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Reading(s) of “deliberately:” Thoreau’s Ascetic *Libra*

Abstract: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately.” In order “to look again at the actual words of *Walden*, the main literary monument to the era’s eccentric etymological speculation” (Michael West), “deliberately” is the best place to start. This article aims to subject *Walden*’s most notable (instance of the) adverb to Thoreau’s hermeneutic methodology, “laboriously seeking [its] meaning” and minding the “perpetual suggestions and provocations” of etymology (100). In other words, it is an attempt to read the word as deliberately as he, a Harvard-trained translator of the Classics and connoisseur of Enlightenment and Romantic philological theories, wrote it. The article tracks the appearance of the adverb in Thoreau’s writing of his best-known line and paragraph, tackles its lexical meaning, and delves into the wordplay that its proper etymology offers: *deliberare* = to weigh; *libra* = the scales. Throughout, Thoreau’s philosophical ambitions for the word—and the activities of reading and living—are tied to the ancient practice of *askesis*.

Keywords: Henry David Thoreau, deliberately/deliberation, etymology, wordplay, *askesis*.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately. These words and the paragraph they introduce—the sixteenth in *Walden*’s second chapter, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For”—have long been the privileged usherer into the book (*Walden* 90-91). (Hereafter, I abbreviate this paragraph and chapter as II§16.) If “deliberately” is the open sesame to the passage’s meaning, it stands in the same relation to the work as a whole. This essay is the first part of a study aiming to give the word the systematic reading it deserves, following Thoreau’s two-pronged hermeneutic methodology.

In *Walden*’s third chapter, “Reading,” Thoreau first exhorts us to peruse “heroic books” thus: “we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom, valor, and generosity we have” (100). These lines have long been used by Thoreauvian scholars—and those who tackled wordplay foremost—to justify the type of “close reading the book so clearly demands,” in David

Skwire's words (283). Here, I will assume that it is not only "not wrong"—Stanley Cavell's words—to take Thoreau as "goad[ing] us to read with subtlety and activity" (28), but crucial to recognizing his project of inducing an active reading, one as poised as his writing. There is nothing "lukewarm"—Cavell's word again—about taking Thoreau's writing as aiming to provide "occasions for our conjecturing" (28), and if there were, a medium temperature between the cold browsing of lexicons and the heated sallies of unmoored interpretation would be particularly favorable to the "laboriousness" advised by such a proponent of the Golden Mean.

Thoreau's second piece of advice points to etymology as an inextinguishable source of polysemy, for heroic writing and reading both: "It is worth the expense of youthful days and costly hours, if you learn only some words of an ancient language, which are raised out of the trivialness of the street, to be perpetual suggestions and provocations" (100). As Michael West shows, etymology allows Thoreau to play *on every word*, or at least to challenge his readers to improve—as we say of land—his every word by their patient cultivation of meaning. Building on West's work, I take for granted the prevalence of the philological element in Thoreau's systematic practice of punning, which he warns is inherent to his business as a writer: "You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature" (17). Written words being "the choicest of *relics*," they are inherently, naturally cryptic, in the architectural sense as well—the past lives of words are buried in hidden depths (102; my italics). As West put it: "*Walden* was aimed at a national audience habituated to etymological speculation. The search for a primal language lurking beneath all natural languages provided American authors with something like a secret language. It encodes their meaning. To fathom them we must decipher it" (xii). Written language is a catacomb, and decryption a fathoming in more than one sense.

To heed West's advice "to look again at the actual words of *Walden*, the main literary monument to the era's eccentric etymological speculation" (xiv), "deliberately" is the best place to start. Indeed, none of the studies specifically devoted to Thoreauvian wordplay have tackled this adverb;¹ nor does any of the often-accompanying checklists of puns in his various works contain it as an entry. As for scholarship that specifically proposes to focus on such concepts as *living* or *reading deliberately*, it does not generally delve into etymological considerations; when it does, it is either partially or superficially.²

Reaping the polysemic crop that “deliberately” affords laborious readership has yielded too much for a single article. Here, the scope is limited to the lexical and etymological meanings of the adverb; the pseudo-etymological *liber* etymon will be explored in a subsequent essay.

This essay brings into focus the backdrop of attitudes and practices Thoreau found in ancient Greek philosophers’ lives, with echoes in Eastern traditions of wisdom and worship. “Deliberately,” I contend, encapsulates Thoreau’s idiosyncratic version of what Hadot calls the Classical wisdom lover’s “spiritual exercise.”³ I first trace the adverb’s itinerary in Thoreau’s writing of *Walden*, link it to ancient *askesis*, and clear up a lexicographic point. I then focus on the *libra* etymon and probe, beyond Cavell’s coverage of the adverb’s bathymetric dimension, its more narrowly static⁴ sense: the scales serve as the privileged metaphorical device for Thoreau’s (conception of) life as a balancing act.

FROM “READING DELIBERATELY” TO “LIVING DELIBERATELY:” ASKESIS À LA THOREAU

The Priority of “Reading”

In his jab at *Walden*’s most quoted lines, after noting Thoreau’s “‘philological’ interest,” F. O. Matthiessen comments on the intended effect behind Thoreau’s use of the word: “as the first long word in the sentence, followed by a marked pause, it compels us to speak it as slowly as possible, and thus to take in its full weight: deliberate = *de* + *librare*, to weigh” (95). To do justice to Thoreau’s rhetorical mastery, the adverb’s four syllables contrast not only with the preceding monosyllables (“went,” “woods,” “wished”) but also with their alliterative gliding and Germanic roots. Beyond brevity, their elocutionary fluidity and English matter-of-factness create no need to mull them over. Matthiessen is right, of course: “deliberately” requires to be read so. The “best linguist and best punster among the era’s major literary figures,” Thoreau is making an autoreferential, meta-hermeneutic gesture (West xiv). Just how deliberate a gesture, however, can only be grasped by backtracking from the second manuscript (B) of *Walden* (1849)—where the paragraph first appears in its final form, last sentence excepted—to the first (A) (1847).

In version A,⁵ the opening reads: “I went down to *the pond* because I wished to live deliberately” (my italics). Although Thoreau has rarely been known to pass upon good (or not so good) wordplay,⁶ by changing from “the pond” to “the woods” in version B, he avoids a pun along the lines of “pondering life by a pond he went down to.” While “Thoreau’s mistrust of punning did not curb his indulgence in it,” he did choose the less conspicuous, arguably

more potentially polyvalent, pun (West 216). In its homophony with “ponder,” “pond” semantically draws attention to the adverb’s actual etymon: *libra*, as in the locution *libra pondo*, abbreviated *lb* for the *pound* unit. By opting for “the woods” instead of “the pond,” Thoreau may be punning according to and in anticipation of either or both of two faulty etymons of “deliberately:” 1) *liber*, “free,” a state for which “the woods” are the paradigmatic locus; 2) *liber*, “bark,” and by extension “book,” of which “the woods” are the literal source—Thoreau will say as much in “Reading.” Simultaneously, Thoreau may be suggesting that, when toying with words, he is not committed to etymological accuracy so much as maximal polysemy. With relish, Thoreau perused the intellectually stirring, often ludicrously erroneous, and almost always wildly entertaining etymological treatises of Enlightenment savants and Romantic philologists;⁷ however, although he confesses in his Journal to have “dreamed of a reeturn to the primitive analogical and derivative sources of words,” he was too competent a classicist and too shrewd a Yankee to unreservedly buy into their etymological speculations (September 5, 1851; 4: 46). In West’s words, “part of Thoreau’s genius was the sure instinct that led him to milk [Romantic theories of language] for laughter” (xiv). Whatever the intention behind the emendation, “deliberately” is a paradigmatic case of Thoreau etymologically weighing his words and implicitly inviting the reader to do so in turn.

To return to *Walden*: as any business that makes us “well employed” (16), reading is an opportunity to experience life in the only dimension that existentially matters—the present—not as a pastime that would “injur[e] eternity” (8). Across the spectrum from “easy” or “Little Reading” (104), therefore, lies “reading [as] a noble intellectual exercise . . . one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object” (101). The lexicon here belongs to physical workout and body conditioning: reading “true books in a true spirit” requires one to have stretched, strained, almost pulled (Latin *tractus*, from which “training” derives) their exegetic faculties (101). Although “intention,” or “tending towards,” calls upon cerebral muscle, it does not mobilize an isolated element in the mental anatomy but all of one’s biology. The “whole life” is not so much about extent of existence as the punctual totalization and concentration of vital energies. All the liveliness in a reader must tend and attend to reading.

But the solitary nature of reading as an exercise should not eclipse its dual—or dualistic—dimension: the athlete meets others in a contest (*athlos*) to win a prize (*athlon*). Reading is a match, in the two senses of the word.

Hence Thoreau's conclusion about its comparative nature: "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written" (101). Interestingly, the sentence first appears in Thoreau's Journal after July 16 and before August 6, 1845, making the occurrence of "deliberately" primal in the drafting of *Walden*. Indeed, the word is not found in Thoreau's first sketch of II§16 on July 6, 1845, two days after his moving to Walden: "I wish to meet the facts of life—the vital facts, which where [sic] the phenomena or actuality the Gods meant to show us, —face to face, And so I came down here. Life! Who knows what it is—what it does?" (2: 156). "Reading deliberately" came first, tapping into the bibliographical ("books"/*liber*) as much as the static ("as . . . as"/*libra*).

Though reading deliberately is about weighing words, it not only implies a separate weighing in writing and in reading, but also a weighing of the two relative to each other. This is what Cavell elegantly plays upon when confessing to a "form of doubt about Thoreau's writing which may threaten the balance of any of my deliberations with his book" (110). For Thoreau, reading is emulation, athletic rivalry, a measuring of oneself to the genius of the ancients, a striving to raise oneself to their level and match them word for word, to "equa[l] . . . the elaborate beauty and finish and the lifelong and heroic literary labors of the ancients" (103).

The butt of Thoreau's early attack in "Reading" is the "modern cheap and fertile press, with all its translations," which cannot "bring us closer" to ancient virtue (100). For a Harvard-trained translator of the classics,⁸ the obvious paradigm for attentive reading is of course translation. When Thoreau looks at "[Homer's] pages . . . "now and then," testifying with moderately genuine humility to the little reading he did in his first year at Walden (99-100), looking back is the Greek text, in the 1834 edition by his former Harvard teacher, young Cornelius Felton (Walls 68). An avowed Transcendentalist, however, Thoreau knew that, beyond the literary dimension, translation is about metaphysical displacement, passing "to the other side"; the quasi-athletic strivings of agonistic sympathy offer the closest thing to "look[ing] through each other's eyes for an instant" (10). The aim of reading is not acquiring extrinsic knowledge but transforming one's life through the momentary inhabiting of another: "We should be as good as the worthies of antiquity, but partly by first knowing how good they were" (107). While the phrase "how good" explicitly refers to the positive extent of these eminent characters' comparative excellence, the adverb "how" surreptitiously raises the inseparable question of manner: how were they so good, indeed? At other times in his writing, "being good," that is, conforming to "what his neighbors call good," is cast as a demonic impulse (10). A consummate reader of ancient lives, Thoreau does not invoke the "demon" lightly, or strictly in the Christian sense: whatever

devil, it is no personal *daïmon*, the heeding of which, against social conventions and ready-made knowledge, is central to the life of the quintessential figure of the wisdom-lover, Socrates. Since “imitation is suicide,” since virtue or knowledge of oneself as part of universal nature are not transferable from another person’s experience, since the *daïmon*’s Romantic and Transcendentalist counterpart—genius—is to be obeyed, how can one reconcile the notions of originality and method (Emerson 259)? How can one learn to cultivate *eudaimonia*?

“Of how much improvement a man is susceptible—and what are the methods,” Thoreau wonders in the final line of a December 1846 entry, which opened with this declaration: “When stimulated by reading the biographies of literary men to adopt some method of educating myself and directing my studies—I could only resolve to keep unimpaired the freedom & wakefulness of my genius.” In a sentence that will make it into *Walden* only very slightly modified, Thoreau elaborates: “What is a course of History—no matter how well selected—or the most admirable routine of life—and fairest relation to society—when one is reminded that he may be a *Seer* that to keep his eye constantly on the true and real is a discipline that will absorb every other.” (after December 2, 1846; 2: 357). “Deliberately” captures the perpetual exercise of such a discipline, the extreme degree of attention to which one should submit what one is about, whatever that is.

Deliberation, therefore, should not be tied to a single activity, such as “reading.” Or, rather, deliberation is aptly confined to the activity of reading, but only insofar as giving our full attention to anything that presents itself to us is (making a) reading (of) it. With “Sounds,” Thoreau progresses beyond “Reading” as a chapter and seemingly as a practice, to the point of asking: “Will you be a reader, a student merely, or a seer?” However, he still advises the reader thus: “Read your fate, see what is before you.” The “discipline of looking always at what is to be seen” is no other than that of reading, well understood, nor is hearing the sounds of the world (111). If the reading of books was confrontational, so is the reading of a world whose essential facts must be “fronted” (90). Between “Reading” and “Sounds,” Thoreau formulates his own version of a *logos*, at once the cosmogenic utterance and the legible—intelligible—world it produces, a topos common to the sacred texts and philosophical doctrines he was conversant with, from the Vedas to the Neo-Platonists through the ancient Testament, Zoroaster, Pythagoras, and the Stoics. Thoreau’s early words in “Sounds” also echo Confucius’s: “Heaven speaks; but what language does it use to preach to men?” (*The Phenix* 111). Hearing the world, in this sense, is already reading it, just as synthesizing a cosmos out of the apparent chaos of elements is a matter of *collection*: “Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a

world?” (*Walden* 225)—asks a post-meditative Thoreau, having come “as near [to] being resolved into the essence of things as ever in [his] life” (224).

Ancient attitudes

Ancient excellence in virtue; athletic training; intensive exercise; self-knowledge; looking inward against the *doxa*; constant attention to the world; (auditory) receptivity to the universe; solution into the cosmic “essence of things”—all these elements converge towards a concept that historians of philosophy before the twentieth century largely ignored and whose function Pierre Hadot is most credited to have clarified: *askesis*. Numerous aspects of the mental discipline Thoreau seeks to practice more easily in the woods correspond to Hadot’s general definition of *askesis* as “spiritual exercise,” particularly Stoical, generally aiming to “[f]ollow Nature, or live in unison with nature” (Ritter 3; 559). Hadot himself wrote about Thoreau’s relationship to *askesis* (366-75): apparently unaware of Thoreau’s familiarity with both the lives and, second-hand, the doctrines of the ancients, he stays at the attitudinal level and, using the opening lines of “Solitude,” paints Thoreau essentially as an Epicurean, with some Stoical traits.⁹ Given his mistrust of exoteric methods, even gathered from the best sources, Thoreau’s *askesis* cannot but be extremely idiosyncratic, shifting, and self-conscious.

From his reading of ancient biographies and histories of philosophy, Thoreau could have intuited most, if not all, of the attitudes and formal exercises that Hadot taxonomizes (24-28). The first among them and condition of all, *prosochè*, is unmistakably Thoreauvian. Like its Latin equivalent, *animadversio*, or “turning the soul towards,” *prosochè* etymologically spells a “facing towards” (*πρός*). The confrontational, adversarial or, less dramatically, *conversational* quality of Thoreau’s “intention” is literal *prosochè*, as written language helps face away from what in life is imaginary—our “factitious cares” (6)—and towards the real, converting one’s outlook on life “from a ‘human’ vision of reality, where values depend on the passions, to a ‘natural’ vision of things, which replaces every event in the perspective of universal nature” (Hadot 24). For social beings, the world, and everything in it, is ontologically Janus-faced; language, as an aspect of or metaphor for the world, has a dark side, a bifacial nature early expressed in the *Journal*: “There are two sides to every sentence; the one is contiguous to me, but the other faces the gods, and no man ever fronted it. . . . [I]t demands a godlike insight—a fronting view, to read what was greatly written” (January 13, 1841; 1: 220). Contiguity leaves no room for the movement of “attention”: our face flattened against our words,

there can be no distinction from them, no reflection of, or about, them. The other side converses with the same gods that, in the July 1845 version of II§16, “meant to show us” “phenomena or actuality . . . face to face.” A face-off or *tête-à-tête*, the recognition of otherness in the exercise of criticism requires duality, an envisaging of Emerson’s “NOT-ME,” which conversely allows for a recognition of oneself as partaking of a cosmos (8). Contiguity and divinity, which give things their two faces, correspond to contingency and necessity, accident and *fatum*, the two states words (or the world) find themselves in whether we consider them, or not, with “alertness,” whether we use them without weighing them or really practice *divination*, oracular reading—“[r]ead your Fate” (*Walden* 111).

In II§16, Thoreau’s casual hinting at antiquity and ancient manners of living is grounds enough to call in on Hadot’s understanding of *askesis*, as the adverbial phrase “Spartan-like” de facto parallels “deliberately.” Thoreau seems to consider his brand of deliberate living, his laconic exercise in life, if not as chiefly spiritual, then at least as requiring both a physical and mental discipline. From his reading of Lycurgus’s biography in Plutarch’s *Lives*, for instance, Thoreau might have remembered:

Even when [the Lacedæmonians] indulged a vein of pleasantry, one might perceive, that they would not use one unnecessary word, nor let an expression escape them that had not some sense worth attending to . . . so that . . . the term *lakonizein* (to act the Lacedæmonian), is to be referred rather to the exercises of the mind, than those of the body. (87)

De Gérando also convokes Sparta when describing Zeno’s *askesis*: Zeno’s “philosophy . . . tended to develop all strengths . . . it was continuous pugilism, a gymnastic of the soul and reason. . . . [H]e who frequents the Porch may think himself living under Lycurgus’s institutions. The Porch’s institutions [were as] rigid as Sparta’s” (40). A reader of Xenophon, Plutarch, and Fénelon on the lives of eminent philosophers (and of Plutarch, Stanley, Cudworth, De Gérando, and Ritter on their doctrines), Thoreau is steeped in the ideal of the “lover of wisdom,” for whom “sincere accounts” matter more than theoretical treatises and exemplary practical lives more than abstract intellectual systems: “We do not learn much from learned books, but from . . . frank and honest biographies” (98). Thoreau’s polysemic, palimpsestic, and ubiquitous “deliberation” overlaps with the striving common to the different schools of philosophy—and the Confucian requisition—to be attentive and “know oneself.” In Confucius’s words,

he [who has acquired some perfection] keeps a continual watch upon himself; he undertakes nothing, begins nothing, pronounces no word, whereon he has not meditated. . . . [H]e carefully observes himself—he reflects on every thing—he examines every thing—he is in a continual vigilance. (*The Phenix* 79)

Three months into his first Journal, after having read Zeno's biography in Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*,¹⁰ Thoreau had elaborated: "And when evening comes he sits down unwearied to the review of his day—what's done that's to be undone. Himself truth's unconcerned help-mate. Truly another system of book-keeping this, than the Cyprian trader to Phenicia practiced" (February 7, 1838; 1: 27). Almost ten years before *Walden*'s first version of "Economy," the matter of spiritual exercise is already cast as an object of accounting, of careful equilibrating, of etymological deliberation, i.e., weighing one's actions, passing judgment over them (the *libra* is also the tool of *Justicia*), balancing them against the principle of "life according to nature," as one chalks off columns in one's books—what Luke Plotica calls "self-accounting" (160). When, at the beginning of the same entry, Thoreau writes that "Zeno stood in precisely the same relation to the world as [he] do[es] now" (1: 26), he is referring to the Stoic "duty," which he also found in Lemprière "to study himself [in the evening] . . . to review with critical accuracy the events of the day, and to regulate his future conduct with more care, and always to find an impartial witness within his own breast" ("Zeno"). When Thoreau takes the pen to his Journal, he does so with the image of "book-keeping" in mind: here lie the thematic germs of the static and the bibliographical, which he will later embed in one neat adverb.

A Lexicographic Point: Intentionality or Pace?

Before laying bare its roots, a possible lexical misreading needs to be addressed. As a native French speaker and an occasional translator of *Walden*, I find it particularly interesting that none of the English definitions Thoreau had access to for *to deliberate*, *deliberate*, and *deliberately* mentions intentionality or contains the phrase "on purpose."¹¹ Contemporary English-speaking readers (and French translators) must take care not to inflect the word excessively towards a meaning not lexicalized in Thoreau's preferred dictionaries. Although the notion of "deliberation" is obviously related to that of "intention," "deliberation" precedes and conduces to choice or a verdict. As opposed to instantaneous somatic reactions, deliberation appears intentional on the grounds of its mental and processual nature. Besides, when Thoreau uses the word "intention" as the requirement for the quasi-gymnastic exercise of reading, it

is in its primary, cognitive, and not volitional sense, as in *Webster's* 1848 entry for the word.¹² He also denies keeping the “secrets of his trade . . . voluntarily” (17), having learned for himself Emerson’s lesson in “Prudence” that “the natural motions of the soul are better than the voluntary ones” (366). Whatever Thoreau means by “deliberately,” petty purposefulness should be ruled out: for him, following Emerson, choosing is a merely intellectual operation (not a moral one), an exercise in arbitrariness, compared to obeying one’s will or whim (not indulging one’s willfulness), spiritually accepting what one is naturally drawn to. The eight other occurrences of the adverb in *Walden* correspond to one or more of the senses in Johnson’s definition; almost none can be glossed as “on purpose.”¹³ Also, the italicized words from the often-ignored last sentence of II§16 (“*somewhat hastily*” [91]) loop back to “deliberately” in the first. Thoreau had already applied the opposition respectively to the writer’s and the reader’s activities: “Books are for the most part wilfully and hastily written, as parts of a system . . . they teach the elements of ignorance, not of knowledge, for to speak deliberately and in view of the highest truths, it is not easy to distinguish elementary knowledge” (*A Week* 97-98); “It is a characteristic of great truths that they will yield of their sense in due proportion to the hasty and deliberate reader” (After June 20, 1846; 2: 260). As for the well-known invitation to “spend one day as deliberately as nature” (97), it comes from a Winter 1846-1847 entry, which opens thus: “Why should we live with such hurry and bustle” (2: 375) —the latter will become “waste of life” in *Walden* (93). Hastening is tantamount to squandering, the ultimate economic sin.

Right before and during Thoreau’s time at Walden, other elements in his writing and reading set the matter of pace as paramount. In *A Week*, after paraphrasing Aristotle (as quoted in Stanley’s *History of Philosophy*), Thoreau concludes that the hero “will know how to wait, as well as to make haste. All good abides with him who waiteth wisely” (128). There can be wisdom, and productive service, in patience, Thoreau says with a wink to Milton, before expounding on Zeno’s requisition: “A man is not his hope, nor his despair, nor yet his past deed. We know not yet what we have done, still less what we are doing. Wait till evening, and other parts of our day’s work will shine than we had thought at noon, and we shall discover the real purport of our toil” (129). Deliberation does not need to see ahead of itself positively as willfulness does; rather, deliberation on one’s purposes is a retroactive endeavor—as it was already a mere three weeks into the Journal, in an entry titled “Discipline”: “I yet lack discernment to distinguish the whole lesson of to-day; but it is not lost—it will come to me at last. My desire is to know what I *have* lived, that I may know *how* to live henceforth” (November 12, 1837; 1: 11). While the objects of deliberation are in the past, its

aims do not range beyond the eternal here and now. The future that matters is what the present immediately holds next: “see what is before you, and walk into futurity” (111). In Thomas Stanley again, Thoreau could have rehearsed a precept of Bias, one of the “Seven Wise Men of Greece:” “Undertake deliberately. . . . Weigh what is to be done” (1: 82)—advice he also found in the *Hitopadesa*, which condemns “Rashness in any undertaking. . . . success . . . attendeth of itself upon him who acteth with due deliberation” (280).

DELIBERATE = DE + LIBRARE: PONDERATION AND BALANCE

Cavell memorably tied the adverb to *Walden*’s “Conclusion” (71-73): “I love to weigh, to settle, to gravitate toward that which most strongly and rightfully attracts me;—not hang by the beam of the scale and try to weigh less,—not suppose the case, but take the case that is” (330). Indeed, *pace* Matthiessen, the Latin verb *deliberare* is not just about transitive *weighing*.¹⁴ The above, including the echo to Pythagoras’s static metaphor—the wise man exhorts not “to step . . . above the beam of the balance” (Jamblichus 134)—stems from the early Journal:

When I read the other day the weight of some of the generals of the Revolution, it seemed no unimportant fact in their biography— It is at least one other means of comparing ourselves with them— Tell me how much Milton or Shakspeare weighed and I will get weighed myself, that I may know better what they are to me. Weight has something very imposing in it— for we can not get rid of it. Once in the scales we must weigh— And are we not always in the scales, and weighing just our due, though we kick the beam, and do all we can to heavy or lighten ourselves? (February 2, 1841; 1: 244)

Punning on the material etymology of “im-port” and “im-posing,” Thoreau turns the inherently comparative device of the scales into the inescapable locus (“are we not always in”) of physical and moral law, i.e., fatality (“we must weigh”). In “Resistance,” the minority is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight” (76). And in *Walden*’s second chapter’s penultimate paragraph, whose first line repeats the adverb *deliberately*, he proposes to let gravity do its work (97-98). Before settling the country, we should settle reflectively, following the downward, etymologically deliberate movement of the plumb through the alluvions of culture to the “hard bottom” of things. Rather than artificially

resisting the pull of gravitation, we should remember that we gravitate out of necessity: weighing with all our weight, consenting to touch bottom against the volatility of thoughts too abstract and through the numbing of comforts too swaddling, we may enjoy contact with reality. Thoreau, earnest in his accounts, does not assume, or “sup-pose,” but accepts what in weight is “imposing.”

Deliberation, a Matter of Consciousness

The final item in Thoreau’s list of the “business habits . . . indispensable” to every “trade” (20) is the “account of stock to be taken from time to time, to know how you stand. It is a labor to task the faculties of a man—such problems of profit and loss, of interest, of tare and tret, and gauging of all kinds in it, as demand a universal knowledge” (21). “Tasking” and “taxing” are etymologically one: Thoreau’s metaphorical business is therefore inseparable from (customs) duties, the toll of imposed expenses. Among these, beyond a material estimate of merchandise, “know[ing] how you stand” nods at a knowledge of the physics (geology, physiology) of being on one’s feet, as grounds for self-awareness. Proper “self-accounting” culminates in omniscience.

Thoreau’s enumeration of his trade practices also subtly develops the 1838 Journal’s staging of Zeno’s evening accounts, as the echo to the “trader from Phenicia” in the penultimate article suggests: “universal science to be kept pace with, studying the lives of all great discoverers and navigators, great adventurers and merchants, from Hanno and the Phœnicians down to our day” (20-21). If Thoreau’s “faithfully mind[ed] business” (18) equals living, then the stasis of the scales, with its possible operations of allowances and deductions for accurate measure, symbolizes painstaking consciousness of what living materially entails. Indeed, Thoreau’s central problem is substituting “the mass of men[’s]” automatic condition by deliberate, individual self-accounting (8). In the paragraph preceding II§16, the metaphor of sleep and waking had foreshadowed the use of “deliberately:” “We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn. . . . I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavour” (90). Against the slumber of human faculties, clockwork is powerless. Since the auroral really presides over every moment in which one is awakened to life, a few morning minutes will fail to exhaust the dawn: “Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me” (90), morning is “that morrow which mere lapse of time can never make to dawn” (333). Looming in the “conscious endeavour” to elevate one’s life (a suggestion both of existence morally ennobled and

the prosaic raising of it from bed in the morning) lies deliberate living, i.e., living in fullest *conscience* (etymologically, “with science,” knowledgeably). A literal *savoir-vivre*, antithetical to the observance of polite usage, it assesses what living consists in. On a plane that is foremost material (physical, biological), II§16 proposes to come to know (“to learn”) what is necessary to sustain living, what it takes or costs to live, life being “dear” in more than the affectionate sense. In Ritter, Thoreau might have read that

as man is unable to give himself up entirely to the dictates of his intellectual nature, but is forced to listen to the demands of his animal wants, there are, in addition to truly philosophical pursuits, many other mental exercises highly commendable, not, indeed, as having the beautiful for their object, but the needful. (3: 203)

Deliberate living supposes a break with unconsciousness and unconscionableness, with ignorance and immodesty, with the disproportion of artificial means in relation to natural needs, which prevail in “normal” living. Thoreau’s “exercising” his attention aims at a poetic deliverance from the materialistic inclinations of most men—Emerson’s farmers in “Nature,” for example, whose particular and partial ownership of enclosed land is trumped by the poet’s integrative outlook and possession of the landscape (9). The best cure for economic, consumerist materialism is philosophical materialism, particularly of the ancient kind. Economics, narrowly conceived as commercial chrematistics, becomes the proper study of the “laws of the house,” the *oikos* an extensive *domus*, i.e., the universe. The *libra* symbolizes Thoreau’s axiological revolution, which hinges on the recognition of the physical substratum to society and the dispelling of the world’s shroud of illusion: “Men nowhere, east or west, live yet a *natural* life. . . . Man would desecrate it by his touch, and so the beauty of the world remains veiled to him. He needs not only to be spiritualized, but naturalized, on the soil of earth” (338). Here, touch does not refer so much to a functional sense as to the supremely materialistic and utilitarian gesture of unhandsomely arrogating natural matter, cutting one from a proper *aesthesis* of the real.

Following Emerson’s rehabilitation of the ordinary, Thoreau makes it his business to take the closest look at what is usually disregarded, an exercise in *prosobè* in keeping with the advice he accepted from Plutarch’s “search . . . into things more obvious [than the great Secrets of Nature]” (*Morals* 2: 429). A living subject, he refuses to be

subjected to life, a slave to his “animal wants,” but will subject it to scrutiny, examining what is customarily thought of as its most insignificant, elementary details (“to reduce it to its lowest terms”), and finally rule on its abjection or sublimity from trial by plumb-rule. Such inspection entails harnessing one’s living with attention to it, making the process an object of lucidity, watching it reflect itself in consciousness: *Walden* is the book named after the mirror of a pond. In his 1842-1844 Journal, Thoreau had praised the *Hitopadesa*’s “playful wisdom which . . . oversees itself” and the indispensable “pledge of sanity . . . that it sometimes reflect upon itself— . . . pleasantly behold itself— . . . hold the scales over itself” (1: 388). Living deliberately amounts to leading a double life of sorts—existence and, at the same time, the conscious experience of it. Such simultaneity is akin to the critical separation (the pleonasm is Thoreau’s), or “doubleness,” of a famous paragraph in *Walden* (134-135). Pondering living while it is being done thus requires “a conscious effort of the mind,” living the life of the mind, living life from the mind (134). Such *vita spiritualis* implies actively using the mental organ to inventory and weigh what is essential to life on the material plane.

The etymologically *librational* quality of Thoreau’s “minding his business” is reinforced by his precise use of another Latin etymon: “PEND, PENS, tenir en suspens [hold in suspension]” (Court de Gébelin 7: 1480). From *pensare*, a form of *pendere* (“to weigh”), derive both *pension*, or what has been hung, and therefore weighed, for payment, and *pensive*, the state of someone hanging something in their mind for consideration—it is ponderation and pondering. (That Thoreau was aware early on of the etymon’s polysemic potential is obvious in one iteration of his poem, “The Fall of the Leaf,” where “the one yellow leaf / Amid the glossy leaves of June/ . . . *pensive hung*, though not with grief” [ll. 17-19; my italics].) In *A Week*, complimenting the light simplicity and sobriety of Menu’s “rare wisdom,” Thoreau had described the Hindoo lawgiver’s sentences as “open[ing] . . . unexpensively” (149); in “Economy,” he is concerned with *sumptuary* laws, which pertain to avoidance of “luxurious and expensive things” (55). Regarding his work ethics, therefore, Thoreau retains the “in-dis-*pensable*,” what he cannot *not* do without, and, in a very rigorous understanding of the prefixes, what he cannot *not* think about (20, my hyphens and italics). The business of living should be a measured affair, in both senses of the word, rationed and reasoned, mentally metered. Although “living is . . . dear,” life should not be *expensive*: weighing and handing out excessive money for it, or giving too much thought to things that do not matter, is a symptom of disease. More than strictly economic, Thoreau’s axiological reflection is economical, in the ancient Greek and Roman philosophical tradition of resistance to inflation: “When they want

to evaluate things, men usually apply a system of purely human values, often inherited from tradition, twisted by elements of passion. This is what Marcus Aurelius calls *tuphos*, the swelling of opinion” (Hadot 171).

And more than exclusively intellectualistic, the deliberate life is practical. Thoreau does not so much purport to deliver conceptual analyses using rationality as, through substantial rationing, to deliver himself practically from “accessory” or “excessive” life, both of which are, etymologically, opposed to the “necessary.” Without the inflation of “superfluously coarse labors,” the report of the senses can be shadowed with attention (6). This is Thoreau’s version of Stoical “appropriation,” which he found in Plutarch (*Morals* 4: 423) and Stanley—*oikeiosis*, although his actual acquaintance with the Greek word is unclear—at once the condition and goal of a “life lived conformably to nature, which Chrysippus, in his first Book of Ends, expounds, both our own proper human nature, and likewise the common nature of the Universe” (Stanley 8: 81). Thoreau’s concern with the Catechism’s “chief end of man” also echoes Chrysippus and what he calls “the first property [*proton oikeion*] of all natural creatures:” “the care of ourselves and consciousness thereof” (Stanley 8: 60). Contemplating our chief end begins with knowing our slender means.

Another word for this process of weighing life is “meditation.” By 1847, Thoreau had come across the ubiquitous term countless times, both in Eastern texts and their commentaries as well as in the lives and doctrines of the ancients—although he clearly understood the distinct nature of Hindu contemplation (*A Week* 137-138). Confucius is perhaps most explicit in his requisition “to meditate . . . in particular on the things we believe we know, and to weigh every thing by the weight of reason, with all the attentiveness of spirit, and with the utmost exactness, whereof we are capable” (*The Phenix* 78):

give up yourself . . . to meditation; . . . consider distinctly what presenteth itself to you; . . . examine every thing, and weigh every thing with care. After examination and reasonings of this nature, you may easily arrive . . . at the end where you ought resolutely to stand, viz. at a perfect conformity of all your actions with what reason suggests. (41)

Notwithstanding the difference between Confucian and ancient Greek meditation on the one hand, and Hindu meditation on the other, he was early convinced of the necessity of mindfulness, whether intensely deliberative or purely contemplative.

While many “professors of philosophy” treat life as a concept, Thoreau’s project is very literally to *reflect* (on) his living. In “Resistance to Civil Government,” he hints at a form of flection on oneself, the genuflection of the squatter: “You must hire or squat somewhere . . . You must live within yourself, and depend upon yourself always tucked up and ready for a start” (78). Although Thoreau’s inspiration here is clearly Stoic (“dependance upon oneself”) and Neoplatonic (“live within yourself”), Jeffrey Cramer traces the allusion to the earlier figure of Bias of Priene (160) and an anecdote about his unconcerned attitude during the sack of his hometown, which appears in Thoreau’s Journal (12 July 1840; 1: 157-158). The passage in “Resistance” resonates with the advice in *Walden* to “live so compactly and preparedly” and like “the old philosopher . . . walk out the gate empty-handed without anxiety” (24). When life is reduced to the bare necessities, the only valuable possession is of oneself, of one’s life as an internal, temporary matter; anything external cannot count as (one’s) life. Reflecting about life, studying wisdom, or theorizing about ethics (what professors of philosophy do) on the one hand, and living reflectively, being practically wise, or living ethically (what philosophers do) on the other, are temporally antithetical. For Thoreau, life is to be considered in the instant, in the narrow present, since only at this moment can life be experienced as *living*: “In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time . . . to stand on the meeting of two eternities, past and future; to toe that line” (17). In Hadot’s words:

This attention to the present moment, . . . the secret of spiritual exercises, . . . delivers one from the passion that is always entailed by the past or the future which does not depend on us; it facilitates vigilance through concentration on the minuscule present moment, which can always be mastered, always be endured, in its exiguity; finally, it opens our conscience to the cosmic conscience, by making us attentive to the infinite value of each instant, by making us accept each moment of our existence in the perspective of the cosmos’s universal law. (26-27)

At odds with this contemporaneous immanence stands the intemporal nature of the professional philosophical treatment, which deals in immutable, capitalized concepts. Instead of thinking the theoretic abstraction of Life as a substantive, positively, Thoreau proposes, like Coleridge with Christianity (131), to take life as something to actively try:

“Here is life, an experiment to a great extent untried by me” (9). The trap, however, is double. The “mass of men” do live, but without awareness of the existential arrow slit of the present, bent by the past and towards the future, the two finite distractions from the “infinite” present (Emerson 394); meanwhile, professors of philosophy do think, but without experimenting their thinking as living, or living their thoughts. The two orders of mere physiological life and mere ideal thought cannot but become alternative; when one is busy living, one hardly thinks about it, and when one is busy thinking, one does not live anymore—at least not “deliberately.” The dichotomy is precisely what Thoreau aims to transcend, as the instantaneous and present quality of a mindful experience implies not the succession but the superimposition of the living and the thinking. The *via media* between Life abstracted and life below the radar is what “deliberately” is all about.

Life in the Scales

A proponent of Solon’s and Confucius’s Golden Mean—the principle of an equilibrated existence—Thoreau proposes to live a medium life. Despite their opposition, speculation about *metaphysis* and neglect of *phusis* are identical regarding their practical effects: they bury reality under fictions, superstitions, and apotheoses. Vitally immersed in *phusis*, as a place to inhabit (the woods being the metonymic locus thereof) and a practice (the study of *phusis*, in the ancient Greek sense), philosophical life walks the line between the supernature of other worlds and that of society.

Two summer months in, Thoreau’s life at Walden presents him with an antilogy: “I find an instinct in me conducting to a mystic spiritual life—and also another—to a primitive savage life” (August 23, 1845; 2: 177). The succession of seasons, however, will bring forth another distinction, captured in a passage of the Journal (Fall-Winter 1845-1846; 2: 145) from which these *Walden* words will eventually stem: “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates. . . . It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically” (14-15). Thoreau’s meditations on the “necessaries of life” are too often taken for granted and disconnected from his actual experience of somewhat harsh conditions. The question of minding the “needful,” in particular the necessity of keeping warm, arises not out of a vacuum but during snow season: “How can a man be a philosopher and not maintain his vital heat by better methods than other men” (2: 146). Living deliberately means striking a balance between the polarities of *praxis* and *theoria*, as much as wildness and mysticism, or the low and the high (the “mean/sublime” distinction in II§16 overlaps with all

these), thereby synthesizing the pairs. In his 1842 Journal, Thoreau had identified slightly different antipodes yet, and their epistemological attitudes:

Facts must be learned directly and personally—but principles may be deduced from information. The collector of facts possesses a perfect physical organization—the philosopher a perfect intellectual one. One can walk—the other sit—one acts, the other thinks. But the poet in some degree does both and uses and generalizes the results of both—he generalizes the widest deductions of philosophy.” (October 7, 1842; 2: 53)

Three years before his time and entries at Walden, Thoreau was already balancing immediate, first-person confrontation with facts on the one hand and logical abstraction on the other (observation of singular instances and establishment of regularities, experience and thought, empiricism and rationalism/idealism, and their respectively ambulatory and sedentary attitudes). As with Emerson’s “integrated” landscape, synthesis was the poet’s to make.

In Spring 1846, the poles have shifted somewhat since winter, as the urgency of survival abates:

The struggle in me is between a love of contemplation and love of action—the life of a philosopher & of a hero. The poetic and philosophic have my constant vote—the practice hinders & unfits me for the former. . . . My tendency is on the one hand to the poetic life—on the other to the practice—and the result is the indifference of both—or the philosophic. (after April 18, 1846)

It falls upon the philosopher to state not his “indifference” to both *poieisis* and *praxis* but “the indifference of both,” i.e., their equality. Exercising philosophy results in the equilibrating of *poieisis* and *praxis*, and their consequent ontological identity.

One could interpret Thoreau’s rehabilitation of practicality as denial—a convenient preference for one with slight formal training in philosophy. Adept as he is, however, at redeeming his flaws by casting them as part of a destiny to be entirely embraced, he is right, of course, that what ultimately matters are manners of living; he has come on his own to Hadot’s point that the contemplative life, with the doctrines it produces, does not matter in

itself, but only insofar as it transforms one's life habits, one's mores, into a being-to-the-world where heeding the universal has become a second nature. When Thoreau tackles the moral, he takes the term in its etymological sense of the habitual. "Any moral philosophy is exceedingly rare. This of Menu addresses our privacy more than most," he declares in *A Week*, referring to the prescription of positive bodily habits (149). In *Walden*, he comments approvingly on Menu's exhaustive approach: "Nothing was too trivial for the Hindoo lawgiver" (221). This holds for Thoreau's other grand models, before Zeno, the figures he will call "Divine legislators" in his Journal, the "Numas—Lycurgus—Solons" (After July 29, 1850, 3: 98), those who, in "Resistance" "legislate for all mankind," like Christ, by opposition to the parochial legislators in Congress, Webster not excepted, who have no "genius for legislation" (88). In a manner reminiscent of Emerson, who noted that the Spartans called "that which is just, equal; not that which is equal, just," Thoreau is committed to the idea that justice does not reside in a metaphysical principle (although his deliberation, or equalizing, also borrows from Pythagoras's strictly mathematical judication), but in a concrete observation and observance of natural laws (561).¹⁵ By pitching legislators against philosophers, Thoreau winks at the era that precedes Athenian democracy and the individualization of the moral question, a golden age before the time that saw the crumbling of blind faith in external prescriptions and the rise of philosophical schools, as many answers to the necessity of turning inward to cultivate virtue. With the moral domain pegged to physiology, broadly conceived, Thoreau makes his practice of a physics throughout "Economy" (and *Walden* more generally) dependent upon a naturalization of ethics—a movement towards natural morals, which the earlier lawgivers of humanity had no second thoughts about committing to stone. In *A Week*, Thoreau expresses the reduction thus: "All the moral laws are readily translated into natural philosophy, for often we have only to restore the primitive meaning of the words by which they are expressed, or to attend to their literal instead of their metaphorical sense. They are already *supernatural* philosophy" (362). This is the most explicit statement of Thoreau's etymological project: the dream to return "to the primitive analogical and derivative sources of words" must be framed within an eminently ethical and physical pursuit. His practice of wordplay is not a gratuitous indulgence but a necessary investigation into the material nature of morality as well as the irreducibly moral dimension of naturalist description.

"What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics. It is the law of average," Thoreau will write in *Walden*, version E (late 1852-1853)—he had assured his readers in *A Week* "that every man's success is in proportion to his *average* ability" (128). Even though the Journal concludes that "There is no exclusively moral law—there is no

exclusively physical law” (after 18 April 1846; 2: 241), *Walden* often revolutionizes the traditional Stoic order, which places physics before ethics: “In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the universe will appear less complex” (324).¹⁶ Instead of deriving a mode of living from a practice of physics, Transcendentalist Thoreau gets at proper physics through the decluttering of ethics. In “Paradise to be regained,” the logical inversion had appeared even more clearly: “[the calculations of mechanical power] are truths in physics, because they are true in ethics” (46). To offset Eltzer’s technophilic lack of interest for “inner improvements,” Thoreau stressed the secondary, partial nature of “exterior improvements,” appending the physical and logical to the ethical, like Cicero and Seneca.

Conclusion

Insofar as “living deliberately” aims at the equilibrium of contemplation and action, or physics and ethics, it does not negate the importance of a theory of “life” but makes it dependent on a certain way of living. Now, while substantive “life” appears in II§16 (“I did not wish to live what was not life”), it eludes a formal definition or a fixed status. The polyptoton is eloquent: “life” must be approached by means of living, while living something other than life (i.e., not living) seems to be, more than a conceptual possibility, the majority case. “Living [being] so dear,” i.e., the cost of dear life always being life itself—as life will kill us, eventually, once it is all *spent*—we cannot afford to live what is not it: we would be defrauded of (some) life. Thoreau therefore takes the *via negativa*: if one can take away something and still go on living, then that was not (essential to) life. This removal of the accessory is what he hints at when, explaining that yeast is “not indispensable,” he quips that his “discoveries were not by the synthetic but analytic process,” using both adjectives—*pave* Kant—in their first, ancient, etymological sense (62). Thoreau acquires knowledge not by combining and building up on ideas but by unfastening, taking apart, criticizing, in keeping with the Stoical, sectional understanding of “definition” as “speech by Analysis pronounced adaequately”, which splits into “partition,” “when the thing proposed is torne (as it were) into pieces,” and “division,” or “section of the genus into its immediate species” (Stanley 8: 33-34).

It will be the burden of a companion essay to follow this divisional physics (and its *logical* transcription), or biology by elimination, to the threshold of death. Let us here say that Thoreau’s deliberate living constitutes a mode of existence spiritually superior to the unconscious just in proportion as it is materialistically inferior—“[life] looks poorest when you are richest” (*Walden* 328). “Analytic” living, getting rid of “luxuries and comforts” in search for

the essential, supposes an external removal: “The ancient philosophers, Chinese, Hindoo, Persian, and Greek, were a class than which none has been poorer in outward riches, none so rich in inward. We know not much about them. It is remarkable that *we* know so much of them as we do” (14). Here, as elsewhere, Thoreau’s use of “about” is polysemic. In the spatial sense, there is not much “about” them for us to know them by, since their values lie entirely within; without this exterior dimension, Thoreau jokes, what remains to be known is *of* them. The wonder is that “we,” who have so much *about* us, can know *of* them who have nothing *about*. The attempt to weigh ourselves comparatively to their sense of balance, to counterpoise their virtue with ours, entails shedding what surrounds us to find what we are about—a radically dendrological type of de-*liber*-ation.

Notes

¹ See Skwire, “A Checklist”; Moldenhauer, *The Rhetoric of Walden*; Ross, “Verbal”; and West.

² See Houston, *Metaphors in Walden* 47-83; Thomas, “Thoreau’s Seven Principles”; Plotica, “Singing Oneself” and “Thoreau and Deliberate Living”; Dumm, “Henry Thoreau’s Walden”; Conde, “The Many Paths.”

³ See Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*. Translations from the French are mine.

⁴ “The Oxford English Dictionary: 1. a. Originally: †the science dealing with weight and its mechanical effects, and with the conditions of equilibrium resulting from the distribution of weight (obsolete).”

⁵ See Thoreau, *Walden: A Fluid-Text Edition*.

⁶ See West 211-18; for Thoreau passing upon puns, see West 475.

⁷ See West 27-67.

⁸ See Seybold 18-21.

⁹ For a differently balanced, more accurate account, see Svoboda, “Thoreau’s *Walden*.”

¹⁰ Not Diogenes Laertius, *pave* Risinger 112.

¹¹ See Sattelmeyer 212, 298; West, 10, on reading; see Webster 275; Johnson and Walker 190.

¹² “Primarily, a stretching or bending of the mind towards an object; hence, uncommon exertion of the intellectual faculties; closeness of application; fixedness of attention; earnestness.” *An American Dictionary of the English Language*.

¹³ See *Walden* 8, 45, 73, 97, 101, 236, 241, 265.

¹⁴ It is composed of the prefix *de-*, probably in its intensive value, and the verb *liberare*, an alteration of *librare*: “(1) To weigh, or poise. 2) To counterpoise, to counterbalance, to level; to try by plumb-rule. 3) To divide equally. 4) To throw, sling, or swing, 5) To gauge” (Ainsworth, *Latin Dictionary*). Beyond the “pound” unit (*lb*) and the “balance,” *libra* designates other kinds of measuring tools involving weight (Ainsworth, *Latin Dictionary*): the “carpenter’s line, or mason’s rule” for levelling (implied in Thoreau’s practice of carpentry [46] and “masonry” [241], as well as “survey[ing]” [81]); the “plummet,” both metaphorical (“not a Nilometer, but a Realometer” [98]) and real, in the villagers’ attempt to sound the pond it with a “fifty-six” that never touches the water (285) and Thoreau’s successful fathoming and lengthy account thereof (285-91).

¹⁵ See Jamblichus 336-37.

¹⁶ See Ritter 3: 472, 559.

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