

*Feeling What You See:
Objectivity and Reflexivity in Thoreau's Lively Science*

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Thoreau may or may not have been a proto-new materialist, but he was certainly a cranky materialist: he made no secret of his frustrations with the empirical science of his day. Indeed, even as his lifelong practice of observing nature became more conventionally empirical over his last decade, his objections to the dry and dusty lifelessness of scientific writing remained as pointed as ever. As scholars, we have tended to account for Thoreau's unorthodoxies by calling him a *Romantic* scientist. Thus critics like James McIntosh, John Hildebidle, and Laura Dassow Walls (among others) variously propose that "Thoreau saw his task to be the joining of poetry, philosophy, and science into a harmonized whole" (Walls 7). Instead of pure objectivity, then, Thoreauvian natural history is a blended practice that anticipates N. Katherine Hayles' desire to see "literature and science as two mingled voices" (in Walls 8). On this view, scientific materialism *needs* the supplement of poetry in order to produce a satisfyingly vibrant portrait of the phenomenal world.

Today I propose to tweak that understanding a bit by suggesting that, at least in some instances, Thoreau's beef with scientific objectivity was not that it was too materialist—not that its vision was impoverished without poetry—but rather that it was not yet materialist enough. That is, I'll be suggesting that at least one distinguishing characteristic of Thoreau's observational practice is his effort to chart a more comprehensive materialism that would account *materially* for the subjective textures—the sense of elevation, significance, or wonder—of aesthetic experience. Consider, for example, the following Journal entry from July of 1851:

When I am against this bare promontory of a huckleberry hill then forsooth my thoughts will expand. Is it some influence as a vapor which exhales from the ground, or something in the gales which blow there or in all things there brought together agreeably to my spirit? The walls must not

be too high...The trees must not be too numerous
nor the hills too near bounding the view. (3: 318)

Moments like this one have served as examples of how Thoreau punctuates his natural history with “Transcendental” or “poetic” eruptions. But of course, this assumes that the phenomenon Thoreau is observing here—that his “thoughts will expand” every time he stands just so upon a certain hill—is categorically different from the other natural phenomena (the leafing out of trees, the arrival of songbirds) with which the Journal is concerned. And to be sure, that’s not a crazy assumption—to this day, few if any ecologists report the felt shape of their thoughts in the field.

Nonetheless, it seems clear to me that the impulse of this passage is analytical more than it is poetic. Although he’s ostensibly describing an experience of natural inspiration (*that’s so Thoreau!*), what fascinates him here isn’t the content of that inspiration but rather its mechanicity: this happens *every time*. Instead of painting us a visionary picture of this landscape, then, he proceeds to rather prosaically anatomize the arrangement of walls, trees, hills, and negative space in an effort to put his finger on precisely what about the composition of this site—what single element or combined assemblage—keeps triggering this dilation of his thoughts. And though the identity of that trigger proves more complicated than the local vapors or winds he first suspects, that those are his initial guesses clearly indicates that Thoreau understands the landscape’s influence to be material (on the *order* of vapors) rather than subjective or spiritual in nature. In other words the causes are, at least in theory, both physical and specifiable.

In this sense, this passage experiments with something like a science of poetic or aesthetic experience. Another memorable Journal entry from later the same year makes Thoreau’s experimental science even more explicit. On Christmas Day, 1851, Thoreau writes,

I witness a beauty in the form or coloring of the clouds which addresses itself to my imagination—for which you account scientifically to my understanding—but do not so account to my imagination.... You tell me it is a mass of vapor which absorbs all other rays & reflects the red—but that is nothing to the purpose—for this red vision excites me, stirs my blood—makes my thoughts

flow—& I have new & indescribable fancies and
 you have not touched the secret of that influence.
 (4: 221-2)

Again, this passage's overt critique of the poverty of the scientific account of sunset has been widely read as an argument for the necessity of supplementing science with poetry.¹ And again, the inflection I'd like to put on that reading would suggest that where previous critics draw a bright line between objective (scientific) and subjective (poetic) observation, this passage seems more interested in the possibility of articulating the objective, physiological causes of aesthetic experience. In other words, the problem with science's explanation of the sunset isn't that it lacks poetry but that it fails to specify the physics by which sunsets trigger aesthetic trembling in human bodies. "I witness a beauty...which addresses itself to my imagination," Thoreau observes; "this red vision excites me, stirs my blood makes my thoughts flow." The autonomic physiological responses he describes (the excitation, the increased blood flow, the stimulated cognition) are, he suggests, no less objectively *real* effects of the light's striking his eye than are the absorption and reflection of that same light as it bends through the body of the clouds.

So why shouldn't science be accountable to these physical dimensions of the phenomenon we call sunset? So long as objectivity means refusing to acknowledge, let alone examine, the physical dimensions of subjective experience, Thoreau argues, science will be condemned to taking a woefully partial view of material phenomena. But however damning this critique of science may be, it is also a profession of faith in it. For by calling science out for failing to live up to its own materialist philosophy, Thoreau is not proposing that we reject or supplement empiricism but rather that we double down on it. And these passages tentatively envision a more thoroughgoing empiricism that observes the world not as an inventory of inert and alien objects but as the site of dynamic and mutually transformative relations between our own and other bodies.

In this commitment to investigating the material conditions of subjective experience, Thoreau suggests at least one of the points of affinity between his unorthodox empiricism and the varieties of new materialisms emerging out of the academy today. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost broadly define them, the new materialisms are unified in their effort to remind us of "the power of matter and the ways it materializes in our ordinary experiences" (1).

To that end, they challenge our tendency to draw stark distinctions between material phenomena (huckleberries, sunlight, global warming) that have been designated the proper objects of science and those “immaterial” phenomena (mind, imagination, feelings) that have been designated “fundamentally different from matter” and, as such, the proper objects of the arts, humanities, and social sciences (2). Thus one of the things this new materialist reorientation can help to light up in Thoreau’s late work is the consistency with which he, too, systematically undermines this distinction. From the phenological studies of the *Journal*, to the late naturalistic essays and his unfinished manuscript for *Wild Fruits*, Thoreau’s late naturalistic work sets out to anatomize the materialization of phenomena we might otherwise assume to be immaterial: things like aesthetic wonder (as at that sunset) and even evangelical extremism (“Show me two villages, one embowered in trees...the other a merely trivial and treeless waste,” Thoreau writes in “Autumnal Tints,” “and I shall be sure that in the latter will be found the most starved and bigoted religionists” [165]). In this sense, I think the new materialisms will be very productive resources for Thoreau scholars by encouraging us to recognize the materialism of this late work—to let that work step out, as it were, from the long shadow of the Thoreau we all fell in love with at *Walden*, the young Transcendentalist ever squinting at nature to make out the symbols of its occult poetry.

Of course, we might wish to posit even closer correspondences to particular new materialist concepts. Thus for instance, Karen Barad’s concept of “intra-action”—which holds that phenomena are “relations without preexisting relata” (815)—might be useful for illuminating Thoreau’s fundamentally dynamic and relational approach to the phenomenon of the sunset. Or again, Jane Bennett’s vocabulary of agential assemblages could help give new emphasis to the efficacy of that huckleberry hill—drawing out Thoreau’s sense that his experience of inspiration there is not *his* precisely but really belongs to the site at that moment, as an emergent dimension of the assemblage “wall-trees-hill-emptiness-human.” As a literary scholar, however, I am always acutely aware of the pitfalls of translation. Transposing Thoreau’s thought into this latest critical vocabulary risks distorting or attenuating the specificity of his thought. For instance, the difference between what Bennett means by an “assemblage” and what Thoreau means when he refers to “all things there brought together” on that huckleberry hill is potentially considerable, for Bennett’s term bears the full freight of a

philosophical apparatus (Deleuzian ontology) under which Thoreau's sense—entirely unacquainted with Deleuze's philosophy—may quickly get lost. Moreover, beyond their work with philosophical ideas, studies like Barad's and Bennett's tend to share philosophy's aspiration to build out comprehensive theories of ontology—to provide a view as if from nowhere from which we might, if not transcend, then at least, as Bennett puts it, “stretch ourselves” to comprehend a material system so unimaginably (or not) larger than ourselves (230). And while Thoreau's journalizing can and has been read as a technology for acquiring just such a post-human-scaled vision of nature, it seems equally clear to me that his interests remained ineluctably tied to the intimate scale and aesthetic textures of human experience. His materialism was, in other words, a method, even an epistemology, but it was not a theory in the sense that it never aspired to the systematicity, to the god's-eye view, that constitutes the explanatory power of the new materialisms.

Thus while I embrace this comparative work and can't wait to see how it will make once-overlooked aspects of Thoreau's work begin to vibrate with new resonance, I also approach it with caution. I want to preserve the still tentative, speculative, and inconsistent character of Thoreau's largely private empirical practice from becoming lost in the more rigorously systematic, if still speculative, materialist philosophies put forward under the auspices of the new materialism. Advancing, then, with trepidation but also in the open-ended spirit of discovery, I look forward to this backward glance and to discovering, once again, just how far back the roots of even our newest “new” insights might actually run into cultural (and material) history.

NOTES

1. See for instance Alan Hodder's reading of this moment as exemplary of the “symbiotic” relationship between Thoreau's “spiritual quest” and his “interest in natural facts” (277-8). In a similar vein, David Robinson describes Thoreau's practice of “participatory observation” as a method for balancing the “complementary roles” of “empirical observation and metaphysical conceptualization” in his project (178).

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