

5-2019

Rereading the *Journal*: Maintaining the Potential for Refinement

Julie Anne Edewaard

Clemson University, jules801@gmail.com

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REREADING THE *JOURNAL*: MAINTAINING THE POTENTIAL FOR
REFINEMENT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Julie A. Edewaard
May 2019

Accepted by:
Dominic Mastroianni, Committee Chair
Andrew Lemons
Matthew Hooley

ABSTRACT

While much of the *Journal* exemplifies Henry David Thoreau's intent to improve the self, this thesis suggests that the *Journal* was used as a device for maintaining the *potential* to improve, or refine, rather than acting as a conduit for achieving the fully improved self. In his progress toward becoming his ideal self, Thoreau performs an act of defamiliarization in his writing by omitting himself from his entries and by writing about himself indirectly by writing about an entity that is separate from him, nature. This paper also explores the importance of the concept of change for Thoreau as it appears to be an integral factor in the identity of an individual and as Thoreau glorifies this abstract concept in his extensive calendrical work. In mapping the changes in nature, Thoreau perhaps aims to map the reciprocal changes in himself, whereby he may gain a more complete understanding of himself; however, gaining a complete knowledge of the self is also not Thoreau's intent as doing so would imply that there is nothing new to discover. The *Journal*, therefore, is a device for creating the *potential* to learn something new rather than a device for understanding the self completely, and this maintenance of potential for endless discovery also elicits endless potential for refinement. This thesis, therefore, argues that Thoreau does not wish to achieve the fully refined self because doing so would imply that he could no longer improve and that there would be no more possibility, nor need, for the "change" which he glorifies. As the format of the *Journal* is also in a constant state of potential for refinement, Thoreau is able to refine the very process he uses to refine himself; however, the true value of this is its potential for this

meta-refinement as Thoreau's *Journal* maintains the endless potential for both the discovery and refinement of the self.

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REREADING THE *JOURNAL*: MAINTAINING THE POTENTIAL FOR REFINEMENT

In writing about nature and in omitting himself from many entries in his *Journal*, Henry David Thoreau sought to create a new “side of the eye” (1: 304) through which to view himself upon return to his *Journal*. By a process of “cease[ing] to understand” himself (3: 148), Thoreau practices a sort of self-defamiliarization which made way for the “possibility of [his] own improvement” (3: 312). In this way, his *Journal* became a device for recursive self-analysis which he used to refine himself in his pursuit of becoming what he “aspire[d] to become” (10: 317). On July 16, 1851, in phrasing resembling a *metta* prayer¹, Thoreau writes, “May I so live and *refine* my life as fitting myself for a society ever higher than I actually enjoy” (3: 311, emphasis added). Since Thoreau’s intent was to *refine* his life for a higher society, I will use the terms “refine” and “refinement” when writing of Thoreau’s progress toward becoming his ideal self. The word “refine” implies sliding backward so as to move forward and chiseling away what is unnecessary to make room for that which may later stimulate and inspire. For Thoreau, therefore, “refinement” clearly articulates his process of progressing toward his

¹ In the Theravada school of Buddhism, *metta bhavana*, or loving-kindness meditations, are practiced by those “who wish to cultivate universal friendliness or lovingkindness” (Patel 330). This practice which aims to expand one’s circle of love and compassion begins with oneself, “[B]y first extending friendliness to oneself” (330). These meditations, when translated into English, include lines that begin with the words “May I...” The last line of the first part of this meditation, “May I take care of myself, happily” (Dhammarakkhita 2), seems reminiscent of Thoreau’s words in this entry on July 16, 1851: “May I treat myself with more & more respect & tenderness-...May I treat myself tenderly as I would the most innocent child whom I love...” (3: 311). Though Thoreau may not have known about the practice of *metta bhavana*, it is not irrelevant to bring Thoreau into juxtaposition with Buddhist thought since Thoreau may have been influenced by the Buddhist text he translated from French into English for the *Dial* in 1844 which he titled “The Preaching of the Buddha: White Lotus of the Good Law” (McGregor 204).

ideal self because this process requires a returning to past entries for inspiration, a “cast[ing] off” of “scurf” (10: 317), a “letting go of what [he] knows” (Walls 308), a “ceas[ing] to understand” himself, a stepping backward so as to gain a new perspective, and an allowing of himself to “drop plumb down” as opposed to constantly “striv[ing] upwards” (1: 133).

In the entry for January 22, 1852, Thoreau writes extensively of his intent to be the audience of his *Journal*² whereby the *Journal* becomes a device for progress (whether of writing or of self) which achieves its utility when he returns to his entries:

To set down such choice experiences that my own writings may inspire me.- and at last I may make wholes of parts.

Certainly it is a distinct profession to rescue from oblivion & to fix the sentiments & thoughts which visit all men more or less generally. That the contemplation of the unfinished picture may suggest its harmonious completion. Associate reverently, and as much as you can with your loftiest thoughts. Each thought that is welcomed and recorded is a nest egg-by the side of which more will be laid. Thoughts accidentally thrown together become a frame-in which more may be developed-& exhibited. Perhaps this is the main value of a habit of writing-of keeping a journal. That so we remember our best hours-& stimulate

² In the “Historical Introduction” of *Volume 4*, Leonard N. Neufeldt and Nancy Simmons seem to suggest that Thoreau was perhaps the only intended audience; the “natural form” of the *Journal*, they argue, caused Thoreau to be “[r]econciled to the idea that perhaps his only audience was himself” (Neufeldt and Simmons 642). However, there is much debate about whether or not Thoreau wrote his *Journal* with any notion of it reaching an outside audience. Sharon Cameron posits the notion of a “posthumous audience” (Cameron 98) and much of the material in his *Journal* was synthesized into his essays, lectures, and books which were intended for an outside audience (Petruionis 402, Rossi and Thomas 376, Walls 254-255).

ourselves. My thoughts are my company- They have a certain individuality & separate existence-aye personality. Having by chance recorded a few disconnected thoughts and then brought them into juxtaposition-they suggest a whole new field in which it was possible to labor & to think. Thought begat thought. (4: 277-278)

This passage not only exemplifies Thoreau's intent to preserve his thoughts, it also defines the purpose of a journal which, for Thoreau, is to preserve those experiences which may facilitate further writing and perhaps even engender a space, as this paper will argue, where he may create the possibility of gaining true knowledge of the self. Though recording experiences in the written form may reinforce memory in the act itself, since the purpose of remembering is to "stimulate" and "inspire," these two words suggest that one must *return* to those written experiences, as if rereading what he had written some time later may compel him to write or may encourage and uplift him in other, more general, endeavors. Bringing "disconnected thoughts" into "juxtaposition" would also require a return to the *Journal* in the act of rereading as cataloging and connecting many thoughts written across multiple entries would likely require some record of these thoughts in order to analyze one alongside others. The *Journal*, therefore, becomes an external memory³ through which, upon return, Thoreau can "remember."

Perhaps one reason Thoreau was intent on writing in a journal was because Ralph Waldo Emerson's words echoed: "Keep a journal. Pay so much honor to the visits of Truth to your mind as to record those thoughts" (Walls 87). In heeding Emerson's advice,

³ This phrase is borrowed from Oatley and Djikic's article, "Writing as Thinking."

the *Journal*, therefore, was perhaps just such a place to preserve and digest those “Truths” which visited Thoreau.⁴ In the “Historical Introduction” of *Volume 7*, Nancy Simmons and Ron Thomas write that “Thoreau’s observations exemplify his conviction that the value of a fact should not be underrated, because ‘it will one day flower in a truth’” (Simmons and Thomas 410). This phrase is taken from Thoreau’s essay, “Natural History of Massachusetts,” in which he writes, “Let us not underrate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in a truth. It is astonishing how few facts of importance are added in a century to the natural history of any animal. The natural history of man himself is still being gradually written” (“Natural History of Massachusetts” 26). In this passage, it is as if the knowledge of man is “still being . . . written” since those facts have yet to blossom into the “truths” which will illuminate the history of man.

In writing about nature and recording “natural facts” (Emerson 20), Thoreau perhaps thought that these facts would “flower in a truth,” a metaphor so pertinently used as it directly relates to what Buell calls the “theory of correspondence” (Buell 117). This theory adopted by Emerson from Emanuel Swedenborg is “[t]he idea that natural phenomena had spiritual as well as material significance” (Buell 117) and is perhaps best articulated in Emerson’s words from chapter four of “Nature”: “Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture” (Emerson 20). While Buell states that Thoreau “took a more

⁴ The term “visit” here is reminiscent of Thoreau’s entry mentioned above: “. . .to fix the sentiments & thoughts which *visit* all men more or less generally . . .” (emphasis added).

empirical and ‘scientific’ approach to nature after 1850,” deriving “spiritual facts” from “natural facts” seems to be one of the reasons for Thoreau’s initial method in writing about nature, and though Thoreau perhaps moved to a more “empirical approach,” I doubt Emerson’s words ever completely left him. Writing in his *Journal*, therefore, was perhaps a way for Thoreau to deposit anything that might not initially be recognizable as “a truth” but that may eventually reveal itself to be so, especially upon return to his *Journal* in the act of rereading it.

On July 6, 1840, Thoreau writes of the *Journal* as a beach on which daily occurrences are the waves that carry treasures to its sands: “Let the daily tide leave some deposit on these pages, as it leaves sand and shells on the shore. So much increase of *terra firma*. This may be a calendar of the ebbs and flows of the soul; and on these sheets as a beach, the waves may cast up pearls and seaweed” (1: 151). Though he cannot be sure that everything he writes will actualize into a “Truth,” as Thoreau writes that the “waves *may* cast up pearls and seaweed,” this perhaps is one of the reasons he is so adamant about keeping a journal. In *Thoreau’s Morning Work*, H. Daniel Peck writes that this is an aspect specific to the genre of the journal because, through Thoreau’s writing of “incidental experiences or perceptions,” “hidden significance might later emerge as a part of a larger pattern...” (Peck 44). Peck further posits that “[o]ne can never know precisely what is important to remember in the moment” as “only time will tell” (Peck 44). This may be the reason Thoreau made the shift in 1850 to write entries more consistently. Peck notes that before this year, Thoreau’s entries were inconsistent and even “fragmentary;” however, in May of 1850, Thoreau “began to preserve his Journal entries

in full..." (Peck 41). This shift marks the moment when Thoreau's *Journal* became a "deliberately constructed work of art" (Miller 4) and when Thoreau started "writing not only in his Journal but for it as well" (Peck 41). Perhaps in reminiscing on his words from the 1840 entry quoted above, Thoreau felt that writing extensively and consistently would cause him to encompass those natural facts which may be recognized as truths upon rereading; though at times the waves may consist only of foam and water, Thoreau is aware that there are other times when the tides will bring to the surface those lustrous white gems.

Writing is, for Thoreau, a way of defamiliarizing himself with the intent of creating the opportunity to view himself as he never had before. In "Art, as Device," Viktor Shklovsky writes that art's true purpose is "to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things; the device of art is the 'enstrangement' of things and the complication of the form, which increases the duration and complexity of perception, as the process of perception is, in art, an end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky 162). The *Journal* is certainly a form of art as it contains the expressions of Thoreau's interpretations and perceptions of his outer world, encased in his own words. As art, for Shklovsky, is meant to "enstrate," or defamiliarize, its subjects so as to create the opportunity for an increased and complexified perception, it seems Thoreau also uses his *Journal* to defamiliarize its subject (which I will suggest is himself) so as to create the opportunity to understand its subject in a novel way.

On July 16, 1851, Thoreau directly expresses his intent to defamiliarize himself: "Let me forever go in search of myself- Never for a moment think that I have found

myself. Be as a stranger to myself never a familiar-seeking acquaintance still” (3: 312). Thoreau’s desire to forever view himself as a “stranger” perhaps stems from his intent for continued inward reflection as he writes in the same entry, “What temple what fane what sacred place can there be but the innermost part of my own being? The possibility of my own improvement, that is to be cherished” (312). Perhaps this process of defamiliarization which forces Thoreau to forever pursue knowledge of his inner self creates the possibility for his refinement, much as an artist may refine his work so long as there are new techniques to be learned and there are noticeable areas which require revision.

Learning about the self, for Thoreau, is accomplished through a willingness to let go of viewing oneself directly, as Thoreau seeks to discover a less common gaze whereby he may expand his range of perception. On April 27, 1841, he writes: “It is only by a sort of voluntary blindness, and omitting to see, that we know ourselves, as when we see stars with the side of the eye” (1: 304-305). I think this seeing stars with the “side of the eye” can be seen as a metaphor for defamiliarization; when looking at an object directly, one is able to recognize it, even identify it by name. However, if one *never* looks at the same object directly, he may be able to say something about its color and perhaps its shape, but he may never be able to assign its name as it is no longer familiar to him, and yet that defamiliarization creates a new perspective through which he may discover something new about the object.

Thoreau seems to agree with the idea that using averted vision will defamiliarize an object as he writes on February 9, 1852: “If we incline our heads never so little the

most familiar things begin to put on some new aspect” (4: 339). Aside from stars, most objects are better seen when viewed directly, but Thoreau advises that we divert our gaze by a “voluntary blindness, and omitting to see,” phrases which both suggest we refuse to even look at the subject we are trying to understand. In this way, the self is defamiliarized because we are forced to look elsewhere, anywhere but the direct examination of ourselves, in order to learn about ourselves. In the same way, Thoreau aims to defamiliarize himself by diverting his gaze to a subject outside of himself, specifically nature, as an attempt to gain true knowledge of the self.

Thoreau’s attempt at “voluntary blindness” also implies a willingness to let go of any previously held knowledge of phenomena in order to obtain this “true knowledge,” and other passages in his *Journal* exemplify this intent. On November 21, 1850, he writes of looking over Fair Haven Pond and the fish-hawks there, “Yet I do not see what these things can be. I begin to see such an object when I cease to *understand* it-and see that I did not realize or appreciate it before-but I get no further than this” (3: 148). In *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*, Laura Dassow Walls relates this passage to Thoreau’s entry on February 27, 1851 saying that, for Thoreau, “to ‘get further’ means knowing, but also letting go of what one knows,” and this is the way to attain “true knowledge” (Walls 308). His words on February 27 clearly articulate his belief that “ceas[ing] to understand” makes way for what Walls terms “true knowledge”:

Of two men, one of whom knows nothing about a subject, and what is extremely rare, knows that he knows nothing-and the other really knows something about it,

but thinks that he knows all- What great advantage has the latter over the former?
Which is the best to deal with?

I do not know that knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel &
grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we had called
knowledge before. An indefinite sence [sic] of the grandeur & glory of the
Universe. It is the lighting up of the mist by the sun (3: 198)

In asking the question, “What greater advantage has the latter over the former?” he
suggests that the latter has no such advantage. It seems that to attain knowledge,
according to Thoreau, one must occupy the position of the starting point, letting go of all
knowledge save the notion that he knows nothing. “True knowledge” then, for Thoreau,
is the realization that the knowledge he previously had about a certain phenomenon is
insufficient, and this questioning of his knowledge about one phenomenon would elicit
him to question his previous knowledge on all the phenomena in the Universe, as he
begins to realize that *all* of his knowledge may be insufficient.

Walls writes that, for Thoreau, the “first step to true knowledge was learning
everything he could” (308), and this learning created the potential for gaining true
knowledge because once he learned something new about a certain phenomenon,
Thoreau would at that moment become aware of all that he had not known, and still did
not know, about the phenomenon. In his first chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau quotes
Confucius on “true knowledge” in words which seem to more clearly articulate what
Walls means by this phrase: ““To know that we know what we know, and that we do not

know what we do not know, that is *true knowledge*” (*Walden* 11, emphasis added).⁵

Knowing what he does not know is, for Thoreau, the starting point – the point of infinite potential from which he has the opportunity for gaining “true knowledge” about any phenomenon. If this is true, perhaps this concept can also be applied to gaining “true knowledge” of the self.

Another instance of Thoreau’s intent to let go of any preconceived knowledge of the self is addressed in his entry on March 29, 1853 when he writes that one must first be lost before he can gain a greater understanding of himself: “...not till we are completely lost or turned around (for a man needs only to be turned round once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost-) do we appreciate the vastness & strangeness of nature...In fact Not till we are lost do we begin to...realise [*sic*] where we are-& the infinite extent of our relations” (6: 47). In *Walden*, he writes the last line as, “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” (*Walden* 166). The first quote from his *Journal* implies that being directionally lost in our surrounding place will help us discover where we are in the world; however, the quote from *Walden* seems to suggest that our relationship with our surrounding place affects our understanding of ourselves since losing a sense of direction in the outer world, in this quote, seems to make way for a

⁵ These words perhaps call to mind Plato’s *Apology*. After Socrates speaks to a politician in trying to find a person who is wiser than he, he says, “...I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is - for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows. I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him” (Plato). Thoreau was perhaps also aware of this as he writes of Plato in *Walden* (104), “Paradise (To Be) Regained” (Essays 94), “Thomas Carlyle and His Works” (128), “Walking” (278), and “Life Without Principle” (352).

cartography of our inner world which depicts its extension to the outer. It allows for a realization of how our inner world interacts with the outer world which would certainly be an aspect of better understanding the self since understanding a phenomenon as it relates to other phenomena is, for Thoreau, a way to gain a more complete understanding of that phenomenon (Neufeldt and Simmons 637; O'Connell 559; Cameron 10; Peck 54, 76; Stapleton xvi). If being lost in the outer world helps one to understand one's inner world, perhaps this knowledge of the self is amplified when one is lost to oneself, in the way that defamiliarization creates the opportunity to "cease to understand" oneself.

As an art form, the technique specific to the genre of the journal that allowed Thoreau to accomplish this defamiliarization is the practice of writing repeatedly on the same phenomena. Francois Specq and Scott Slovic both suggest that the *Journal* was an instrument specifically used by Thoreau for defamiliarization; Specq writes that the *Journal* was "a tool for perceiving through endless defamiliarization" (Specq 395) while Slovic posits that the *Journal* allowed Thoreau to be as "awake to familiar surroundings as travelers might be to new places" (Slovic 32). The process of repeatedly writing on a certain phenomenon in his *Journal* may both familiarize Thoreau with, and defamiliarize himself from, the phenomenon as Sharon Cameron notes that Thoreau was aware that "the foreign and the familiar are not static entities (as the self, for example, is not a static entity) but are subject to change" (Cameron 36). Returning to a certain object repeatedly may cause one to understand that object in its totality, but alternatively, returning to that same object may also, depending on the state of one's mind, on the state of one's mood, and even on any newly acquired knowledge or experiences that may imprint themselves

on one's perceptions, stimulate a discovery of something new about that object. In the split second that one feels curiosity toward that object, in realizing there is something there that had never noticed before, the object is no longer familiar in the way that it once was during any of those dozen times it had previously been examined. Thoreau, therefore, perhaps seeks to defamiliarize the subjects of his *Journal* by this process of repeated writing so that he can create the opportunity to explore and analyze that subject in a novel way.

Defamiliarization, for Thoreau, can therefore be seen as a tactic for creating *opportunity* and *potential* for true knowledge, which, it should be noted, is different from *attaining* this true knowledge. As Specq writes, "each new day represented for him the occasion to improve his acquired knowledge, but also to shake it up, to put it to the test" (Specq 403). The *Journal* created the "occasion" to refine Thoreau's knowledge, as if the true advantage of the *Journal* was the *potential* to refine his knowledge in letting go of and questioning it. Thoreau's use of the *Journal*, therefore, seems to coincide with Richard Poirier's definition of literature in *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*. Literature, he writes, is "any written text whose points of clarification, whether these occur by local or by larger design, bring you only to densities different from but flexibly related to those from which you have previously emerged. Literature is that writing whose clarities bring on precipitations of density" (Poirier 117). By defamiliarizing his subjects, Thoreau uses his *Journal* not only to sharpen his knowledge but also to complexify his perception of that subject so as to create the potential to refine his knowledge in viewing it from a point of estrangement. The *possibility* of refining his

knowledge through defamiliarization caused Thoreau to repeatedly write on the same subjects, as if the strokes of his pencil were “the waves” that had the potential to “cast up pearls and seaweed” (1: 151).

The form of the *Journal* specifically allows Thoreau to defamiliarize himself so that he may complicate his perception of himself so as to create the potential to discover something new about himself. He certainly seems to believe that his thoughts are separate from him as he writes on January 22, 1852, “My thoughts are my company- They have a certain individuality & separate existence-aye personality” (4: 277-278). In fact, not only are his thoughts estranged from him, it seems that Thoreau also believes his own words are estranged from him, as he writes a few days later on January 27, “The peculiarity of a work of genius is the absence of the speaker from his speech- He is but the medium. You behold a perfect work, but you do not behold the worker. I read its page but it is as free from any man that can be-remembered as an impassable desert” (294). This perhaps suggests that as Thoreau returns to read his journal entries, he is able to “behold” the “work,” his writing, as an entity completely separate from the “worker,” himself.

By separating himself from his work, Thoreau is perhaps able to return to his *Journal* to view himself as a friend or acquaintance. Many passages of the *Journal* allude to the fact that Thoreau was extremely self-critical; on February 7, 1841, he writes, “I have myself to respect but to myself I am not amiable-but my friend is my amiableness personified” (1: 256), and on February 10, 1852, he writes, “Now if there are any who think that I am vain glorious-that I set myself above others...I could enumerate a list of as rank offences as ever reached the nostrils of heaven That I think worse of myself than

they can possibly think of me...” (4: 340). By separating himself from his *Journal* entries, he can perhaps transcend this self-critical nature and instead view himself as a friend might or, perhaps, even as he might view nature. In his entry on February 21, 1842, Thoreau writes, “I must confess there is nothing so strange to me as my own body- I love any other piece of nature, almost better” (1: 365). Thoreau perhaps defamiliarizes himself in his *Journal* entries as a way to avoid his self-critical tendencies, and this is accomplished by writing indirectly about himself through writing about a separate entity, nature. Upon return to read his entries, then, he has a “whole new field in which it was possible to labor & to think” (4: 278), in this case, “to labor & to think” about himself.

While Sharon Cameron suggests that Thoreau seems to write “human beings virtually out of the picture and makes them literally marginal” (Cameron 12), Specq further elaborates by suggesting that Thoreau writes even himself out of the picture, saying that Thoreau’s *Journal* aimed to “transcend the self – to liberate oneself from the strictures of ordinary selfhood” (Specq 377). With the *Journal*’s “almost exclusive focus on the emphatically nonhuman realm of nature,” Specq believes that “the reader...may feel distanced from it...” (Specq 378). By not writing about himself, Thoreau defamiliarizes himself in an act that would, upon later reading, allow him to view himself in a novel way. Therefore, this practice of writing on topics other than himself, specifically nature, is a way to defamiliarize himself to allow for the opportunity to pursue “true knowledge” about himself.

Through this process of defamiliarization, Thoreau can perhaps view himself in the guise of viewing nature. In *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing*,

Alfred I. Tauber suggests that Thoreau knew nature to be a separate entity as Thoreau “saw nature not as a reflection of himself but as radically other” (Tauber 211). However, writing about something so “radically other” perhaps created the possibility for Thoreau to better understand himself upon return to his entries because nature appears to simply be a “side of the eye”⁶ that ultimately allows his own personhood to come into focus. Slovic suggests this writing about nature is the way in which Thoreau understands himself more clearly as he writes, Thoreau is “extremely self-conscious even as he proceeds to record intricate observations of the outside world” (Slovic 25), and that “[b]y confronting face-to-face the separate realm of nature, by becoming aware of its otherness, the writer implicitly becomes more deeply aware of his or her own dimensions, limitations of form and understanding, and processes of grappling with the unknown” (Slovic 4). Sharon Cameron also believes that this writing about nature is an indirect writing about the self as she writes, “Apparently to write about nature is to write about how the mind sees nature, and sometimes about how the mind sees itself” (Cameron 44). In either case, “the mind,” the mind of the observer, is always present, and therefore, although Thoreau may be writing about nature, he is always indirectly writing about himself. Perhaps his intent in this indirect writing about himself is with the thought that upon return to his *Journal*, he may view himself as he would any part of the nature which he so cherishes.

⁶ Scott Slovic, in *Seeking Awareness in American Nature Writing*, calls these “selfless entries” a way for Thoreau to write “from a more detached point of view” (Slovic 49) and Laurence Stapleton, in *H.D. Thoreau: A Writer’s Journal*, terms it as writing from a “detached perspective” (Stapleton xiii).

Many of Thoreau's *Journal* entries exemplify the notion that he often saw himself in nature and nature in himself. A phrase that seemed to hold firm in Thoreau's mind was told to him by Margaret Fuller, "Nature is not yours until you are more hers" (Walls 294). Thoreau's entry on January 23, 1858 exemplifies this belief in his inseparability from nature, as he writes, "It is vain to write on the seasons unless you have the seasons in you" (13: 58). Cameron notes that for Thoreau, "the self recognizes its image in nature," and when Thoreau writes about nature, she writes that "Nature is internalized and the body externalized through tropes of inversion" (Cameron 31). In this sense, nature and the self become two parts of one whole, and therefore, writing about one will always, either directly or indirectly, involve writing about the other.

If Thoreau wrote indirectly about himself by writing about nature, then in the moments that he reflects on the "nature" in his *Journal*, he is, in fact, reflecting on himself. Though the nature he writes about is perhaps separate from him in the moment of his writing, when he uses his own language to describe nature, it becomes encased in an envelope of aspects of Thoreau's personhood, and when reflected on, he is able to perceive the wholeness of an entity, the components of which are part nature, part self. Stapleton writes of the moment when Thoreau uses the phrase "side of his eye" on March 23, 1853 in regard to nature: "Man cannot afford to be a naturalist-to look at nature directly-but only with the side of his eye-" (6: 30). Stapleton writes that this seeing with the "side of the eye" "might be termed modes of reflection" and further points out that "reflection interested Thoreau greatly, so much so that he found it in the principle of composition itself" (Stapleton xiv). Stapleton then draws attention to Thoreau's entry

from October 16, 1858, where he writes, "...In the reflection you have an infinite number of eyes to see for you and report the aspect of things each from its own point of view" (14: 223). It is as if each time Thoreau returns to reread his *Journal*, he has one of the "infinite number of eyes" through which to view his experiences and, ultimately, through which to view himself. In this way, reflection serves to defamiliarize himself by giving Thoreau a new perspective through which to view himself, and this defamiliarization then ultimately creates the possibility for him to understand himself at a deeper level, gradually filling in those "infinite" perspectives which there are to view himself.

By indirectly writing about himself through writing about nature, Thoreau creates the possibility to understand nature with a "divine mind"⁷, and therefore, he also creates the possibility to understand *himself* with the same "divine mind" when he returns to his *Journal* since he is able to indirectly analyze his own changes over time by surveying those reciprocal changes in nature. Much as Heraclitus suggests that "change is the only constant," Thoreau also seems to have grasped that change is one of the primary "constants" in the identity of a phenomenon, including the identity of an individual. Sharon Cameron seems to suggest that this recording change is the very reason Thoreau writes his *Journal*: "...as change is part of what things unavoidably are, it is necessary to 'make a chart of our life...'" (Cameron 62). "Chart[ing]" a life, for Thoreau, therefore, is about documenting the changes that constitute a phenomenon.

In *Henry David Thoreau: A Life*, Laura Dassow Walls also writes of how Thoreau realized these changes in nature are linked to human beings as she notes the time when

⁷ Thoreau uses the phrase "divine mind" on July 7, 1851 (3: 290).

Thoreau set fire to a forest near Well Meadow Brook saying, “From that day forward, Thoreau knew a truth few others fully understand: human beings are not separate from nature but fully involved in natural cycles, agents who trigger change and are vulnerable to the changes they trigger” (Walls 173). If this is true, then this moment enlightened Thoreau of two notions: First, it made him realize the importance of changes, and second, it made him realize how closely he was connected to nature and how his actions could influence changes in nature which would, in turn, affect him also. Perhaps, then, Thoreau understood that “change” was the common thread between himself and nature, and therefore the changes of a phenomenon, whether of human beings or nature, were perhaps at that moment understood as the true identity of the phenomenon.

Being aware of changes, for Thoreau, is certainly a way of understanding a phenomenon better. One of the reasons Thoreau rereads his *Journal* seems to be to gain an understanding of the changes that go on around him, in nature and perhaps also in himself, as he writes on May 5, 1860, “It takes us many years to find out that nature repeats herself annually-- But how perfectly regular & calculable all her phenomena must appear to a mind that has observed her for a thousand years!” (16: 170). Pursuing this “divine mind” seems to be one of the aims of Thoreau’s *Journal*. As Peck writes, when Thoreau rereads his *Journal*, he is able to examine “moments against the present as a way of measuring change” (Peck 44) and this act “might reveal the direction and nature of change” (45). Peck suggests that the “changefulness” of months of the year perhaps caused Thoreau to “search out what in them was permanent and to fix their permanent aspects in spatial form” (Peck 96). This certainly seems to be the case in the later years of

his life when Thoreau began working on a piece called “The Story of March” in which he would explore March as “a whole decade of Marches, each one similar but different, with every phenomenon carefully noted and dated” (Walls 467). By recording ten months of March and by placing them into juxtaposition, Thoreau was perhaps able to stabilize a concept that is different each year. In this way, not only did he make their changes “permanent” as Peck suggests, he was also able to come into a greater understanding of “March” with all its changes over the years and gain a mind like the capitalized Nature of which he often speaks. The *Journal*, therefore, was not only a space where Thoreau could, in a sense, take control of change by making it permanent on the written page, the *Journal* also became a space for Thoreau to record changes in nature, and perhaps also thereby indirectly record changes in himself, so that he could pursue true knowledge of himself. Though his entries may be selfless, the observer is always present in each of them; one year he may place emphasis on the sounds of March, while in another he may write in length of the sights. Therefore, Thoreau can perhaps become aware of the changes in himself by noting the changes in his perceptions and in his focus over the years.

This ability to see changes over the years, by means of the *Journal*, enables Thoreau to “‘see’ time, and to see it whole, as a full matrix of past, present, and even future” (Peck 45). In Thoreau’s entry on February 3, 1859, he writes of his intent to view something from many “different periods” so that he may understand it better: “Most that is first written on any subject is a mere groping after it--mere rubble stone & foundation. It is only when many observations of different periods have been brought together--that

he begins to grasp his subject--& can make one pertinent & just observation” (14: 175). Perhaps the act of returning to his *Journal* in order to reread his entries is the way that he can bring these observations together so that he may view the observations alongside one another. By repeatedly writing on a certain subject, the thin layers of the nuances build to form a more exhaustive understanding of the subject, and the *Journal* creates the opportunity for multi-faceted self-reflection.

In repeatedly writing on a specific topic, object, event, or experience, Specq writes that Thoreau is “rescuing what would otherwise have gone unnoticed as bringing the invisible to the fore” (Specq 383).⁸ I would suggest, however, that by rereading his *Journal*, Thoreau not only wishes to increase his understanding of phenomena by viewing them from different perspectives and time periods, he also wishes to understand the concept of “change” itself. Change is not visible in a single, isolated moment; it is only visible over a period of time, and therefore, his *Journal* is not only a device to preserve the memories which may decay overtime, nor is it only a tool for multifaceted reflection of any single phenomenon; it is also an instrument for understanding this abstract concept which is so integral to identity. “Change” cannot be written about directly; it is only by stepping back and viewing the variations in a single phenomenon overtime that one may begin to understand its patterns. When Thoreau wrote “The Story of March,” perhaps his main intent was not to better understand the abstract concept of “March” but rather to write about the underlying enzyme that catalyzes these differences

⁸ This is perhaps reminiscent of Thoreau’s words on January 22, 1852, “Certainly it is a distinct profession to rescue from oblivion & to fix the sentiments & thoughts which visit all men more or less generally” (4: 277).

between years – change. By indirectly writing about himself through writing about nature, then, Thoreau is able to analyze *change*, the only aspect of his identity that he would deem “constant.”

Thoreau, however, in pursuing this “divine mind,” does not want to gain a complete understanding of the self because having a complete knowledge of the self would be an indication that the self is no longer changing and that there is nothing new to discover about the self. Instead, it is about the *possibility* to know the self better. Never does Thoreau want to know the self completely, for that would imply he is no longer changing, that he has stagnated, that there is nothing left for him to discover about himself. Thoreau, therefore, desires there to forever be the possibility to learn something new about himself so as to make way for the possibility for change by inciting himself to either hone his strengths or adapt to his weaknesses in the process of refining himself into his ideal self.

Thoreau’s intent of refining the self is undeniable in his *Journal*, and in his entries, it becomes clear that he uses the *Journal* as the instrument for this refinement. In the “Historical Introduction” of *Volume 1*, Elizabeth Witherell notes that while studying at Harvard, Thoreau wrote about the topic of “keeping a private journal,” saying that doing so would allow him to “turn over a new leaf, having carefully perused the last one” (Witherell 593-594). Thoreau, therefore, perhaps believed that keeping a journal would allow him to refine himself into the person he desired to become.

I do not, however, believe that reaching this ideal self is Thoreau’s true intent. On July 16, 1851, he writes,

May I so live and refine my life as fitting myself for a society ever higher than I actually enjoy. May I treat myself tenderly as I would treat the most innocent child whom I love-may I treat children & my friends as my newly discovered self-Let me forever go in search of myself- Never for a moment think that I have found myself. Be as a stranger to myself never a familiar-seeking acquaintance still. May I be to myself as one is to me whom I love-a dear & cherished object-What temple what fane what sacred place can there be but the innermost part of my own being? The *possibility* of my own improvement, that is to be cherished.
(3: 311-312, emphasis added)

Thoreau could have stated that simply, his *improvement* is to be cherished, as if reflecting on those moments in the past when he improved is of value; however, he instead states that it is the *possibility* of his improvement that should be cherished, and in this statement, I detect no sense of pride about his past for it implies that he is always looking ahead to moments when he may refine his life. Refinement, for Thoreau, therefore, seems to be about the *possibility* of refinement. I do not think Thoreau wants to achieve perfection nor do I think he wants to achieve the fully refined self; I believe he desires there to always be the *potential* for his refinement. The end goal of the improved or refined self would only imply that he could no longer improve, no longer *refine*. It would imply that there is no more possibility, nor need, for change, and if “change is part of what things unavoidably are” (Cameron 62), reaching the fully refined self would mean stagnation which could only result in the total destruction of the self. Thoreau glorifies Nature for its changes as is evidenced by his extensive calendrical work in which he

recorded the variations in natural occurrences from year to year (Dean 6). Reaching the fully refined self, then, would mean he could no longer resemble the Nature which he so cherishes because if Nature is defined by its *changes*, his stagnation would be in complete opposition to this definition.

The *possibility* of refinement, then, implies change and a sense of constant motion, just as the universe and all of nature is in a constant state of flux, whether the rise and fall of the ocean tides, the unabating flow of a river, the gentle glide of clouds across the sky, or the nearly undetected growth of a seed as it sprouts its trunk and branches upward and outward and penetrates its roots downward. Modified to describe humans, this sense of change and motion can perhaps be described by the word “traveler.” Thoreau wants to forever be in a constant state of motion, much as he glorifies the profession of the traveler for his motion: “A Traveller! [*sic*] I love his title A traveller is to be revered as such- His profession is the best symbol of our life Going from-toward- It is the history of every one of us” (3: 283). Thoreau wants to be like a traveler, always departing from a point and always striving toward another, but once he reaches it, he always wants there to be yet another. As with his desire to “cease to understand” himself, Thoreau never wants to “think that [he has] found [himself]” because finding himself would perhaps mean there is no longer any possibility for change or refinement. Refinement, for Thoreau, therefore, is about always having the *potential* to refine.

Thoreau even seems to suggest that a failure in life or a missed step in the path toward self-refinement may end in an improved self nonetheless. He writes on June 20, 1840,

Let us remember not to strive upwards too long, but sometimes drop plumb down the other way, and wallow in meanness: From the deepest pit we may see the stars, if not the sun. Let us have presence of mind enough to sink when we cant [*sic*] swim...Praise begins when things are seen partially. (1: 133)

In this passage it seems that the “deepest pit” may actually prove to be the ultimate state of potential. Here, refinement is about being able to let go of only moving forward and allowing the self to take a step back so as to view from a different perspective, perhaps to relinquish the need to view a phenomenon in its totality as focusing on only part of an object may defamiliarize it in such a way that it elicits a deeper understanding, though on a smaller scale.

Thoreau’s supposed failure regarding his book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, also seems to have created more potential in his progress toward becoming his ideal self. In the “Historical Introduction” of *Volume 7*, Nancy Simmons and Ron Thomas note that Thoreau’s publisher sent back “706 unsold copies” (Simmons and Thomas 412) of the book and in response to this, Thoreau writes on October 28, 1853,

I can see now what I write for & the result of my labors-
Nevertheless, in spite of this result-sitting beside the inert mass of my works-I take up my pen tonight to record what thought or experience I may have had with as much satisfaction as ever- Indeed I believe that this result is more inspiring & better for me than if a thousand had bought my wares It affects my privacy less & leaves me freer. (7: 123)

This incident that might have seemed like a failure was perhaps the “deepest pit” which Thoreau allowed himself to sink into. From this lowest point, he perhaps realized his place of infinite potential as he felt “freer” – free, perhaps, from the ensnaring thoughts of others who might read his writing and thereby rob him of his solitude.⁹ In fact, this failure seems to even be a more positive than a negative or even a neutral experience as this incident is described as “more inspiring” and “better” than if he had found success in his publication. Failure, for Thoreau, therefore, seems to be a state of potential from which he may propel himself into becoming his ideal self.¹⁰

By pushing past failures and instead learning to appreciate himself, Thoreau perhaps aims to suppress his innately self-critical tendencies as this also seems to be a requirement when refining his life. When Thoreau writes, “Yet I do not see what these

⁹ On August 8, 1852, Thoreau writes, “I know...that Sadi entertained once identically the same thought that I do-and thereafter I can find no essential difference between Sadi and myself...By the identity of his thought with mine he still survives...In his thoughts I have a sample of *him* a slice from his core...” (5: 289-290). In this passage, it is as if Thoreau believed that, by having the same thought as Sadi, Sadi was, in a sense, with Thoreau. If this is true, perhaps Thoreau believed that if no one read his thoughts in his book, *A Week*, he could avoid the encroachment of an audience on his privacy.

¹⁰ By allowing himself to fail and even by seemingly cherishing his moments of “failure,” Thoreau seems to create even more potential for his refinement. In “On Potentiality,” Giorgio Agamben writes, “...if a potentiality to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then there is truly potentiality only where the potentiality to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes folly into it as such” (“On Potentiality” 183). In order for the potential to-be to exist, there needs to also exist the potential not-to-be. In his process of refinement, Thoreau allows himself both of these potentials: he allows himself to “improve,” which could directionally be described as moving forward or upward in his progressive growth; however, he also believes he should “have presence of mind enough to sink when [he] cant [*sic*] swim” (1: 133). Therefore, in his process of refinement into his ideal self, he expands his potential not only by allowing himself to move forward but also by allowing himself to move backward. This backward motion is vital for the forward motion: it is as if the “deepest pit” (1: 133) is where he may realize his own “impotentiality” so that he may create potential. This echoes Agamben’s thinking in “Bartleby, or On Contingency”: “Only when we succeed in sinking into this Tartarus and experiencing our own impotentiality do we become capable of creating, truly becoming poets” (“Bartleby, or On Contingency” 253). Thoreau then, in the moments of his failures, in the moments when he takes a step back, and in the moments when he allows him to sink into the depths of the abyss, is able to “truly becom[e] [a poet],” and in leaving open the possibility to both progress and retrogress, Thoreau perhaps ultimately creates the “Divine Being” (“Bartleby, or On Contingency” 252), potential.

things can be. I begin to see such an object when I cease to *understand* it-and see that I did not realize or appreciate it before-but I get no further than this” (3: 148), perhaps to get “further” requires Thoreau to at last “realize” and “appreciate” the object.

Appreciation, for Thoreau, results from being “completely lost or turned around” (6: 47). Perhaps in order to get “further,” therefore, Thoreau must first be lost to himself in order to “realize,” or understand, himself, and he must also “appreciate” himself, much as he writes, “May I treat myself tenderly as I would treat the most innocent child whom I love...May I be to myself as one is to me whom I love-a dear & cherished object-” (3: 311-312). The *possibility* of refinement, therefore, seems to require both realization and appreciation: realization so that he may become aware of the potential for refinement and appreciation so that he may view himself differently, as he would a beloved child.

The *Journal* allowed Thoreau to cultivate this appreciation of himself, and the format of the *Journal* itself also reflects his intent for continuous self-refinement as the genre also always contained the potential to be refined. Thoreau’s decisions of inclusion and exclusion in his entries allowed him to view himself “not as what [he was]” but “as what [he] aspired to be” upon return to his *Journal*. Viewing himself “as what [he] aspired to be” allowed Thoreau to see himself the way he believed Emerson viewed him. In the “Historical Introduction” of *Volume 3*, Sattelmeyer et al. posit that when Thoreau writes of friendship in *A Week*, he is writing about Emerson, who, ““treated us not as what we were, but as what we aspired to be”” (Sattelmeyer et al. 487). Perhaps Thoreau, when he returned to reread his *Journal*, wanted to view himself in the same way Emerson had. Perhaps this is how Thoreau planned to view himself as “a dear & cherished object”

as in the quote above from July 16, 1851, and perhaps this is how he believed he could create the potential for refinement as it would elicit an appreciation of the self.

In his entries, Thoreau decides to exclude certain experiences in his life, such as his refusal to go into detail about his work as a surveyor (O'Connell 573), and in his exclusions of Ruth Emerson's death and of Ellen Fuller Channing's leaving her husband (Simmons and Thomas 404-405). This perhaps suggests that Thoreau wished to preserve only those thoughts which would later stimulate himself upon his return to reread his *Journal* in the process of "cast[ing] off" the "scurf" which would not be beneficial for him to reexperience later in life (10: 317). On July 7, 1851, Thoreau writes, "I believe that the mind can be profaned by the habit of attending to trivial things so that all our thoughts shall be tinged with triviality" (3: 290). Though the *Journal* allowed Thoreau to record those observations and experiences which may not first appear to be "Truths" but that may one day reveal themselves to be so, as the above-mentioned incidents pertained to social matters, he perhaps felt them too "trivial" to include in his *Journal*. On September 20, 1851, he writes that the town is a place of "emphatically *trivial* things" and describes the "affairs of men" with the same adjective (4: 85). Perhaps then, Thoreau omits these "trivial" topics from his entries to leave room for those subjects that he believes will create the possibility for his refinement.

Thoreau directly writes of his decisions of inclusion and exclusion in his entry on January 24, 1856:

A journal is a record of experiences & growth--not a preserve of things well done or said. I am occasionally reminded of a statement which I have made in

conversation & immediately forgotten--which would read much better than what I put in my journal. It is a ripe dry fruit of long past experience which falls from me easily without giving pain or pleasure-- The charm of the journal must consist in a certain greenness--though freshness--& not in maturity. Here I cannot afford to be remembering what I said or did-- my scurf cast off--but what I am & aspire to become. (10: 317)

In this passage, Thoreau speaks of his decisions of inclusion and exclusion, saying he should include “experiences” and “growth” and notions of what he “aspire[s] to become,” the words reminiscent of how he believed Emerson viewed him. “[T]hings well done or said” should be excluded as “remembering what [he] said or did” is considered “scurf” that needs to be “cast off.” Perhaps these decisions of inclusion and exclusion were made with the intent of return in mind; if Thoreau knew he would return to his external memory in the form of the *Journal*, he could “forget” anything that might not be beneficial to his refinement process, yet “remember” anything that might create potential to progress toward his ideal self.

On November 16, 1850, Thoreau also notes his choice of subjects for writing, “My Journal should be the record of my love. I would write in it only of the things I love. My affection for any aspect of the world. What I love to think of” (3: 143). As Thoreau writes that he should write “*only* of the things” he loves, whether or not he always follows through with these words, it suggests that he believes that a *Journal* should only preserve those “things [he] love[s]” and perhaps appreciates. Perhaps, then, one could relate this to the way that he writes about himself, as one who he “aspire[s] to become,”

and in this way, he seems to write about himself as the version of himself who he loves. Then, upon return to his *Journal*, he would be able to view himself as a “dear & cherished object,” and by viewing himself with love and appreciation, he could perhaps better create the potential for his refinement.

Through these decisions of inclusion and exclusion, Thoreau is, in a sense, refining the very process he uses to refine himself, and perhaps this is the way Thoreau envisioned maintaining the possibility of his refinement. As Thoreau kept his external memory in a constant state of potential for refinement, perhaps he too was able to thereby keep himself in the same state of constant potential. Thoreau certainly intended to refine his *Journal* as he used the form to his advantage by returning to his entries to edit, revise, or add new information. In the “Historical Introduction” of *Volume 5*, Patrick O’Connell writes that “the *Journal* functioned not only as a record but as a resource that he continued to consult, as is evidenced by the fact that he occasionally penciled in corrections and comments based on new information he discovered some time later” (O’Connell 571). As Robert Sattelmeyer writes in the “Historical Introduction” of *Volume 2*, Thoreau “characteristically left large blank spaces- sometimes more than half a page-above or below an entry” and he “returned to these entries and expanded them” (Sattelmeyer 453). Francois Specq, in “Thoreau’s Journal or the Workshop of Being,” writes that the genre of the journal allows for this return to edit as the work itself is always “incomplete and so continually open to revision” (Specq 392), and similarly, in *Thoreau’s Morning Work*, H. Daniel Peck writes that the genre of the journal “allows for constant revision” (Peck 86).

Since the *Journal* was open to refinement and because the *Journal* was itself Thoreau's tool for his own refinement, Thoreau could, in a sense, perform an act of "meta-refinement" in refining the process he used to refine himself. However, the paramount aspect of this is perhaps the *potential* for meta-refinement, as the advantage of the *Journal* seems to exist in its creation of potential. The *Journal* allowed Thoreau to defamiliarize himself so that he might view himself as a stranger might to create the *potential to realize* something new about himself; however, it also created the *potential* for him to view and *appreciate* himself as he would an admired friend or adored child. As a blueprint of his changes overtime, the *Journal* awakened Thoreau to the understanding that the self was always adapting, always internalizing observations, and always interpreting perceptions whereby the mind is constantly revising its interactions and relations with the external world, and in turn, he was able to do the same for his internal world. In writing his *Journal*, therefore, Thoreau perhaps forged the ultimate tool that both embodied and bestowed everlasting potential for the refinement of the self. As Thoreau writes in his essay, "Reform and the Reformers," "Inward is a direction which no traveller [*sic*] has taken" (*Reform Papers* 193). Thoreau, then, becomes the pioneer, ever a traveler, ever an excavator of knowledge from the uncharted caverns of the self, and therefore ever a creator of his own potential to refine.

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