so easily tired, if his capacity for wonder not so limited, he would abandon forever such fantasies of the supernal. He would learn to perceive in water, leaves, and silence more than sufficient of the absolute and marvelous, more than enough to console him for the loss of ancient dreams. (*Desert*, 200; Abbey's italics)

In urging silence as the most appropriate response to place, the most appropriate antidote to constrictive linguistic constructions which so often fantastically falsify because they derive from imaginations too weak to construct, or reconstruct, a commensurate, practical relation to place, Abbey raises the possibility that not just human silence but human absence altogether is nature's due. "Beyond atheism, nontheism. I am not an atheist but an earthiest. Be true to the earth," he writes, culminating his consideration of the question of God's existence, but not the question of the necessity of human existence, which he leaves open in this narrative.

Abbey more insistently pursues the question in another part of *Desert Solitaire*, "The Dead Man at Grandview Point," which argues more explicitly and more unequivocally for the imperative of natural life and the expendability of human life. Representing Abbey's participation in a search party for a man who gets lost in the canyonlands and dies, the plot focuses on the fact of a particular human death and on the value of human death and life in general. Just prior to the search, Abbey hears coyotes howl near the trailer he occupies and, taking exception to people who would trap and kill coyotes, he observes, "We need coyotes more than we need, let us say, more people, of whom we have already an extravagant surplus" (*Desert*, 236). This



statement is no gratuitous provocation, however, for his narrative goes on to show that it means in part to put this value into practice.

Upon finding the body, Abbey envies the man's dying alone "on rock under the sun. . .like a wolf, like a great bird" (Desert, 240). And his subsequent fuller response accords with his deference to coyotes, to natural imperative over human:

Each man's death diminishes me? Not necessarily. Given this man's age, the inevitability and suitability of his death, and the essential nature of life on earth, there is in each of us the unspeakable conviction that we are well rid of him. His departure makes room for the living. Away with the old, in with the new. He is gone -- we remain, others come. The plow of mortality drives through the stubble, turns over rocks and sod and weeds to cover the old, the worn-out, the husks, shells, empty seedpods and sapless roots, clearing the field for the next drop. A ruthless, brutal process -- but clean and beautiful. (Desert, 242)

Although the man has died accidentally and not voluntarily, Abbey's placing all human death within organic and even inorganic cycles of degeneration and regeneration implies the expendability of human life and the imperative of natural life. And although in the paragraph which follows from this one, Abbey admits that "part of our nature rebels against this truth" and insists that human life is "unique and supreme beyond all the limits of reason and nature" (Desert, 242), his narrative in larger part advocates human expendability.

The narrative ends, in fact, with Abbey's representation of a vulture's-eye view of his own demise into inanimacy instead of the man whose body he has just discovered and from which he has watched vultures flee:

I feel myself sinking into the landscape, fixed in place like

a stone, like a tree, a small motionless shape of vague outline, desert-colored, and with wings of imagination look down at myself through the eyes of the bird, watching a human figure that becomes smaller, smaller in the receding landscape as the bird rises into the evening -- a man at a table near a twinkling campfire, surrounded by a rolling wasteland of stone and lime and sandstone monuments, the wasteland surrounded by dark canyons and the course of rivers and mountain ranges on a vast plateau. . .and beyond this plateau more deserts and greater mountains, the Rockies in dusk, the Sierra Nevadas shining in the late afternoon, and farther and farther yet, the darkened East, the gleaming Pacific, the curving margins of the great earth itself, and beyond earth that ultimate world of sun and stars whose bonds we cannot discover. (*Desert*, 243-44)

Abbey assumes a vulture's-eye view, the view of a creature to whom human life at close range is offal or potential offal and at longer and longer range is nothing at all. In this way, he narratively enacts not just the limitation, the smallness of any anthropocentric view, but the expendability of any and all human life. Abbey makes anyone and everyone the dead man at Grandview Point.

Abbey's final vision represents on a more globally fatal scale much the same relation between natural and human life that Thoreau encounters on a beach of Cape Cod, where Thoreau sees

a vast *morgue*, where famished dogs may range in packs, and crows come daily to glean the pittance which the tide leaves them. The carcasses of men and beasts together lie stately upon its shelf, rotting and bleaching in sun and waves, and each tide turns them in their beds, and rocks fresh sand upon them. There is naked Nature -- inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man, nibbling at the cliffy shore where gulls wheel amid the spray. (CC, 147)

With Abbey, however, Thoreau's personification of Cape Cod, like the personification of nature as hostile in "Ktaadn," is absent, does not pertain, literally is inappropriate. For unlike Thoreau whose last two narrative

explorations anticipate yet stop short of fully asserting the imperative of natural life and the expendability of human, Abbey's narratives find that human practice by now makes natural life imperative and so anticipates the end of human construction altogether, whether physical constructions like a dam or linguistic constructions like silence. And not just silence but, with no one to construct it as such, neither will nature exist. Toward this end, Thoreau's last two books unknowingly lead. But McPhee, Zwinger, and especially Abbey, made more knowing by their practical engagement in our time's unparalleled diminishment of nature, follow Thoreau in their variously urgent narrative ways.

## Conclusion

My rhetorical analysis of the dialectic between lyrical, or metaphorical, nonnarrative and metonymic narrative in Thoreau's four books reveals a Thoreau increasingly engaged in natural and temporal human practice. Not simply narrative but metonymic narrative becomes the means by which Thoreau resists the centripetal potential of metaphorical language to represent the repetitious gestures of lyrical, atemporal consciousness either in nonnarrative or sometimes (for example in parts of Walden) also in narrative. By contrast with metaphorical writing's greater self-referentiality and insistence on its own mediation of experience, metonymy in conjunction with the mimesis of a narrative plot serves Thoreau simultaneously to mediate temporal human practice and yet also to point toward practice apart from mediation. In this way, metonymic narrative demonstrates simultaneously the necessity of human construction of experience and yet the contingency of human construction too. Such narrative, then, combines daring with deference to all that eludes construction. This disposition toward living and writing makes possible the articulation and exploration of crucial questions like how consciousness relates to practice, like whether preservation of wilderness is necessary, and whether natural life is imperative and human life expendable.

While metonymic narrative certainly is not the only rhetorical mode which eschews self-indulgence and permits insight into the place of human practice, my study of Thoreau and others suggests some of the ways in which metonymic narrative may be particularly effective for purposes of examining and criticizing temporal practice. In addition to metonymic narrative's capacity to mediate experience and yet defer to what remains immediate,

another major feature of this linguistic mode is that it enacts a practical redirection of infantile psychosexual desires which metaphorical language readily expresses. This redirection serves to facilitate engagement with and criticism of what Poirier calls an "existing" or "provided" environment rather than, as in metaphoric language, to promote escape into an "imaginary" or "invented" environment. Whereas metaphor marks the topography of the world of temporal experience as undifferentiated from and coterminous with a topography of self, metonymy marks the topography of the world of temporal experience as discrete from self and as superseding it. The rhetoric of Thoreau's four books demonstrates these two main courses of conduct as he shifts from the former to the latter.

Although Thoreau's four books show his increasing involvement with his historically provided environment, as for relating Thoreau's or the other writers' texts directly and in detail to biography and social history, my study perhaps implies what I will make explicit here: I think that connections between a text and history or biography are too complex for "historicization" (as these gestures generally now are called) to be credible. Although I have become increasingly interested in the historical moment of a text, many efforts to historicize a text seem to me sheerly speculative and arbitrary; rather than document and support a thesis, historicization often undermines an argument or even exposes its unsupportability. (Eve Sedgwick's "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" is, to me, an example of an intriguing and generally plausible thesis that is discredited by a historicizing method.) Although I discuss Thoreau's and other writers' dispositions toward the historical moment represented in their texts, I do not, except in the most

general and oblique ways, discuss incidents in biography or social history in relation to particular dispositions and concerns demonstrated in the texts.

My rhetorical analysis of Thoreau's four books not only reveals a more historically engaged Thoreau than emerges when he is read as the author of only A Week and Walden, but it also shows Thoreau's rhetorical and thematic relation with several contemporary writers of nonfiction narrative prose of place. Agee's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men perhaps more than any other single contemporary work embodies the conflict of rhetoric and purpose of all four of Thoreau's books. Famous Men demonstrates the potential of metaphorical nonnarrative to give preeminence to atemporal, noncritical consciousness in contrast to and in conflict with the potential of metonymic narrative to give preeminence to temporal practice and simultaneously to effect a critique of practice. Looking at Agee in light of Thoreau as the author of four books is a way to illuminate within American nonfiction prose of place a persistent conflict between rhetorical strategies and related psychosexual and epistemological goals. However, the more this conflict resolves itself in favor of the rhetoric of metonymic narrative, as it does in Thoreau's Cape Cod and The Maine Woods and in the work of Heat Moon, McPhee, Zwinger, and Abbey, the more salient become the themes of social criticism. Reading Thoreau and these contemporary writers in relation to each other gives their common themes a historical and social resonance and their metonymic narrative style an epistemological force that they otherwise would lack. Mark Twain observed that history might not repeat itself, but it certainly does rhyme. Reading Thoreau as the author of four books and relating him to Agee, Heat Moon, McPhee, Zwinger, and Abbey sounds some

Increasingly urgent rhymes about how people and place fare as human practice diminishes the environment.