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Materialism and Memory: Representation of Canoes in Thoreau's *Journal*
(to be edited, reformatted, and presented at the annual Thoreau Society Gala)

[NOTE: the presentation will begin with a powerpoint/slideshow cycling through various MS journal pages—some text heavy, some image heavy. ~5 images total, ending on the canoe reflection drawing]

Thoreau's *Journal* fluctuates wildly between various characteristic continuums: from basic to detailed, terse to lengthy, descriptive to speculating, accurate to imaginative. One of its biggest achievements also poses a problem to readers: there is so much "stuff." As a result, finding a way into the *Journal* requires a good deal of selective attention. A reader might focus on entries within a certain date range or subject matter, discussions that later appear in published works, etc. Historically, scholarship regarding the *Journal* has done precisely this, but only with regards to what was *written* in them. We realize, as pick through such colossal data, as it were, that Thoreau *wrote* everything. By this, I mean not to say that his goal was to record the events of his life, big and small, in the only way contemporary technology would allow. Rather, I mean to say that journaling was a method (or perhaps experiment) of perceiving the world according to him. What our project proposes and hopes to inspire, is a simultaneous consideration of the drawings that reference, compliment, and sometimes interrupt the words Thoreau wrote.

In her essay *Thoreau's Technology of Inscription*, Laura Dassow Walls puts it thusly: "Thoreau had no wish to serve science. Rather, he wished to make science serve his own design...to learn how, instead, to be a weaver who caught up the threads of a complex network and braid[ed] them into a discourse."¹ Detailed accounts, an affair of the scientist or naturalist, are unsatisfactory for Thoreau. They merely sense, but do not achieve, the "transcendental 'higher law'"² that he sought. No matter how much detail Thoreau puts into his "writing" an object, materiality—of leaves, of birds, of artifacts—can never avoid the reducing of the world to a collection of symbols. This is, in large part, a basic constraint of media. Words cannot replace objects. Lucky for us, Thoreau also *drew* many of the items he described. These facsimiles should, in their being visual, provide a better approximation than the writing, right? Not exactly. Aside from the sketchiness of Thoreau's sketches, which are anything but exact, their interpretation raises questions about object representation more broadly: what is the most basic form of an object? What are its parts and its totality? And can words or drawings sufficiently represent their simplicity or complexity? Other questions are then necessarily raised regarding the beginnings and ends of objects, the boundaries that distinguish them; and we haven't even discussed *what* he writes and sketches! So, let's get there. He *does* write and *does* draw after all, so clearly there is something to the existence and interplay of these two mode of representation...

Aside from those who praise Thoreau's environmental ideals and warnings, citing their still-poignant bearing on modern environmentalism, there is a strain of Thoreauvian

¹ Walls 124-125

² *ibid* 124

criticism that is not so kind. Stemming from the same objectival anxieties just mentioned, the transcendental movement (along with his 19th century Romantic predecessors and contemporaries) has been faulted for aestheticizing a “nature ‘over there’”³—an object of its own regard. The issue here is two fold. On one hand, ecocriticism has not been able to dispel the “nature ‘over there’” idea.⁴ On the other, any “(re)turn to Nature” ideology, after the ecocritical work of Lawrence Buell, is discredited as hopeless nostalgia. Thoreau, in his focus on natural objects and living out of doors, is an unsurprising scapegoat for this kind of criticism. But, in searching for fruitful research materials while compiling a database for “Thoreau’s Anecdotal Drawings,” I stumbled upon a series of images that defies such criticism. On September 22, 1853, Thoreau visits a Penobscot Indian village where he pays attention, not on landscapes or waterways, but on a self-sufficient community and the building of a canoe.

[NOTE: shift to first canoe detail image (of completed canoe, from front, on its stand), the MS versions next to drawing’s situation in the Princeton ed.]

[NOTE: Begin cycling through drawings of canoe detail, again juxtaposing MS and ed. Perhaps shift through a few images of actual canoes (also, look for images, drawings, schematics of Thoreau’s own canoe!)]

Also, I’ve decided to leave the quotes of *Journal* in for the purposes of this being a paper as well as a presentation. For the presentation, they will be removed from the paper and shown on screen to provide better visual stimulation AND save time]

By arranging this canoe-building “scene” in the context of his trip to a foreign village, he accomplishes two things. He, much like a scientist or naturalist in his striving for precision, takes on the role of an outsider observing. This is unlike his analysis of the “traditional” lifestyle of towns like Concord, which are largely critical. The intense observation is nothing new for his *Journal* though. The different demographic has a more unique effect: it steals Thoreau’s attention from the natural features that he would perhaps otherwise attempt to write. It forces him to focus on individuals, on the community, and on their particular brand of economy (economy being a serious interest of his despite the image of Thoreau-as-hermit). That his depiction is one of admiration proves that community and economy are not categorically undesirable. An understanding of the need for such structures underscores this entire entry; and in other entries and works, he reveres local Native American tribes for their culture’s benevolent environmental attitude.⁵ There is a benefit to man-made objects, such as a canoe (or a community); but Thoreau would propose limits to the artificiality of combining objects to create composites.

³ Morton 160

⁴ A more wholesome theory of “deep ecology”—an alternative perspective to the binary that places man in a network of interdependent organisms—has been proposed and has done well to break down the man/nature binary.

⁵ I.e. Thoreau’s *Indian Notebooks*; The canoe-building entry is particularly complimentary of the Penobscot lifestyle. To be frank, his praise of these tribes is somewhat of an appropriation of Native American lifestyle with limited understanding of their politics.

He achieves the moralizing balance of human necessity and respect for the environment by inquiring deeply into the canoe-building, from the selection of materials to the polishing of the finished product (I'm hesitant to call it an "object" because I'm uncertain of Thoreau's definition of objects). "I looked very narrowly at the process," Thoreau writes, cuing us in on the focal field he self-imposes for the task of fully perceiving the canoe-object—he is looking *only* at the canoe and those involved with its construction versus, say, a fuller depiction of the scene.⁶ His visual attention is selective, but within that smaller sensual frame, he finds an abundance of minute details that, in their abundance, disrupt the idea of "narrowness" altogether. There is so much to take account of—the different kinds of wood needed, the taking care to harvest bark at the proper moment in the cycle of seasonality, the arduous rendering of those raw goods into usable shapes, etc. We might imagine the nonconformist persona of Thoreau comparing this to the increasingly industrial manufacturing processes of his communities consumer economy, but no such judgment is offered here. Rather, he figures the "work"—a word almost inextricably connected to economized laboring—simultaneously as a work of art. He justifies his studying of the process by saying that it "deserves to be minutely described as much at least as most of the white man's arts accounts of which now fill the journals." An elevation of labor to craftsmanship requires intense attention to detail, and that can be seen in Old John Pennyweight's constructing of a canoe.

It might be no small coincidence that, after bringing art into the discussion, that Thoreau actually starts drawing images of the canoe here. As if to further call into question the status of art—because conflagrating labor and art degrades Art's status a bit—Thoreau tries his own hand with a few rough sketches that are aesthetically pleasing by almost no one's standards. He draws the canoe from side and from back, and includes details of its various parts: a cleat along the taffrail, stitching over the seams created by adhering pieces of bark, an "oval piece of cedar for stiffness." Rarely is Thoreau so meticulous about artificial objects. The majority of his journal reads more like that of a naturalist with numerous logs of flora and fauna. For all of his talk of natural materials—the "spruce," "cedar," birch," "rock maple"—so typical of his naturalistic endeavors, this passage finds him much more interested in what man *creates* with them—a measured boat frame with seats, railings, and sheathing for waterproofing, all held together by rosin (which requires processing before use, opposed to "pitch formerly" used). The canoe-as-object is now far more complicated than was initially seen, as a finished vessel. It is comprised of number of smaller objects, the pieces of the canoe, which are themselves reducible (without a microscope) at least to the level of their natural constituents—the various species of trees.

Part of me wishes that Thoreau would speak admirable of the vessel and each of its parts. It would be a great testament to its artistry. It would provide a model for an ideal product. On a basic level, the passage still accomplishes this by portraying the beautiful process of making a canoe from the harvesting of materials to the layering of rosin. But Thoreau is abrupt in moving beyond the "very narrow" experience. In his final "thoughts" on the subject, he writes, "While the batteau was coming over to take us from the Island—I looked round on the shore—saw many fragments of arrowhead stone & picked up one broken chisel." The canoe cannot hold his attention. The aforementioned critics of the aestheticizing of nature might instead rejoice here! Thoreau does not engage in the objectival fetishizing of any object—the canoe, its manufactured and natural parts, or the fleeting images of arrowheads and chisels (he forgets those, too, by the next paragraph). Instead, he

⁶ The final section of this paper provides an example of this kind of "observation."

seemingly resolves to be a curious wanderer, surveying the totality of objects he encounters, realizing that, to a detailed observer, objects can be seen as infinitely extendable as they are reducible.

[NOTE: end on a slide showing ALL canoe detail images from MS]

[NOTE: shift to drawing of canoe reflection—first ed., then MS. When talking about the issue of water, switch to a stock (or original) image of canoe on water w/ reflection. Maybe include a map of river when discussing outing w/ M. Russell. Then, return to MS drawing of reflection at end]

Its remarkable how UNdetailed these details are though. The drawings are merely schematics. At times, Thoreau is terrifically attentive, and he is accordingly descriptive in the corresponding text. The canoe-building episode is a prime example. At other moments though, he opts not to follow up on rather remarkable observations, or seems to take survey of so many objects that he can only privilege a few by discussing them. A general sense of overstimulation characterizes these narrations, leading to an almost necessary reduction (by focusing on one image). Such is the case regarding his entry on 16 August 1854. After taking a survey of what surrounds him: hornwort, button bush, some herons, a pony, a partridge, maples, swamp oaks...you get the idea....he pauses briefly to draw a stunning, but still simple, image: that of two people rowing a canoe, reflected perfectly along an invisible horizontal axis. The referential text is basic: “At the steam mill sand bank—was the distinct shadow of our shadows—1st on the water then the double one on the bank bottom to bottom one being upside down—3 in all—one on water, 2 on land or bushes.” He describes, with decidedly cryptic grammar, a simple enumeration of shadows that extend beyond the material physicality of the boat.

There are a couple of bizarre features of this particular drawing—perhaps the most glaring is that it’s hardly observational at all! If we are to view Thoreau as a sort of naturalist, at least in his objectively fixated perspective and intention to describe (though not with accuracy)⁷, this image disrupts that perspective. It refers to his own experience paddling one evening with Mary Russell in a third person point of view. The written entry, a first person experience of seeing the canoes shadow reflected in three different configurations, is closer to the naturalist ideal. The drawing is interestingly limited in its being omniscient. While poststructuralist claims to the limits of linguistic and visual representation of objects, we might still think of visual arts as the best approximations of the images of life—especially if we’re looking at a work with naturalist intentions. Thoreau’s drawings are thus relevant for their interest in detail and their being of a visually based medium. Drawings, as it the case with here, don’t achieve a more complete “image” here, where the written word is able to present *more* data than the visual. This is an empowering moment for the literary figure who can be selective and/or multivalent in terms of what images they present.

⁷ The goal of a naturalist drawing being to render an idealized representation of a given organism, not an exact replication (the earlier discussion of illustration as an approximation of real objects applies here). Here, this logic is applied to a larger scene, comprised of multiple objects.

The drawing, however, possesses another power for Thoreau—one that a naturalist writer could not utilize: the power of abstraction. It allows him to present the memory via a visual description. But, the sketch—the “memory” in this case—does not faithfully portray the boat, its occupants, their reflection, or the complexity of the scene. It has been distorted to fit his own worldview in some way, resulting in a stylized representation of a factual experience. Like the canoe details of the previous entry, this drawing exist in Thoreau’s journals as a symbolic approximation based on a material reality that he (as a “naturalist” of life’s objects and events) is so interested in.

I am particularly interested in the liberties Thoreau takes to create this image. I look at it as a good summation or estimation of the ideals informing Thoreau’s entire literary project. Unlike a naturalist, the sketch and corresponding text show Thoreau taking a liking to the interplay between “distinct” objects, both natural and artificial. There’s the canoe, the paddlers, and the suggestion water. The drawing interestingly doesn’t actually include that latter (though Thoreau has exhausted the topic of water many times over elsewhere). I see two possible explanations for this. Either Thoreau’s “narrowness” is coming back into play, choosing here to focus on the representations of humans instead of the environment. But, then, why the reflection? The answer to this justifies the other reason for omitting the water: that there can be no complete separation of man and nature for Thoreau. Even in the absence of the “natural” thing, man is found *in* nature. The reflection, then, in text and image, both destabilizes the binary and reproduces it, allowing each side to interact and establishing a likeness between with the natural world and human realm, gesturing at an organic relationship.

Then there’s the matter of the reflection itself. This is a far cry from the object fixation that limits the scope of the canoe-building passage. It makes explicit the relationship between objects and makes us wondering which is reflecting which. Either the natural world is a projection of the human world, or the human world is an imitation of natural designs. Funny...this sounds like something has said elsewhere in text.⁸ But it’s not just words that do this. His journal drawings are equally predisposed to this perspective, and there are a lot of them (~2,000!). Thoreau only pays fleeting attention to this memory on August 16, perhaps because there is so much else to observe. He has left us these journals as an artifact of those memories, allowing us the opportunity to ruminate on them longer and make these critical arguments. There’s much left to uncover in them by comparing and abstracting the textual *and* graphic objects in the *Journals*. By doing so, we might continue the Thoreauvian journey of extracting new theories of universal truths from everyday observation. His drawings share a common interest in replicating objects and memories in detail; but they are ironically “narrow” in their perspective. Each is subject to manipulation given Thoreau’s unique understanding of natural design, hence their sketchiness, their duplicity, and the issues they raise regarding representation. They both compliment the text as the text adds detail to them, but no combination of the two can ever transcend what inspires Thoreau to keep such an impressive *Journal*: a belief in the necessity of one’s attention to detail and in meaningful encounters with natural objects.

⁸ I.e. the oak leaf engraving and discussion of the leaf’s construction as a reflection of universal design in the late work, “Autumnal Tints.”

Works Cited

- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007.
- Thoreau, Henry David, John C. Broderick, Robert Sattelmeyer, Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, and Nancy Craig. Simmons. *Journal*. Vol. 7-8. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981.
- Walls, Laura Dassow. "Romancing the Real: Thoreau's Technology of Inscription," *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, Ed. William Cain (New York: Oxford UP, 2000): 123–51.