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Immanence and Transcendence in Thoreau's "A Winter Walk"

Henrik Otterberg

While several studies to date have tracked Thoreau's influences from scientists both professional and amateur – Goethe, Humboldt and Agassiz among them – and above all related them to his "mature" writings of the 1850s and later, I wish to discuss some relevant aspects of his early nature essay "A Winter Walk" (1843). Consensus would have it that Thoreau here evinces little more than an Emersonian and hence Transcendentalist frame of mind, rejecting outright formal science: what Thoreau elsewhere called "the Baconian." Close reading of Thoreau's early essay, however, arguably reveals a fledgling openness to formal, positivist inquiry – and more fundamentally an interest in nature as primarily presenting an immanent order, regardless of the idealist philosophy brought to bear upon it.

How is the physical world of nature best approached by the writer? For the young Henry Thoreau, making his literary debut, this was a prime question. Equipped at Harvard with an education in the humanities and natural sciences, he launched himself as a fledgling author. Moving beyond derivative poetry and a number of solicited reviews, one of his first independent literary essays, "A Winter Walk," was published in 1843. The forum was a Transcendentalist magazine, *The Dial*, edited by Thoreau's friend and mentor Emerson.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a generation older than Thoreau. A skilled orator and enthusiastic proponent of spiritual reform, he had moved to Thoreau's hometown of Concord, Massachusetts, a few years earlier. By all accounts he had a profound influence on Thoreau, advocating self-reliance as well as independence from both institutional religion and entrenched capitalism, two pillars of the emerging nation. Emerson defiantly called nature a symbol of spirit, where discrete natural facts would correspond to moral ideas. In each individual, he argued,

lay a divine faculty or seed, there to be cultivated by a direct and intimate relationship with God's creation. His prime target was Unitarianism, with its emphasis on received miracles and latent disregard of the material world. This faith, Emerson felt, fostered a plodding and narrowly pragmatic spirituality, robbing the individual of interest in the submerged, intuitively moral dimensions of reality.

For Thoreau these matters would not have been new in the early 1840s. Having read the German romantics in college during the mid-1830s, and somewhat later Carlyle, Wordsworth, and various Hindu scriptures, his familiarity with Transcendentalist epistemology arguably deepened with – rather than originated from – his contact with Emerson. Yet Thoreau's particular concerns and emphases soon deviated from those of his mentor. Whereas Emerson's interest in the natural world remained largely theoretical beyond his own garden, his popular lecture tours carrying him across the North American continent and to Europe, Thoreau immersed himself in his local landscape, intent on pursuing a vocation at home.

A clue to the tension between the two men's views emerged with Thoreau's 1842 review essay "A Natural History of Massachusetts." Its ostensible purpose was to discuss a sample of official nature surveys of the state. While little is actually said of the studies, Thoreau is generous with details from his own Concord excursions and their related observations. Reading and seeing, science and sympathy, the objective and the subjective, are polar terms in Thoreau's text. His preferences generally seem to lie with the latter, correlating with basic tenets of Emersonian Transcendentalism. Stressing individual perceptiveness over empirical teamwork and scientific abstraction, Thoreau concludes by promoting his version of the heroic and independent male naturalist:

The true man of science will know nature better by his finer organization; he will smell, taste, see, hear, feel, better than other men. His will be a deeper and finer experience. We do not learn by inference and deduction and the application of mathematics to philosophy, but by direct intercourse and sympathy. It is with science as with ethics, – we cannot know truth by contrivance and method; the Baconian is as false as any other, and with all the helps of machinery and the arts, the most scientific will still be the healthiest and friendliest man, and possess a more perfect Indian wisdom. (NHE 29)¹

¹ Pending the long-awaited Princeton volume of Thoreau's "natural history essays," the standard collection remains the one edited by Robert Sattelmeyer in 1980, based as it

Yet despite his confident and youthfully assertive tone, Thoreau reveals a slight but unmistakable ambiguity towards his putative antagonist, the detached "Baconian" observer and manipulator of nature. One notes his tendency to define his ideal as a "true man of science" rather than the expected "Transcendentalist" or "naturalist." While the latter would comprise two of his preferred self-designations later in life, here he is at pains to describe as "most scientific" the man who is in touch with his own sensuousness and possesses a "perfect Indian wisdom."

A similar conflation of outlooks is evident in Thoreau's famous quotation delivered somewhat earlier in his closing paragraph of "A Natural History Of Massachusetts": "Let us not underrate the value of a fact; it will one day flower in a truth" (*NHE* 28). Two questions at once spring from this sentence. Firstly, science – an institution hitherto portrayed as dedicated to the accumulation of facts – appears here to be given definitive value, however indirectly. Secondly, it is left unclear precisely *how* the fact will flower with truth. Will it be due to some inherent, communicative quality of the fact *per se*, or perhaps to the higher faculty of the attuned observer – or yet again result from a species of merger of the two?² In other words, will nature ultimately present an immanent or a transcendent order?

When Thoreau submitted his "A Winter Walk" manuscript to *The Dial* the next year, Emerson was not pleased. He remarked on the essay's "unlimited contradiction" in "substituting for the obvious word and thought its diametrical antagonist," and with editorial license excised the text of portions which annoyed him (Harding, 118).³ Later critics, however, have generally agreed on the essay's transcendental tendency, seeing it as a sounding of terrain anticipating *Walden*.⁴ The structure of "A Winter Walk" of course invites such a conclusion: an omnipresent narrator guides the reader through a wintry landscape, fo-

largely is on the posthumously published collection of essays entitled *Excursions*, edited by Thoreau's sister Sophia Thoreau and his friend Ellery Channing in 1863. For scholarly annotation, however (which Sattelmeyer's edition lacks) two invaluable additions reside in William Rossi's and Lewis Hyde's anthologies respectively.

² I am indebted to John Hildebidle for this gloss (22).

³ For details on Emerson's editing of the essay, see F. B. Dedmond (8-9).

⁴ The seminal reading is Sherman Paul's (166-72). Paul is echoed, for example, by Henry Golemba (142f). *Walden* (1854) was generally seen as the touchstone of Thoreau's work also among critics emphasizing its links to ancient Indian philosophy, a tendency that culminated in the 1960s and 70s. For a representative interpretation of "A Winter Walk" in this vein, see James Morse Marshall (16-23).

cusing both on outer nature and inner analogies or contrasts. The intense cold is countered by an "inner fire" promising heroic virtue and purity; the circular walk corresponds to the light's arch from dawn to dusk; the walker's horizontal motion to the transcendental aspects of submerged springs and ascending smoke.

Without doubt there are many conventional traits in "A Winter Walk." It has been finely analyzed as an exponent of the romantic excursion as developed in nineteenth-century America, and also related specifically to various stock images of picturesque New England (Buell 188-207, Fink 112-121). Thoreau was evidently still searching for a literary form suitable to his ken. But this was not his only quest. As one critic observes of Thoreau's early works, their Emersonian tendencies become "an intellectual screen, behind which he meditates on the psyche and the world in adventurous and defiant ways" (McIntosh 95).

In the following, I wish to trace how Thoreau employs a dialectic of correspondence and immanence in "A Winter Walk." The protagonist's apprehension of his world proves dynamic and, as I will argue, is rooted in a will to explore different ways of perceiving it. While most critics have emphasized the essay's spiritual tendency, I will propose a more comprehensive understanding. While certainly not lacking in symbolism, I see "A Winter Walk" as also discussing antecedent problems of how to perceive the natural world and gain knowledge from it.

Thoreau's style can both exasperate and uplift, indulging as he does in puns, paradoxes and oxymora. The latter are evident in "A Winter Walk," with its snow "warm as cotton," its forests "natural cities" and sunrise a "swinging sound of cymbals" (*NHE* 51 57 and 54). Emerson was frustrated by this trait, and it has fostered a later criticism of Thoreau that often either overestimates his wordplay or tends to ignore it. Thoreau's stylistic play is significant, but not singularly so. On the one hand, it tends to supply welcome humorous contrasts to his more romantic modes and, in another register, to alleviate his acerbic social criticism. On the other hand, it also prompts the reader's attention to submerged countercurrents beneath the surface and, in "A Winter Walk," as yet fairly conventional rhetoric, alerting the reader to the text's dialectical qualities.

Let us now turn to a detailed discussion of the essay. At the commencement of "A Winter Walk" Thoreau's narrator describes a hushed dawn landscape covered in snow. What immediately becomes clear is

that an inner realm is involved in the description, blurring the boundary between the manifest and the meditated:

The earth itself has slept, as it were its first, not its last sleep, save when some street sign or woodhouse door has faintly creaked upon its hinge, cheering forlorn nature at her midnight work – the only sound awake 'twixt Venus and Mars – advertising us of a remote inward warmth, a divine cheer and fellowship, where gods are met together, but where it is very bleak for men to stand. (NHE 51)

The door/street-sign also calls attention to a "forlorn" nature awaiting the walker's company, while an "inward warmth" beckons as his heroic reward.

The Venus and Mars phrase has been interpreted in various ways. One critic argues that it speaks of a "truth . . . between love and war . . . or between voice and countervoice" (Golemba 143). Love and war are perhaps inevitable mythological extrapolations, and would seem to dovetail with a traditional correspondential view of nature as influenced by the gods. But there is nevertheless a deft dialectic at work here and appropriately the contrasting perspective is the tangible one. We will go some way towards recognizing it by citing a bold Danish translation of "A Winter Walk" which has Thoreau's planetary phrase rendered as "mellem Aften og Morgen," or "between evening and morning" (*Om at Vandre* 55). This interpretation ultimately turns the English reader's attention to the spherical, sun-orbiting bodies of Venus and Mars, while it is itself concerned to pin down Thoreau's meaning as one of quotidian chronology.

What weakens this reading somewhat is that Venus is traditionally accorded status of both evening and morning star, muddling what might at first seem a clear indication of the narrator's time of day. Yet one could, to my mind, simplify Thoreau's phrase even further, and point to the planetary body 'twixt Venus and Mars, namely Earth.⁵ The preceding "only sound awake" of course points primarily to the creaking of the door or street-sign, but it also subtly suggests nature's alertness: *She* (for the narrator feminizes and capitalizes her throughout) remains "sound awake" while her creatures sleep. Arguably, this is both contextually and structurally motivated. Thoreau's following sentence is led by "while the

⁵ Steven Fink argues that the phrase connotes "vast reaches of silent space," (115) but if there is a "sound awake" in this space – as Thoreau's text might suggest – it will have to be within Earth's atmosphere.

earth has slumbered, all the air has been alive with feathery flakes descending, as if some northern Ceres reigned.”

Furthermore, the “inward warmth” – the essay’s recurring contrast to outer frost – gradually approaches natural terms. Nature is said to harbor the “slumbering subterranean fire” that is its source, and appears increasingly self-sufficient both as a life-sustaining system and artistic objective as the text unfolds (*NHE* 55). The landscape strikes the narrator “as if Nature had strewn her fresh designs over the fields by night as models for man’s art” (*NHE* 52).

By contrast, when an explicit God is invoked in Thoreau’s text it is done in the margins. Ascending smoke meets its “master’s eye . . . in the upper sky;” a bleak mountain peak is said to display such valor “as God himself” (*NHE* 53, 55).⁶ Yet the narrator is only fleetingly preoccupied with smoky heights and imagined mountaintops. His discussions instead tend to corner what may be seen and learned from his immediate surroundings: “In the winter, warmth stands for all virtue, and we resort in thought to a trickling rill, with its bare stones shining in the sun, and to warm springs in the woods, with as much eagerness as rabbits and robins” (*NHE* 56). Importantly, the ideal aspect of virtue here is not related to any deity, but instead evokes rills and springs. The passage’s dialectic of perception thus motions “downward” from the ideal to the natural, confusing the supposed hierarchy between these realms. Indeed, nature in “A Winter Walk” becomes ever more powerful, both as a primal and moral force. She will, as the narrator asserts, “blot out the traces of men” and “prevail over art” by sojourn’s end (*NHE* 69f).

Language sooner or later becomes a challenge to the nature writer intent on conveying faithful impressions to the reader. The countless nuances of light, sound, texture, force and motion the writer will typically encounter and value in a more or less natural setting are not easily translated by conventional language. At times language may even seem chronically inadequate to the task, dyeing nature in anthropomorphism and thus revealing more of its own nature than anything else.

⁶ Furthermore, Thoreau’s narrator speaks of a river as “a beautiful illustration of the law of obedience . . . the path for a sick man” to conduct “by broad and easy steps” a path to the sea (66). Interestingly, however, he does not relate this law to any deity, but rather to the function of inclined planes and submerged springs. Thus, the “sick man” – read as naively law-obedient – may form an ironic contrast to the healthy winter walker, who wades through thick snow to uncover the river’s natural source in the interior (66).

How is this problem tackled in "A Winter Walk"? Upon reaching a stretch of woods, the narrator sighs in relief at having "shut out the gadding town," and then expresses a wish for communion with the trees: "notwithstanding the wonders which science is elsewhere revealing every day, who would not like to hear their annals?" (NHE 56f). This wish is naturally impossible to grant, at least in any conventional sense. Trees cannot speak, neither by themselves nor credibly as ventriloquized via the poet. And so the narrator's response becomes one of irony and paradox: "What would human life be without forests, those *natural cities*?" (NHE 57). From the woods, he continues, we borrow "the boards which shelter and the sticks which warm us," that is, we transform the forest, and the same result must ultimately come of the poet's effort: his vaunted woods become metaphorical cities (NHE 57).⁷

As "A Winter Walk" progresses, its various hyperborean images of the natural world increasingly coalesce into one of essential warmth. The wild and harsh aspects of winter are countered by the influence of evergreens, dexterous fauna and submerged springs. The narrator's personal quest is for a similar domestication or appropriation. He has assured the reader early on that nature's fire also "has its altar in each man's breast," but a problem remains in how to understand this relation (NHE 56). Is man a privileged being, or rather to be seen as part and parcel of nature?

Characteristically, Thoreau explores two answers to the question side by side, one relying on Transcendentalist ontology, the other on a notion of nature's immanence. The first option relies on Emersonian hierarchy, where ideal man ultimately makes nature into his realized will. "A healthy man," Thoreau echoes here, "is the complement of the seasons, and in winter, summer is in his heart. There is the south. Thither have all birds and insects migrated, and around the warm springs in his breast are gathered the robin and the lark" (NHE 56). This passage must have pleased Emerson, at least initially, so closely following his philosophy as it does. Yet in its blatant imitation, it also approaches parody – pointing to a stymied understanding of nature, sentimentalized and stripped of complexity. Indeed, much of "A Winter Walk" proves a contrast with

⁷ It is interesting to note the self-consciousness with which Thoreau employs figurative language at this early stage of his writing career. "A Winter Walk" abounds in explicit "as if" qualifications and phenomena "suggesting" various analogies. Notably, punning is largely absent from the essay, demanding as it does a more assertive and mischievous narrative voice. Hints toward Thoreau's later prowess are yet served with the lake in a hollow of the hills being called their "expressed juice," and later with nature's snowfall allegedly helping her to "prevail over art" (62, 70).

the typical Emersonian outlook. The essay's careful investigations of natural detail depart from Emerson's habitual swift motions toward pithy generalizations. Furthermore, Thoreau's budding recognition of the self-sufficiency of wild nature, its cross-informing and coherently functioning structure forming a "tawny grammar" of its own, represents a radical departure from his mentor's ideas.

The essay's passages on a deserted woodsman's hut brings this notion of a natural grammar to the fore. Significantly the narrative perspective, hitherto a unanimous and missionary "we," here momentarily turns into an inquisitive, more independent "I" (*NHE* 60). The logger's abode is situated in a fading but still "civilized and public spot" facing the surrounding forest, and the narrator has "such associations as when the traveler stands by the ruins of Palmyra or Hecatompolis" (*NHE* 60). In other words, the site strikes him at once as a peaceful oasis and place of sacrifice; he expresses joy at civilization but grievance at the loss of wilderness.

What follows is a careful reconstruction of the logger's life at the hut: what he ate and saw, how he slept and worked. The investigation culminates in the following:

See how many traces from which we may learn the chopper's history! From this stump we may guess the sharpness of his axe, and from the slope of the stroke, on which side he stood, and whether he cut down the tree without going round it or changing hands; and, from the flexure of the splinters, we may know which way it fell. This one chip contains inscribed on it the whole history of the woodchopper and of the world." (*NHE* 61)

Of the many remarkable aspects of this quotation, one may especially note how the narrator's reasoning approximates the cybernetic. His focus on the woodchopper's willed action upon nature, wresting a natural object into the realm of human service – a latently Transcendentalist view – is subsumed into an idea of nature's every particle bearing evidence of a larger history. One might of course object by arguing that the woodchopper has been responsible for the chip's inscription, or that it merely serves as a familiar Thoreauvian micro-to-macro analogy, but that does not preclude its important suggestion that man and his environment constitute an immanent system.⁸

⁸ For a contrasting interpretation of this passage arguing for its transcendental tendency, see Gordon Bigelow (15).

In his seminal *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson has shown how the idea of mind's transcendence gradually loses relevance when one is faced with a living, fully interdependent environment. To illustrate his point, Bateson calls to mind a man felling a tree:

Each stroke of the axe is modified or corrected, according to the shape of the cut face of the tree by the previous stroke. This . . . mental process is brought about by a total system, tree-eyes-brain-muscles-axe-stroke-tree [having] the characteristics of immanent mind. . . . But this is not how the average Occidental sees the event sequence of tree felling. He says, "I cut down the tree," and he even believes that there is a delimited agent, the "self," which performed a delimited "purposive" action upon a delimited object. . . . [Thus] popular parlance includes *mind* in its utterance by invoking the personal pronoun, and then achieves a mixture of mentalism and physicalism by restricting mind within the man and reifying the tree. Finally the mind itself becomes reified by the notion that, since the "self" acted upon the axe which acted upon the tree, the "self" must also be a "thing." (*Steps* 286f)

The radical aspects of Thoreau's apprehension of nature are clarified by the tree-felling episode of "A Winter Walk." Not only the chopper with his axe, but also the slag products of the process – the wooden chips – are described as capable of reconstructing the course of the felling event. And in that the chips may speak of what has happened, they are clearly related to a larger, "ecologically" structured system. This system is such that all parts may speak and bear witness – there is no privileged instance of memory or other organization, but rather a mass of initiatives and controls at play every moment. They form a web of intertwined actions and registers we tend to summarize today as an ecosystem.

The full implications of such speculations may well have been too jarring for Thoreau to follow through. The mind seen as a part of nature (and vice versa) would seriously challenge the Transcendentalist insistence on the autonomy and authority of the individual soul and its supposed maker. Its necessary moral would be proto-ecological rather than Transcendental. Yet drawing a clear line between the self and outer nature constitutes a problem already for Transcendental epistemology. If nature is a symbol of spirit, then a thorough investigation of nature ought to be the prime objective of the spiritual seeker. But a dilemma soon arises: the more of nature's complexity one perceives, the harder it proves to pinpoint symbols and extract their moral (and we may here, as

an aside, recall Emerson's frustration in his *Representative Men* with Swedenborg, whose elaborate system of perceived "correspondences" at length became so intricate and dense as to become impractical as scriptural exegesis, let alone as tutelary examples of moral vicissitudes).

We recognize a milder version of this problem when smoke is called "a hieroglyphic of man's life" by Thoreau's narrator. "Hieroglyphic" inadvertently speaks both of the initial power and eventual difficulty of seeking symbolic functions in nature. Smoke is vaguely said to suggest "more intimate and important things than the boiling of a pot" at a later point in the essay, while its significance is precisely one of hearth's homely herald as first described (*NHE* 62, 53). Thus the rather hackneyed introductory presentation of smoke gives over to something harder to decipher, polysemous even to the point of obscurity in its implications.

For his part, the narrator's own actions suggest the supremacy of direct apprehension of the natural world over any theoretical speculations brought to bear on it. He wishes that our lives be "more conformed to nature," that we stay out to be influenced by the purity of the air – "that the gales sigh through us, too . . . and fit us for the winter" (*NHE* 55). He asks of the forests, "whither shall we walk but in this taller grass?" and ends a discussion on water by praising the fisherman: "He belongs to the natural family of man, and is planted deeper in nature and has more root than the inhabitants of towns" (*NHE* 57, 69).

When he returns to the issue of immanence, however, the narrator is tellingly more cautious, partly placing another in his observer's stead. The issue is one of leaves which he notices tossed by the wind:

Here is one just keeled up against a pebble on the shore, a dry beech leaf, rocking still, as if it would start again. A skillful engineer, methinks, might project its course since it fell from the parent stem. Here are all the elements for such a calculation. Its present position, the direction of the wind, the level of the pond, and how much more is given. In its scarred edges and veins is its log rolled up. (*NHE* 63)

It is noteworthy that the "engineer's" conclusion here would be restricted to the dead leaf's particular history. Previously, with the logger's discarded chip, the narrator indicated a potential for a history "of the world," at least if a man of his own ability were to scrutinize it. With this Thoreau subtly introduces a caveat, modifying his understanding of immanence to include interest and power. In the engineer's case, the hy-

pothetical examination of the beech leaf would, to Thoreau, come up slightly short as compared to his own interested musings on the woodchip, as he or she would not be looking for aspects other than the leaf's travelogue. This also quietly ushers in the question of power, in acknowledging and/or limiting what we may provisionally call naturally available information, and in choosing to act on it or not.

But this said, and as touched upon above, there are more accommodating gestures toward "scientific" methods and aims on display in Thoreau's essay. Consider the following passage:

In winter, nature is a cabinet of curiosities, full of dried specimens, in their natural order and position. The meadows and forests are a *hortus siccus*. The leaves and grasses stand perfectly pressed by the air without screw or gum, and the bird's nests are not hung on an artificial twig, but where they builded [sic] them. (NHE 67)

The narrator here criticizes the "indoor" aspects of science – this indeed forms his main argument against it in the essay – but tellingly he is himself intent on ascertaining "natural order and position." "A Winter Walk," read in such light, becomes in its progression a plea for direct experience of living nature, even when outer circumstances are harsh. Thus, while homage is paid to the snug warmth of cottage hearths, such comfort should properly come only as a reward for one's having faced the elements and lit an inner fire. Because, notwithstanding his mainly reassuring and coaxing tone regarding the winter ramble described, the narrator hardly masks his own bravery or the fickleness of the weather involved. He initially faces a frosty dawn "clothed in a somber Tartarean light, like the shadowy realms;" later a wind "shaking down snow from the trees" and finally the prospect of wading through fields of snow as a "surly night wind rustles through the wood, and warns us to retrace our steps, while the sun goes down behind the thickening storm" (NHE 52, 59, 70).

This determination echoes Thoreau's adoration of Linnaeus' exploration of his homeland as alluded to in "A Natural History of Massachusetts," where Thoreau praises the Swedish botanist's "quiet bravery" and goes on to delineate the "true man of science" cited previously as modeled upon Linnaeus. Essentially, this becomes the program for "A Winter Walk" as well. But here the narrator stumbles upon the insight – so significant for his later essays on forests, leaves and wild apples – that an acute subjective study of nature does not necessarily preclude formal,

“scientific” results. In this vein, his casual exploration of a river’s submerged track emerges into a theory of water leveling, and his fascinated discussion of caddis worms goes beyond immediate observation to a description of the insects’ life cycle (*NHE* 62f, 58f).

“A Winter Walk” thus ultimately confirms itself as a tentative text, not only revealing its author’s self-conscious use of conventional imagery and reliance on received Transcendental philosophy, but also showing his forays into a more “scientific” logic of perception and a radically modern, immanent view of nature and man.⁹ During the following years, Thoreau may also have had occasion to revise his disdainful early opinion of “the Baconian,” as Bacon’s rationale underlying his stringent methodology was based on the conviction that the Fall had caused a momentous diminution of human power. The sacred role of science, as Bacon consequently – and quite radically – saw it, was to restore man’s position by furthering his knowledge of the natural world and its laws.

While Thoreau by all accounts distrusted human power in the aggregate, his quest – above all in his later journals – evolved into something at least partly akin to Bacon’s vision: elucidating the laws and probabilities of the natural world, slowly but patiently, by assiduous factual notation, vast readings in the contemporary natural sciences – Agassiz, Humboldt, Lyell and Darwin – and eventual synthesis: witness for example his late essays on the succession of forest trees, the spread of wild apples, and the tinting of autumn foliage. At any rate, the dialectic between “scientific” and “sympathetic” tendencies in his outlook did not end with “A Winter Walk” in 1843. Eleven years afterwards, in *Walden*, Thoreau would still speak of the disruptive power of knowledge – that a fact, properly understood, would cleave the perceiver in two (*Walden* 98). Appropriately enough, the narrator’s concluding gesture in “A Winter Walk” is one of contained enthusiasm. Skeptical of his schooling, Thoreau seems determined to explore options further: “The best scripture, after all, records but a meager faith” (*NHE* 71).

⁹ An arguably related aspect of the essay’s tentativeness is its shifting narrative perspective. While most of the text progresses in comradely fashion, it is not all “we” as Henry Golemba maintains (142). The narrator enforces his own interpretation of things in the passages on the woodcutter, the beech leaf and the booming of ice, and also in the poem “When Winter Fringes Every Bough” (*NHE* 60, 63f, 64f).

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