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Sounding: Henry David Thoreau

We know what Thoreau meant by Walden, or at least, we know what he meant for it to do. We know because he told us, on the title page of his book, where by way of an epigraph he quoted himself:

I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.¹

So that’s clear then. In fact, Thoreau could be hardly be clearer. What could be clearer after all, as he amplifies later in the chapter called ‘Sounds’, than a cockerel crowing

clear and shrill for miles over the resounding earth, drowning the feeble notes of other birds ... It would put nations on the alert. (W, 116)

Probably nothing could be more clear, in Thoreau’s world at any rate, than the cockerel, except perhaps the chanticleer: chanticleer being the French for cockerel, and deriving its name precisely from the clarity of its song, its chant clear. So Thoreau is clearer in his statement of intent even than he first seemed to be: he means to issue a clear song. Except that in order to be so clear he has had to make two moves: to a word from another language, and then back, by way of derivation, through that language to the word’s origins. Thoreau’s epigraph is clear and shrill, if, that is, one listens closely.

Take the opening clause: ‘I do not propose to write an ode to dejection’. Coleridge wrote an ‘ode to dejection’. Such a form of expression is one of the options available to the writer who – and which writer doesn’t? – thinks that all is not as it might be with the world. Formally speaking it is an incongruous choice, the properties of the ode – with its exalted style and enthusiastic tone – being at odds with its subject. Either way, this possible course will not be Thoreau’s. He has mentioned it in part to notice that on beginning to write he had faced a choice – it is very much to the point of Walden that we acknowledge the choices we make – but also, in acknowledging the Coleridgean option, to clear the way.² He means not to praise or indulge low
spirits, but by counter definition, to raise them. He does not ‘propose to write an ode to dejection’.

In fact, he doesn’t propose to write anything, but instead to ‘brag as lustily as a chanticleer’, between which two possibilities there is a world of difference. Coleridge, famously, proposed to write things. He proposed to write more of ‘Kubla Khan’ than he was able to, before the man from Porlock interrupted him, and in Biographia Literaria he continually proposes to write something he never quite gets round adequately to expressing – ‘Esemplastic’, the concept the book trails, being a disappointment when finally it arrives. For all its critical qualities, that is, Biographia Literaria has the air of a proposal to write. There is a melancholy in such proposing, a melancholy that comes of alienation, that comes of the distance between stated intention and act. The present book, for instance, was first proposed to its publisher, then, after its publisher’s readers responded to the proposal, proposed again. It was then the subject of a proposal to the departmental Research Committee, and following approval there, to the University Personnel Office, and then, in painstaking detail, it was proposed to a funding council, who, in the spirit of scrutiny, wanted to know a good deal about the book that in reality couldn’t be told until it was written. It was then subject to two independent assessments, pursuant on which I was offered a right to reply. I barely managed a reply; by that stage I had lost the will to live. To propose anything is to write an ode to dejection.

This said, one way of interpreting Thoreau’s epigraph is as a proposal to brag. Actually, though, he doesn’t propose to brag, he just brags; the verb ‘to brag’ substituting for the whole over-monitoring phrase ‘propose to write’. The word ‘brag’ changes the epigraph entirely. Firstly, it recasts the activity in hand, shifting it from ‘writing’ to something more akin to speaking. Writing can brag – Thoreau is about to prove it can – but at very least there is a tone of voice implicit in bragging. Thoreau won’t actually speak to us in the book, of course, but his book will have voice, or tones of voice; we will be addressed directly. ‘To brag’ also introduces an element of risk, with Thoreau’s choice of word confronting a problem implicit in his work. If he is to wake his neighbors up, if he is to be heard at all, he has no choice but to raise his voice, and if he does raise his voice somebody, somewhere, will be sure to say that he likes the sound of it. Somebody, inevitably, on encountering the example set by Walden, will accuse its author of bragging; so Thoreau gets in first, bragging in order to wake his neighbors up. One of the risks inherent in Walden, in other words, is that it will be thought to crow.

But who is crowing? And what are they are crowing about? Judging by the epigraph this isn’t absolutely clear, and not least because it isn’t absolutely clear from the sentence that it is in fact Thoreau who wakes his
neighborsup. Or rather, it isn’t clear that it is his voice that does the waking. Does the sentence not allow us to hear it as the chanticleer bragging from his roost, ‘if only to wake my neighbours up’? Maybe Thoreau is not making himself plain here, maybe he has not noticed the ambiguity his syntax has opened up; or maybe, through the chanticleer, he is trying to tell us something significant about voice, and more pressingly about voice as it is understood in Walden. The chanticleer has a great voice—cock-a-doodle-doo—which, at a certain moment in the day in particular, he cannot help but sound; Thoreau’s word ‘lustily’ (as opposed in the sentence to the bureaucratic constraint of the proposal) making its involuntary nature clear. In effect, what the chanticleer does is sound, or give voice to, the morning; it is as if in some sense its voice comes from somewhere else, as if in sounding it the chanticleer articulates something other than, or more than, itself. The chanticleer crows: it’s morning. Perhaps this habit it has of voicing something other than itself is why the cockerel is associated with prophecy. Christ prophesied that Peter would betray him three times before the cock crowed: ‘This night before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice’ (Matthew 26:34). And, of course, he did.

Thoreau’s epigraph is rich. It notes the melancholy effect of certain distancing properties in language, certain abstractions and bureaucratic locutions in particular, and it states the author’s intention to raise spirits rather than to endorse or compound low spirits. It establishes the possibility of verbal clarity so long as attention is paid to prior meanings of words. It illustrates, or offers an analogy for, a sense of voice which is both in some sense — ‘lustily’ – uncontrolled, and in another sense highly meaningful, which can be understood at least in part as issuing from somewhere else, and which when it goes out into the world – which it cannot help but do – results in action; it gets things going. What Thoreau means to do in Walden, in other words, in a very full sense of the word, is to enthuse, and what his epigraph gestures towards is the scope and understanding of his enthusiasm.

So far I’ve drawn on – or alluded to, or borrowed from – the work of two of Thoreau’s major modern commentators: Stanley Cavell, who writes brilliantly about prophecy in The Senses of Walden, and Lawrence Buell, one of whose importantly responsible questions in The Environmental Imagination is (to paraphrase), ‘What is it in Thoreau, or in Walden in particular, that has secured and stirred so many readers?’ What I want to say – it’s difficult now to propose it – is that thinking about Thoreau’s enthusiasm, and thinking of him as an enthusiast, is a good way of going back to these and other significant issues raised by Walden and other of his works, a good way of keeping such issues going. What I don’t want to say is that, as he wrote,
Thoreau thought of himself as an enthusiast in the sense that, for a while, Ezra Pound thought of himself as an imagist. Enthusiasm doesn’t tend to take writers like that. There’s no manifesto, no proposal to write, not least because, if there was, that which it would be proposing to contain would exceed it. What I’m saying instead is that when a writer happens upon enthusiasm as an element of writing, or as a mode of composition, or even, as in Thoreau’s case, the possible foundation of a way of life, certain other thoughts tend to follow; and also that because Thoreau was both a wider reader than most writers – he is one of those writers one can be sure of having read what one wants him to have read – and because he was a more rigorous thinker than most writers, one finds in his enthusiasm a very full statement of its possibilities. What Thoreau teaches us, then, is that to approach writing and the world through an idea of enthusiasm has radical implications for thinking about, among other things, economy, epistemology and language. Or to put these categories in terms of the present participles Thoreau preferred (with the grammatical implication, thereby, of action, immediacy and, perhaps most importantly, continuation), Thoreau’s enthusiasm has radical things to teach us about ‘circulating’, ‘knowing’ and ‘deriving’. First, though, ‘enthusing’ – with what justice is Thoreau called an enthusiast?

**Enthusing**

Thoreau counts himself an enthusiast, or at least as someone who has enthusiasm, in the opening chapter of *Walden*. ‘I do not mean,’ one paragraph begins, Thoreau leading us again to what he does mean via the options he has not taken,

> to prescribe rules to strong and valiant natures, who will mind their own affairs whether in heaven or hell ... nor to those who find their encouragement and inspiration in precisely the present condition of things, and cherish it with the fondness and enthusiasm of lovers, – and, to some extent, I reckon myself in this number. [W, 16]

There are others to whom Thoreau does not address himself, ‘the well employed’ for instance, but it is only those who cherish ‘precisely the present condition of things ... with the fondness and enthusiasm of lovers’ whose number he reckons himself among. There are a number of prominent terms in that clause – ‘encouragement’, ‘inspiration’, ‘cherish’, ‘lovers’ – all of which clearly fit Thoreau, and there is no need to insist that ‘enthusiasm’ is central. But it is there, defining the number Thoreau identifies himself with. And not only is it there, in this moment of self-definition, but already he is offering us ways of regarding the idea which he will be in the business of unfolding in
Walden. In one way, then, Thoreau precisely does not cherish the present condition of things, if that were to mean, for instance, the materialism of his society and culture. He does, however, cherish ‘the present’; the mental state that is enthusiasm being a means for him whereby the present can precisely be known or cherished. More on this later, as on the opposition toyed with here between enthusiastic cherishing and reckoning: Walden being a reckoning of the world which disputes the prevailing calculations, or rather, disputes calculation and the picture of the world it comes up with.

Early in Walden, then, Thoreau deftly positions his enthusiasm between ideas of knowing (cherishing) and ideas of measuring and calculating (reckoning). That the term should fall into his argumentation so readily owes to the fact that in the years up to the writing of Walden he had been trying out its value, repeatedly, insistently, until it came to mean something important. For instance then – although strictly speaking, no doubt, before the trying-out stage – in an essay written while he was at Harvard, Thoreau notes (without actually troubling to fulfil the requirement of annotation), that as ‘some one has justly observed, zeal and enthusiasm are never very accurate calculators’. This was in 1835. Two years later he writes of Paley and his Natural Philosophy.

We may call him a fanatic – an enthusiast – but these are titles of honor, they signify the devotion and entire surrendering of himself to his cause. Where there is sincerity there is truth also. So far as my experience goes, man never seriously maintained an objectionable principle, doctrine or theory. (EE, 104)

This is unremarkable, perhaps, except to point out that the term has come to Thoreau, as an undergraduate, freighted with meanings which have, in common parlance anyway, since dropped away. Chaucer, more pointedly – in a lecture on poetry he gave at the Concord Lyceum on 29 November 1843, the text of which he subsequently spliced into A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers — is rated less important than Homer and Ossian on the grounds that:

though it is full of good sense and humanity, it is not transcendent poetry. For picturesque description of persons it is, perhaps, without a parallel in English poetry; yet it is essentially humorous, as the loftiest genius never is. Humor, however broad and genial, takes a narrower view than enthusiasm. (EE, 168)

This is arguable, obviously, as criticism of Chaucer (though equally the sample doesn’t represent Thoreau’s fully developed view of the poet). It does, though, tell us something of Thoreau’s cultural nationalism, enthusiasm being that which, as was implied of the English poet Coleridge, the English
poet Chaucer is considered to lack. What does Thoreau mean, one wants to know, as he clears the literary ground, by his word ‘enthusiasm’?

Helping with this a little, in his essay on Sir Walter Ralegh, which considers equally the life and the work, and which estimates the work partly in terms of the life, Thoreau associates enthusiasm with action: All fair action is the product of enthusiasm, and nature herself does nothing in the prose mood’ (EE, 217). This is quite significant for the causation it implies: enthusiasm, previously an element of writing, is now expressly linked to action, an element of the world. Books, this suggests, can be things in the world, can participate quite directly – i.e., not just as proposals – in the world’s making. What Thoreau’s comment on Ralegh should not be taken to mean, however, is that enthusiasm itself must necessarily be thought of as an active state. Or at least, if Ralegh’s enthusiasm is active, Thoreau’s isn’t, or isn’t always, witness the very careful account he gives of it in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*:

You must be calm before you can utter oracles. What was the excitement of the Delphic priestess compared with the calm wisdom of Socrates? – or whoever it was that was wise. – Enthusiasm is a supernatural serenity.5

This is important. Thoreau wrote *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* while he was living at Walden Pond, from 1845 to 1847. The enthusiasm proposed here, then – and relative to the immediacy of the later book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* often reads, in its abstraction and speculation, like a proposal to write – is very much the enthusiasm of *Walden*. There are two ways of substantiating this. First, *Walden* is a prophetic book of sorts – not in the classical sense, perhaps, that it claims to foretell action – but at least in that it is concerned with future actions and future lives. Thoreau means to wake his neighbors up; he means for them to alter their futures. Second, *Walden* is prophetic in that out of the serenity of its enthusiasm, words are uttered which have had, on some, something like an oracular effect. And crucially, and here we are back for a moment with the chanticleer, the words, often, are not Thoreau’s own. In one way, of course, they are never Thoreau’s own because as Thoreau knows more than most, he doesn’t own words. In a more explicit way, however, the words he utters frequently come from somewhere else. He says as much in *A Week*, in a passage on scripture which links readily with his statement on the serenity of enthusiasm:

The reading which I love best is the scriptures of the several nations ... Give me one of these Bibles and you have silenced me for a while. When I recover the use of my tongue, I am wont to worry my neighbors with the new sentences. (*Week*, 58-9)
This, if ever there was one, is a portrait of the writer as an enthusiastic. Thoreau shows himself reading scripture and so all but literally pictures himself breathing in the God, after which, and after a period of silence, he is heard to utter new sentences. We might worry about these new sentences – that when he recovers his tongue Thoreau worries his neighbors by speaking unintelligibly, as if in tongues. In fact, though, his new sentences are old sentences, because what he goes on to do, in the next paragraph, is quote from the New Testament; quotation, the speaking of another’s words, being akin to prophecy. Quotation and prophecy are different kinds of speech act, of course, in that to quote is not to make a claim on the future, but there is overlap also, in the sense that in both acts one voice gives itself over to another. Then again, to track prophecy back through its derivations is eventually to find the Greek word simply for speech, as if when it comes down to it speech is quotation, and as if speech properly understood is therefore necessarily enthusiastic.

But this has gone further into Thoreau’s enthusiasm, and into *Walden*, than I had meant to at this point. What I wanted to do was to justify calling Thoreau an enthusiast by reference to his increasingly knowing use of the term; and it is clear that Thoreau knew about enthusiasm – that he knew its force, its implications, its history and its values. But then of course he did: Thoreau was steeped in enthusiasm. He was a classicist by his university training, and knew exactly what the idea meant to the Greeks. He was also a student, as were all the transcendentalists, of turn-of-the-century German thought, and of Romanticism, and so he knew that it could be claimed, as Mme De Staël had [from whose *Germany* he copied into his journal] that with regard to this period, ‘enthusiasm is the distinguishing characteristic of the German nation’. Equally, when he numbered himself among those who manifested the enthusiasm of lovers, and the prevailing Unitarianism notwithstanding, he was simply numbering himself among his friends. Bronson Alcott, for instance, was, as Robert D. Richardson has noted, ‘a talker of shattering, almost apostolic brilliance’ who ‘wrote inspired, ecstatic gospels’ and for whose ‘orphic speech’ ‘Neoplatonism and both German and French Romanticism’ afforded the best parallels. More than most, more than anybody perhaps – more, as *Walden* demonstrates, than his mentor Emerson – Thoreau knew what enthusiasm could mean.

**Circulating**

In turning to think about Thoreau and circulation I take it as read that Thoreau, in the guise of *Walden* at least, has circulated. He only published two books during his lifetime, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* and *Walden*, the former making so slight an impression on the market (from
the initial print run of 1,000 copies, 703 were left unsold after 4 years), that he struggled to persuade his Boston publishers, Ticknor and Fields, to publish his second book: a commercial reluctance subsequently justified by further poor sales (by 1880, 26 years after the book’s publication, and 18 years after the author’s death, total sales of Walden stood at 3,695). Since then, however, the circulation of Walden has become legion, the book having reached, and influenced, politicians, writers, scholars, so-called ordinary readers, naturalists and eco-activists alike, and there is nothing to be added here to Lawrence Buell’s definitive account of the book’s reception, marketing, canonization and readership.8 Walden, no question, is a book that has been passed on. What I want to consider instead, in this context of his enthusiasm, are reasons internal to Thoreau’s writing that can be thought to have guaranteed its circulation.

The historic success of Walden presents a paradox, because one of the most obvious readings of Thoreau – of Walden in particular, but of his excursions generally – is of a man out of circulation. As his defining gesture has it: ‘I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond’. He received visitors, of course – there is a chapter devoted to them – and he would in turn visit his friends, notably Emerson, notably (sometimes) for dinner. He also records in ‘The Village’ how he would regularly step back ‘to hear some of the gossip which is incessantly going on there, circulating either from mouth to mouth or from newspaper to newspaper’ (W 151). So he wasn’t a hermit. Nor though, by a long chalk, is Walden a populous book, and socially speaking during his sojourn at Walden Pond Thoreau could hardly be said to have been in circulation. For Emerson, according to his posthumous ‘Biographical Sketch’ this being out of circulation was the trouble with Thoreau: ‘It seemed as if his first instinct on hearing a proposition was to controvert it, so impatient was he of the limitations of our daily thought... Hence, no equal companion stood in affectionate relations with one so pure and guileless.’9 This says nothing that would have surprised Thoreau, or even, perhaps, offended him, despite the eulogistic occasion of Emerson’s words. In his own essay on friendship, embedded in A Week on the Concord, his definition of the relation strictly delimited his circle. ‘We do not wish,’ he insisted, ‘for Friends to feed and clothe our bodies, – neighbors are kind enough for that, – but to do the like office for our spirits. For this few are rich enough’ (Week, 217). Delimiting further, ‘None,’ he is speaking of friends still, ‘will pay us the compliment to expect nobleness from us. Though we have gold to give, they demand only copper’ (Week, 218).

The question of the proper currency is fundamental to Thoreau, for whom ‘Economy’ was of the first importance. In the first place, then, Thoreau took
himself out of circulation, to a plot of land he could occupy at minimal cost, and he built his house himself – although, as he later details, with help from some friends – chiefly to avoid the burden of a mortgage. The burden of a mortgage is the way it intrudes on a life. A loan whereby a property acts as the security on the loan taken out to secure the property, and which frequently, as Thoreau is at pains to point out, and as the Old French derivation (dead pledge) indicates, takes the best part of a life to pay back, a mortgage has a relation to living which is equivalent, say, to the relation between a proposal to write and writing. As such, as it intrudes on the matter that ought to be in hand – and here one should hear pre-echoes of Ezra Pound, Thoreau’s mortgage standing as an equivalent to Pound’s usury – the mortgage replicates the effect of money, on which subject Thoreau is a tireless commentator. ‘Visitors’, for instance, offers a particularly clear definition of money furnished by a friend, probably the Canadian Alex Therien. Quizzing him on many subjects, in order to establish the ‘Homerish’ quality of person it was possible to encounter in modern North America – to establish the presence of gold not copper – Thoreau brags:

> When I asked him if he could do without money, he showed the convenience of money in such a way as to suggest and coincide with the most philosophical accounts of the origin of this institution, and the very derivation of the word pecunia. If an ox were his property, and he wished to get needles and thread at the store, he thought it would be inconvenient and impossible soon to go on mortgaging some portion of the creature each time to get that amount. [W, 135]

Thoreau would seem persuaded, although in passing the definition on, and in his clarifying of the meaning of money through its derivation, he quietly offers counter modes of circulation. Once again he presents a choice.

Elsewhere the questioning of money is more shrill:

> I respect not his labors, his farm where everything has its price; who would carry the landscape, who would carry his God, to market, if he could get anything for him; who goes to market for his god as it is ... who loves not the beauty of the fruits, whose fruits are not ripe for him till they are turned to dollars. [W, 177]

This turning to dollars is the issue; or rather, the issue, as Thoreau repeatedly makes clear, is that dollars turn everything into themselves. A strong version of this argument is presented in his exacting late essay ‘Wild Apples’, where again the image is of taking to market: ‘There is ... about all natural products a certain volatile and ethereal quality which represents their highest value, and which cannot be bought and sold’ [Ex, 273]. His attention is drawn, then, to the wild apple ‘hung so high and sheltered by the tangled branches that our
sticks could not dislodge it’. Such ‘is a fruit’, Thoreau wants us to believe, or wants himself to believe, ‘never carried to market... quite distinct from the apple of the markets, as from dried apple and cider, – and it is not every winter that produces it in perfection’.

We should appreciate where we are here. We are not only by Walden Pond, not just anyway; not a mile from any neighbor and so to all intents and purposes out of circulation; we are, rather, in the maw of the nineteenth century, that engine room just to the side of which Karl Marx was, at this very moment, setting himself up in his own hut, otherwise known as the British Library. The commodity is king and from the security of his vantage point, Thoreau, like Marx, has entered the factory, only here the factory is a farm, or a landscape, but same difference: same rules, same grid, same demand for production; same process whereby materials become commodities in order that they should be carried to market, whereupon they will be turned, every last one of them (completing the alchemy) into money. One can hardly think of Thoreau without thinking of Marx. One can hardly think, for instance, of those tables pricing up his house – ‘Two casks of lime, ... 0 31 That was high’ – without thinking of the tabulations by which Marx holds capital to account. In the insistence on detail also: Marx absorbing his from factory inspectors’ reports, Thoreau from naturalists’ surveys of the altering and denuding of the landscape. Like *Capital*, *Walden* means definitively to get the measure of its moment, to appreciate the forces by which the mid-nineteenth century is being shaped. The difference is that where Marx was engaged in its critique, and so necessarily became enmeshed in the operations of the money economy, Thoreau, who did not ‘propose to write an ode to dejection’, set out to establish an alternative, to remove himself from circulation. Marx didn’t think this possible, witness his criticism of the utopian and model societies of which Brook Farm was an intellectual relation, but he did (with Engels) recognize the impulse, witness the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, published in 1848, the year after Thoreau left Walden:

> The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his ‘natural superiors,’ and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment’. It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation.10

The phraseology is the same – ‘Enthusiasm is never a very accurate calculator’ – though as they have no investment in it, Marx and Engels’ sense of enthusiasm is a good deal less considered than Thoreau’s. Marx and Engels said another thing: ‘The need of a constantly expanding market for its
products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere. Thoreau’s response to such globalization was to take a step away.

Except that in Walden, as in all his mature writing, Thoreau doesn’t step out of circulation but into it. (The analogy is with O’Hara apparently stepping ‘away from them’, but actually, always, stepping into the midst of things.) Thus the problem, to be clear, as Thoreau perceives it, is not circulation, not that things circulate, but that in a money economy, as things circulate, so they convert to one thing, their dollar equivalent. Things don’t circulate; money circulates. Things in themselves are lost in the translation. All that is solid melts into air. To which structural problem Thoreau has two responses. The first is to confound the singularity of the measure. There is no gold standard in Walden. Things – the things of nature in particular – do not find their equivalent in a single other thing. This is why Thoreau is always measuring; because there is no single measure, because the project of finding a single measure can result only in a distortion and diminution of that for which a measure is being sought. I am talking in part here, obviously, about academic bureaucracy, about the insane project of trying to measure thought and books, of trying to reduce the possibilities of the humanities to a notation of stars. Which is one of the reasons it is good to hear from Thoreau, who had, as Emerson noted, though again dismissively, a highly developed talent for mensuration.

He could pace sixteen rods more accurately than any other man could measure them with a rod and chain. He could find his path in the woods at night, he said, better by his feet than by his eyes. He could estimate the measure of a tree very well by his eyes; could estimate the weight of a calf or a pig, like a dealer. From a box containing a bushel or more of loose pencils, he could take up with his hands fast enough just a dozen pencils at every grasp. (Ex, 15)

There is a comedy in all this, as if Thoreau were an eccentric uncle performing his party tricks, and among other things Walden is a comedy of measurement, Thoreau parodying the accountancy that wants to price everything up. But by the same token, Thoreau’s mensuration is deeply in earnest, because above all what Thoreau wants in Walden is to take the measure of things. There is a world of difference between these two operations, between the act of measuring and the process of taking the measure of, the latter project calling not for a single currency, but a constantly varying unit of measure, where the variation depends on familiarity with the thing in question, and where the ambition is always the same, somehow to measure things on their own terms, to measure things as they are and in themselves. Take, for instance, the pond.

Walden is measured throughout Walden, but nowhere more thoughtfully than in the chapter entitled ‘The Ponds’, where the neighbouring ponds White
Pond and Flints’ Pond, are used to bring Walden into view. Combining his own research and historical findings, Thoreau judges Walden according to its differing height, or depth, and its varying temperatures, with both of these measures being viewed chronically and seasonally. But while, clearly, it can be measured in these terms, it is itself a measure, an infinitely subtle recording instrument: ‘not a pickerel or shiner picks an insect from this smooth surface but it manifestly disturbs the equilibrium of the whole lake’ (W 169). In fact, ‘Not a fish can leap or an insect fall on the pond but it is thus reported in circling dimples, in lines of beauty, as it were the constant welling up of its fountain’ (W 170). And then also, especially on the kind of September day he is commenting on here, the pond is a kind of mirror — ‘a perfect forest mirror, set round with stones as precious to my eye as if fewer or rarer’ — and as such, as a mirror, in revealing other things so it reveals itself (W 170). The trajectory of ‘The Ponds’ is typical: from the externally imposed unit of measure (feet, and degrees Fahrenheit) to a fathoming determined by the pond’s defining properties; from a measure conducted in alien terms to a measure in terms of the thing itself. Not, of course, that Thoreau has the thing’s own terms available to him. Unlike Marx’s commodity, the things in Walden are never invited actually to speak. Except that in Walden, and it is central to his experiment, Thoreau goes beyond both Marx and (as we shall see) Kant – the Enlightenment tradition’s major commentators on the disappearance of things – in formulating a language that might act as the kind of measure that, for instance, money is not: responsive, equal, open to things.

One way Thoreau succeeds in this objective is to accentuate the analogical character of language. What this means is not that Thoreau is, as a writer, forever making analogies – though he is and the practice is important to Walden. What it means, rather, is what Stevens is driving at in his essay ‘The Effects of Analogy’, where language is understood not simply as a medium in which analogies are made, but as itself an analogy, careful sequences of words (in their varying weights and measures) achieving an analogy for, or a correspondence with, the world. Thus, perhaps.

The shore is irregular enough not to be monotonous. I have in my mind’s eye the western indented with deep bays, the bolder northern, and the beautifully scalloped southern shore, where successive capes overlap each other and suggest unexplored coves between. (W, 168)

Here the sentence – and this time the critical phraseology points towards the Pound of ‘Vorticism’ — is itself the measure, with the not-monotonous irregularity of the shoreline caught not so much in the relayed descriptive sense — in the references the words make to things – as in the varying and continuous play of sounds: in ‘western indented’ and ‘beautifully scalloped’,

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an effect which requires the words to be spoken, or at least heard out loud, for the writing to be sounded. Also, though, beyond analogy, is the thought that underpins all of Thoreau’s writings, that if you dig deep enough what you find at the roots of words are things. In pecunia, for instance, cattle.

Thoreau’s second response to the uniformity effected in the circulation of things by money is to detail endlessly, or as if endlessly, the other ways the world has of effecting circulation. Always there is a process of transmission to be observed, one thing passing through another thing to become a different version of itself, or just passing through, unaffected by the transition. Thoreau’s beans, for instance, his cultivation of which is in all commercial respects a comical failure,

have results which are not harvested by me. Do they not grow for woodchucks partly? The ear of wheat, (in Latin spica, obsoletely speca, from spe, hope,) should not be the only hope of the husbandman; its kernal or grain (granum, from gerendo, bearing,) is not all that it bears. How, then, can our harvest fail! Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds? [W, 150]

Distribution, the way things are kept or put into circulation, Thoreau wants us to understand, doesn’t work like you think or are encouraged to think, one thing becoming another in many more ways than one. Look at my beans, he says, which didn’t do so well as a cash crop, but did serve to keep the woodchucks going. Witness also ‘The Succession of Forest Trees’, the whole of which significant early essay – significant as a staging post in Thoreau’s development, but also, as it has turned out, as a work of still usable scientific observation – is a detailing of the mechanisms and modes of circulation whereby the perpetuation of trees is ensured. These can be delicate, as with pines, in which case, ‘a beautiful thin sack is woven around the seed, with a handle to it such as the wind can take hold of’ [Ex, 138]. Or they can be gloriously indelicate: ‘Eating cherries is a bird-like employment, and unless we disperse the seeds occasionally, as they do, I shall think that the birds have the best right to them’ [Ex, 140]. We know what he’s talking about here – he’s talking about excretion.

There are many such descriptions of countermodes of circulation – Thoreau’s writing precisely teems with them – accounts of how fish, or apples, or trees or beans go round, or keep themselves going, or are kept going round. Just as often, though, there are metaphorical or allegorical variations on these, where the operations by which nature circulates – operations through which things either remain themselves or, better still, fulfil their potential – are allowed to suggest, or are related to, the circulation of human society and culture, or even thought itself. For instance, from the concluding paragraph of ‘The Pond in Winter’: 
Thus it appears that the sweltering inhabitants of Charleston and New Orleans, of Madras and Bombay and Calcutta, drink at my well. In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal 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 Vedas, or dwells at the root of the 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. (W, 266)

The passage goes to the essence of Thoreau's enthusiasm, and of his sense, presented most fully in Walden, of enthusiasm as a mode of circulation counter to money. It follows a lengthy account of how, in the winter of 1846-7, a local farmer had men break up the ice on the pond for subsequent sale. By this transaction the ice will become dollars, given over to private use and so taken out of circulation. Thoreau's response, prompted by his environment, is to posit a different form of transaction. Thus, as the ice is removed, so the water of the pond again begins to evaporate, hence the thought that the inhabitants of Charleston and Calcutta might drink at his well; evaporation, one thing become another but preserving itself in the process, becoming in turn a model for the readerly thought. Except that, as so often with Thoreau, what he happens to be reading is scripture, and so the passage of thought or words from one speaker to another, from book to book, is associated with the divine. Enthusiasm, the breathing in of the God, is thus cast, via citation, as a mode of circulation.

We know how this works. Enthusiasm, even, or especially, in its most colloquial sense, is a means of circulating: if somebody enthuses about a book — Walden, for instance — they heighten the possibility of its being passed on. 'My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy', as O'Hara has it at the end of 'A Step Away from Them', a statement of enthusiasm which, when it was published in Lunch Poems, caused an unlikely rush on the works of the semi-Surrealist French poet. By this kind of gesture are words and works kept in circulation. More than this, money-losing ventures of all kinds – poetry for instance – are fuelled and sustained by enthusiasm. In the most colloquial sense, then, where money is either not available or not desired, what stands in its stead is enthusiasm. Thoreau's contribution is to sound the deeper implications of this conventional procedure, presenting a sense of enthusiasm as circulation which takes us back to scripture, or to his reading of it, or to his
presenting of it. To spell this out: we have already heard Thoreau define enthusiasm as an oracular gesture. In an enthusiastic state the individual self does not utter speech, but is spoken through. This is the substance of accounts of inspiration – the muse – and also of some forms of religious testimony, in Quakerism for instance. Enthusiasm, in other words, is a voicing of, at very least, words, and, ideally, entities and agencies, not oneself. And Thoreau is always doing this. Always he is arriving – his chapter endings provide notable instances – at the serenity whereby he might speak enthusiastically, as an enthusiast, and invariably when he does he quotes. Thus much more so than Emerson’s essays, *Walden* is made up explicitly of other people’s words: of the anonymous words of scripture, of Ovid’s, of Virgil’s, of Shakespeare’s, of Bunyan’s, of Addison’s, of Confucius’, of Menu’s, of Lovelace’s, of Chapman’s, of Cato’s, of Milton’s, of Cowper’s, of Thomas Gray’s. Drop into the text at any moment and you will find the putative diaristic or autobiographical self clearing out, so that others’ words might come through. Not that the autobiographical self is ever entirely dismissed – Thoreau’s enthusiastic gesture is predicated on there being a discernible voice there in the first place. The work’s enthusiastic self depends on the quotidian self; *Walden* is not *The Cantos*.

This shift, from the circulating quotidian self to the circulation of enthusiasm – from the self that does this and does that, to the self that breathes out the God – is most carefully presented in ‘The Village’. What Thoreau purports to do in that chapter is to show himself re-entering circulation: ‘Every day or two I strolled to the village to hear some of the gossip which is incessantly going on there, circulating either from mouth to mouth, or from newspaper to newspaper’ [W 151]. Thoreau names circulation here, but only immediately to set about redefining it. Thus, the chatter of the citizens is made equivalent to the noise of leaves and frogs, while the chatter itself is shown not to be the self-motivated exchange of individuated citizens, but the hollowed-out transmission of barely conscious thoughts. Thoreau, in other words, goes back into society, reenters circulation, to find that what is circulating there isn’t worth a bean. The contrast is with the end of the chapter, the moment when he leaves the village, when as convention would have it he steps out of circulation, but when in fact as we should by now expect he instead steps into it. The issue at this point is property, Thoreau explaining how he never locked or bolted the desk which contained his papers, and never fastened his door behind him even if he was to be absent for a few days, and that in all his time at Walden he never had anything stolen, save, as he is delighted to point out, a volume of Homer. This probably apocryphal anecdote relayed, the chapter ends with two quotations, the first, from *The Elegies of Tibullus*, indented, the second, from the *Analects* of Confucius,
absorbed into the body of the text. The point is made: Thoreau’s language is a medium of circulation through which words and thoughts pass unaltered, or perhaps with an aspect of their potential fulfilled. Anticipating Pound – an association prompted by the reference to Confucius – Thoreau’s version of *The Dial* would frequently give its pages over to extracts from major classical writers, ensuring their continued presence in New England in the 1840s. Quotation is circulation. Thoreau was never out of circulation, though nor, if we were reading him carefully, did he ever pretend to be. Right from the beginning he borrowed: the materials for his house came in part from other people. Then, of course, there were the tools without which he could never have got started:

> It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course to thus permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise. The owner of the axe, as he released his hold on it, said that it was the apple of his eye; but I returned it sharper than I received it. (W, 38)

So there you go, he made it new.

**Knowing**

Shifting from circulating to knowing in Thoreau – from the question of how things are distributed and distribute themselves to the question of how one might know them – one runs up against a paradox. Always one is running up against paradoxes in *Walden*, much more so than in his other works, the end of the sentence invariably giving way to a *volte face*, a contradiction, a counterthesis, or a self-annihilating change of tone or persona. Such shifts define the book’s style and are integral to its lesson, the unresolved break forcing decision (or at least the acknowledgement of indecision, or of the necessity and burden of decision implicit in existence) on the reader, while the book itself has to be understood as containing a multiplicity of elements, a manifold, to use a term from Kant, that steadfastly remains as such. We come to expect paradoxes, in other words, in Thoreau: paradox is part of how he writes. Still, though, some paradoxes are more pressing than others. Thus where, on the question of the circulation of thought and expression, and of economy generally, Thoreau has just been heard to announce himself not-self-reliant, a cheerful borrower of other people’s words and tools, on the question of knowledge he refuses to accept the second-hand.

This is particularly evident in ‘The Bean-Field’:

> It was a singular experience that long acquaintance which I cultivated with beans, what with planting, and hoicing, and harvesting, and threshing,
More even than to grow them, Thoreau is determined to know beans, the comical aspect of which, it should be noticed, he is happy to acknowledge by his 'long acquaintance'. Thoreau is deeply in earnest in Walden, but he knows also that, from time to time, he cuts a ludicrous figure; we would be less able to take him seriously were it not that sometimes he knows he looks odd. Still, what’s at issue is knowing, and as he presents it knowledge is a practical affair: planting, hoeing, harvesting, threshing. It is also an affair of the present tense, the immediacy of the present participle being, apparently, a factor in how Thoreau knows. I am hoeing, therefore I am knowing. [In which, to say it again, there is something serious but also something unavoidably funny; ‘I’m ploughing North America,’ Stevens wrote, ‘Blow your horn!’] To know beans is also, as Thoreau points out, to know other things also, for instance the weeds it is necessary to clear to make way for the chosen crop. ‘Consider,’ he says, ‘the intimate and curious acquaintance one makes with various kinds of weeds ...That’s Roman wormwood, – that’s pigwee, – that’s sorrel, – that’s piper-grass.’ And so Thoreau documents his intimate and curious acquaintance with beans, signing off, as when he built his house, with a balance sheet. ‘This,’ he says emphatically, ‘is the result of my experience in raising beans.’

There is a radical independence of mind being asserted here – ‘this’, ‘my’ – one which Thoreau had previously generalized upon at the end of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, when by way of conclusion he offers a justification for his excursion – a justification which he perhaps senses is due, the week in question having been, by any standards, a long one: ‘for knowledge is to be acquired only by a corresponding experience. How can we know what we are told merely? Each man can interpret another’s experience only by his own’ (Week, 296). This would seem like the worst aspect of mid-century self-reliance, with Thoreau casting himself as a kind of anti-intellectual, an American know-nothing. Except that, as we have seen already, Thoreau is not afraid to show dependence, Walden precisely, and enthusiastically, opening itself up to its sources. The issue is not, then, as it can seem with Thoreau, whether or not one should make do with other people’s knowledge. The question, rather, is what constitutes knowing. Or as he put it much more emphatically, towards the beginning of A Week on the Concord, recovering his environment as he goes:

The white man comes, pale as the dawn, with a load of thought, with a slumbering intelligence as a fire raked up, knowing well what it knows, not guessing but calculating ... He comes with a list of ancient Saxon, Norman and Celtic names, and strews them up and down this river, – Framingham, Sudbury, Bedford, Carlisle. (Week, 44)
What's at issue, then, is not whether Thoreau is prepared to take another person’s word for it. What's at issue, rather, as he wants to present it here, is a whole cultural and racial mentality, a whole disposition towards the world, a disposition caught in the phrase ‘a load of thought’. It is a good phrase, communicating well the burden under which people go into the world, or fail to go into it; a phrase that implies, in Kantian terms, a critique of pure reason.

The importance of Kantian thought to American writing, its principles and the problems it brought forth, cannot be overstated. Which is neither to say that all significant American poets have been Kantians, nor even that Kant has been on most American poets’ reading lists – though famously, of course, he was on Stevens’. Kant is central because he was foundational for the Transcendentalists, and because since the 1850s American writers, poets especially, have been working on the house that Emerson and Thoreau built, a structure designed to house or at least to accommodate Kant, hence Emerson’s explanation of the otherwise unhelpfully numinous term by which he and his contemporaries made themselves known:

It is well known to most of my audience that the idealism of the present day acquired the name of transcendental from the use of the term by Immanuel Kant of Konigsburg, who replied to the skeptical philosophy of Locke which insisted that there was nothing in the intellect which was not previously in the experience of the senses, by showing that there was a very important class of ideas, or imperative forms, which did not come by experience, but through which experience was acquired: that these were intuitions of the mind itself; and he denominated them Transcendental forms.12

Emerson presents quite clearly, and quite contentedly, here, the a priori nature of Kant’s contribution to philosophy which was his seeming appeal to the Transcendentalists, and out of which Emerson developed his wrongly untroubled sense, most fully articulated in Nature, of the harmony between the intellect and the world.

Thoreau’s habit on hearing a proposition was, as Emerson said, to controvert it. This is not to imply that as Kant circulated among his contemporaries Thoreau’s response was straightforwardly negative. The suspicion of ‘a load of thought’ is not, then, in any simple-minded way, a ‘no’ to thought, but strikes instead the same relation to a Critique of Pure Reason as Thoreau strikes, in effect, to Marx’s critiques of political economy. Caught in the elaborate apparatus of intellection, as Capital is caught in the elaborate processes of manufacture, Kant’s Critique, unlike Emerson’s version of it, is hardly happy with itself, finding in reason’s operations the conditions of experience but also the severity of their limitations. Again the issue is alienation, the problem Kant passed on to nineteenth-century thought being
how to get beyond understanding to the thing itself. From this point of view, when Thoreau went to live by Walden Pond he stepped away epistemologically as well as economically, out of the problem of pure reason into the world of things.

This, at any rate, is more or less how Stanley Cavell sees it. For Cavell, picking up some of Walden's favoured terms, Thoreau achieves a nextness, nearness or neighborliness to the world that, as a lived relation, amounts to an acquaintance with things in themselves. ‘I was determined to know beans,’ Thoreau says, and Cavell asserts that he did.

Epistemologically, [Walden’s] motive is the recovery of the object, in the form in which Kant left that problem and the German idealists and the Romantic poets picked it up, viz., a recovery of the thing-in-itself; in particular, of the relation between the subject of knowledge and its object.

He pulls this off, Cavell argues [to paraphrase], by stepping away, where the gesture can be understood almost literally, Cavell’s chief point of reference being the moment in the ‘The Pond in Winter’ when Thoreau witnesses a double shadow of himself: ‘Being beside oneself is the dictionary definition of ecstasy. To suggest that one may stand there, stay there in a sane sense, is to suggest that the besideness of which ecstasy speaks is my experience of my existence.’ Cavell’s word is ‘ecstasy’, ‘ecstasy’ being not a million miles, or even a mile, from enthusiasm. Cavell, however, doesn’t refer to enthusiasm in The Senses of Walden, except in the second edition, and then only in the expanded second edition, and then only in the expansion on Emerson, where again the central question is how, taking on board Kant, we can inhabit a world of things:

I take Emerson’s answer to be what he means by ‘abandonment’. The idea of abandonment contains what the preacher in Emerson calls ‘enthusiasm’ or the New Englander in him calls ‘forgetting ourselves’, together with what he calls leaving or relief or quitting or release or shunning or allowing or deliverance, which is freedom ... together further with something he means by trusting or suffering.13

What the preacher in Emerson calls ‘enthusiasm’ is worth dwelling on here, because of its currency in New England in the middle of the nineteenth century, but also as it features in Kant, the significance of Walden to American literature being measurable in part in terms of the confluence that occurs there: Thoreau situating himself, for all his distance, in the mainstreams of Enlightenment and Romantic thought. Thus, if the problem that Kant calls forth is the unknowability of the thing-in-itself, and if that unknowability is a function of mind’s conditioned relation to the world — if reason, like money, alienates things — it’s as well, as Kant does, to take a look at what reason was brought forward to displace. To return, then, to the Critique of Judgement.
The idea of the good to which affection is superadded is enthusiasm. This state of mind appears to be sublime: so much so that there is a common saying that nothing great can be achieved without it. But now every affection is blind either as to the choice of its end, or, supposing this has been furnished by reason, in the way it is effected – for it is that mental movement whereby the exercise of free deliberation upon fundamental principles, with a view to determining oneself accordingly, is rendered impossible.14

The problem with enthusiasm – the value of which Kant wants to be seen not to underestimate – is that it renders ‘determining oneself’ impossible. But Thoreau doesn’t want to determine himself, he is determined instead to know beans; and so he steps away; not, this time, from the prevailing networks of circulation, but from the networks that constitute the transcendental self. It is an enthusiastic gesture, except that where for Kant there is a more or less violent derangement in enthusiasm – ‘every affection’ being rendered blind, the imagination becoming ‘unbridled’ – for Thoreau, for whom Eastern religions were among the tributaries, enthusiasm (the state of being in which something other than the self is predominantly at work) is a moment of serenity. Again, ‘You must be calm before you can utter oracles. What was the excitement of the Delphic priestess compared with the calm wisdom of Socrates? — or whoever it was that was wise. – Enthusiasm is a supernatural serenity.’

The argument emerging here – and which will be developed through the book, emerging, at is fullest, in the discussion of James Schuyler – is for something like an enthusiastic epistemology, or rather, that in the state of enthusiasm as Thoreau describes it here, things can be known; that in enthusiasm there is knowing. It is a claim Thoreau makes quite often, Walden frequently presenting as its object state a condition whereby unburdened of the load of thought, a person is not apart from things but among them. ‘Every man,’ he observes in ‘The Village’,

has to learn the points of the compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations. [W, 154]

As a claim this is interesting, but not, in itself, compelling. It is not sufficient, one might well think, to counter the elaborate workings of the transcendental deduction with a metaphor, or at best, perhaps, a pun. What we need to know is ‘how’. How, we want to know of Thoreau, do we ‘realize where we are’, given that in realizing where we are, in making our environment real, the promise is made that we might become properly acquainted with things? Cavell points to the state of mind Walden repeatedly depicts, to the ‘nearness’
to things that comes of the ‘besideness’, the being beside oneself, the being outside of reason, that is a function of ecstasy or enthusiasm. Cavell’s commentary characterizes this psychology brilliantly, getting as close as one can imagine to the state of mind Thoreau wants to present. What I want to suggest here, however, is that for Thoreau, the answer to the question ‘How do we realize where we are?’, or ‘How might we become properly acquainted with things?’, has to do with how he derives, with how he does things with words.

**Deriving**

Like the Emerson of, in particular, *Nature*, and like Pound after him, Thoreau has a faith in the origins of words, a faith that if you track words back to their origins you find in them a more exact rendering of things. Words themselves, in their tangle of roots and meanings, seem to promise this. Etymology derives from *etymon*, being ‘the earliest recorded form of a word’, which comes from the Greek *etumon* meaning ‘basic meaning’, which comes in turn from *etumos* meaning ‘true or actual’. This is to derive the word: to derive from being ‘to draw on (or in) the source or origin of a thing, to obtain by reasoning, in the sense of deduction or inference’, and, as the verb applies to words, ‘to trace the source or development’, to derive coming from the Latin *derivare*, meaning ‘to draw off’, which derives in turn from *rivus*, meaning ‘a stream’.

Taken this way, what words promise is knowledge. It is this promise that the classicist in Thoreau finds attractive, his knowledge of the language apparently conducting him back to a knowledge of things. The supposition is that in the first act of naming there was an intimacy between words and things. It is a limited claim in that it is only ever made for specific examples, and also in that the claim is about words and not about language as a whole. It had a special appeal, though, to the Concord writers who thought themselves to be the beginning of American literature, the new first namers. Later it became an element in Heidegger’s response to Kant.

Often, then, in Thoreau, we are taken back through etymologies to hear the meanings that will speak through words if they are allowed to. There is an analogy here with the act of quotation, the poet’s task – Thoreau considers himself a poet when he is writing like this — being to so handle the language as to enable it to speak all that it knows, which is more than it knows in any contemporary usage, contemporary usage serving to restrict words. Deriving, then, is a further act of clearing, a tracking back which is a making way in order that words can perform their revelatory function. Old words speak through new words the way, in quotation, one voice speaks through another, the writer’s task being to guide words back to their better originals. Sometimes this requires only a minimal realignment, as for instance at the
end of the first day, the Saturday, of *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, when Thoreau and his brother are kept awake by the novelty of their situation, by the foxes and the owl and the house dogs and eventually the cock:

All these sounds, the crowing of cocks, the baying of dogs, and the hum of insects at noon, are the evidence of nature's health or sound state. Such is the never-failing beauty and the accuracy of language, the most perfect art in the world; the chisel of a thousand years re-touches it.

(Week, 35)

There is knowledge here, the sounds of the animals serving as 'evidence' of nature's health. Nature sounds and she is heard to be sound, she sounds and she is sounded, in her sounds she is revealed. These are seductive moves – revelation is a function of prophecy, prophecy, as was pointed out earlier, derives from the Greek for speech. What I want to draw attention to, though, is not just the moves (and their validity or otherwise) but also the mood in which they are made. Quite often such slight readjustments are made at the end of a chapter or a section, when what has been arrived at is a state of contemplation. It is at these moments and in this mood, often, that words are heard to speak more fully and, as it were, knowingly. 'Enthusiasm,' it will be recalled, 'is a supernatural serenity.' In the chapter in *Walden* devoted to 'Sounds', what eventually comes through the silence, after the noise of the train has died away, is not a repositioned word, but the sounds themselves of the neighbouring animals: 'bor-r-r-r-n', 'tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk!'. The implication is that given a sufficiently serene state, a sufficiently careful listening, things will sound themselves, onomatopoeia pointing to the intimacy between words and things that Thoreau hopes for in language.

*Walden* is always leaning on words in this way – grain, com-munity – and invariably Thoreau will give the Latin names for animals and plants. Sentences frequently hinge on the different inflections afforded by current and earlier meanings. All the time in Thoreau's writing the impression is of something else coming through. The most spectacular example of this is to be found in 'Spring', when, as Thoreau observes the thawing of the sand, he discerns there the emergence of forms which resemble foliage, and which in their springing into being put him in mind of the primordial moment when the 'Artist who made the world' was first 'strewing his fresh designs about'. This is the end of *Walden*, and Thoreau’s claim is that he is as close to things as he ever has been or, perhaps, ever will be: his proximity consisting in part in the fineness and accuracy of his observation. But it consists also in derivation, Thoreau tracking the words he is compelled to use right back through their etymologies to the constitutive phonemes or sounds. 'I feel,' he
says, ‘as if I were nearer to the vitals of the globe’, and then proceeds to situate the reader there also, the sands anticipating the leaf in which form the earth ‘expresses itself outwardly’, but with which also ‘it labors inwardly’.

The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. Internally, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick lobe, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the leaves of fat, (λειβω, labor, lapsus, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; λοβος, globus, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words,) externally a dry thin leaf, even as the f and v are a pressed and dried b. The radicals of lobe are lb, the soft mass of the b (single lobed, or B, double lobed,) with the liquid l behind it pressing it forward. In globe, gib, the guttural g adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves. Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly. The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit. (W, 273)

There are two things to say in response to this extraordinary passage of writing, presented here, at the end of Walden, not as a typical instance of Thoreau’s practice but as an ultimate version of it. The first thing is that standing here, feeling nearer to the vitals of the globe, to the lumpish grub and the fluttering butterfly – nearer, note, and not, as Emerson blithely asserted, at one with; this is not antinomianism, but the meditative enthusiasm of Fox and Penn – Thoreau finds himself where Kant never stood: so close to things – expressed outwardly, labouring inwardly – that they are known as and in themselves. In one way, of course, one can always counter that this is illusory; in another way, equally, there is a generous sense in which Thoreau really could be thought here to find and take the measure of things. Either way, what we need to notice is that as he responds to the problem of the transcendental deduction, he does not simply revert to empiricism. To do so, by a Kantian way of thinking, would be to reduce experience to the manifold, a move Thoreau does sometimes make – ‘bor-r-r-r-n’, ‘tr-r-r-oonk’ — but which here he goes beyond. Thus here he gets beyond Kant without diminishing Kant’s sense of experience, doing so by retaining in his picture of knowledge an equivalent to Kant’s concepts and categories. The world presents itself as fully as it does here partly because there are, as Thoreau has observed, structural similarities to the elements of the world, but partly, also, because the basic structural principles have their counterpart in language. Words, carefully used, listened to carefully, so Thoreau would here assert, sound things and realize the world.

The second thing to say in response to this passage has to do with the state in which its realization can be thought to occur. The passage hovers between gibberish and sense. It sounds nonsensical. As the word is sounded out, as globe becomes leaf and as the transition is followed up through and out
of the throat, the full extent of the words is sounded, their constituent elements loosened and unleashed. But the passage makes sense also, in that what it aims to do is to make sense of the world: the words, their etymologies, their derivations and ultimately their constitutive phonemes are understood here to sound the objects they refer to in the way that the onomatopoeically rendered birdsong sounds birds. This, I think, this passage in particular, is an example of Thoreau’s enthusiastic use of words, where enthusiasm works both in Kant’s sense of the unbridled self, and in William Penn’s sense of the ‘nearer’ testament, and in Thoreau’s own sense of supernatural serenity. Thus, that words are ungoverned here is plain, and also that as they are unbridled so they present a kind of frenzy: albeit a frenzy in which, if we find Thoreau persuasive, they speak more than in their governed, buttoned-down sense they are capable of. More than this, as the words are unbridled so something is conceived as speaking – or even passing – through them, the thing in question being the world, or the globe. And so there’s one sense of verbal enthusiasm, the sense that seventeenth-century commentators were so worried about, and that twentieth-century writers, in their even more acute confrontation with the implications of bureaucracy and rationality – one might think, here, of William Burroughs – would find so appealing. But Thoreau’s sense is here also, both because he could arrive at this level of insight only through the prolonged period of serenity that he enjoyed while living at Walden, but also because the passage itself is among the most carefully worked and heavily revised passages in the book, its knowledge made available only by the Delphic calm of writing.

Ungoverned and calm? Ungoverned because calm? Whatever — in this startling performance Thoreau echoes a claim he made at the start of his book. He is crowing, or at least his words are: sounding and resounding, bragging of that which is not them. *Walden* is an enthusiastic book.

**Notes**


5 Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, New York, Library of America, 1985, p. 103; hereafter referred to in the text as *Week*


11 Ibid.

