

## **Thoreau's Translations: John Brown, Apples, Lilies**

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Thoreau's evocations of wilderness and his piercing political essays are unified expressions of a single impulse, a love of the world, a world that must continually be raised from desolation, shadows, decline, and death. He delivers the serenity of Walden Pond with one hand, and with the other, a defense of civil disobedience in protest of the invasion of Mexico. We share his climb up Maine's austere Ktaadn and then share "Slavery in Massachusetts" delivered at a rally after the re-enslavement of Anthony Burns. We may remember "Walking" or "Wild Apples," redolent of woods or meadow, and we remember equally his impassioned "Plea for Captain John Brown." Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry appears today as the opening skirmish of a bloody uncivil War, a skirmish won by the South who had him hanged. Thoreau's full-throated defense was as much against the local grain as his "retreat" to Walden. His vivid accounts and evocations work from an impulse to save what's best in Brown and what's best in the land and terrain we inhabit together.

Through varied phases of his life, Thoreau sought fullness in becoming, a quest recounted, composed, passed on to us by words. They are words we savor, save, and reenact in speech and deed, continuing thereby a continuous creation marked by cycles of grief and celebration, of perishing (tender or cruel), and of unfailing advent of new days. His song enacts an instinctive love, a passion to save what's worth saving, whether it's the eternal sound of the sea saved for our ears, the taste of wild apples saved as the elixir of the gods, the testament of John Brown saved for our humanity, or the scent of a lily saved as the hope of creation.

### **SENSING THE LIFE OF THE WORLD**

Thoreau is a philosopher of the senses: "*We need pray for no higher heaven than the pure senses can furnish . . .*" (382, emphasis added). Sensing the world from new angles brings it alive anew. His paths toward the rocky heights of Ktaadn cut through varied wilderness. He

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sees and takes note of the detail along the way, beholding a mobile, evanescent surround that alters as he moves. There are lakes, dense forests, dangerous rapids, and the sense that few humans have marked the terrain, perhaps none with the poetic renderings he will afford. Approaching the summit, he's stopped dead in his tracks, for the top is invisible, shrouded in mist, unnerving, forbidding. There is no sense of the human or even of life – only boulders, precariously balanced, as if cast away and ready to plummet. A mile into clouds, he's struck down by the sight of “some undone extremity of the globe.” This is no longer the forested approach. It seems to Thoreau that “some vital part” of him “escape[s] through the loose grating of his ribs” (*Essays* 108). Ktaadn gives him an inhospitable, unfinished creation, quite unlike the creations, the dawns, he recounts by Walden Pond. This sight doesn't so much bring the world alive as remind him that the world can be *drained*.

Worlds otherwise drained can be filled by Thoreau's ample poetic approach. Here he seeks the ship-wrecked remains of his friend, Margaret Fuller:

I expected that I should have to look very narrowly at the sand to find so small an object, but so completely smooth and bare was the beach ... that when I was half a mile distant the insignificant stick or sliver which marked the spot looked like a broken spar in the sand. There lay the relics in a certain state, rendered perfectly inoffensive to both bodily and spiritual eye by the surrounding scenery, a slight inequality in the sweep of the shore . . . . It was as conspicuous on that sandy plain as if a generation had labored to pile up a cairn there . . . . It reigned over the shore. That dead body possessed the shore as no living one could. (123)<sup>1</sup>

The place of Fuller's bones is at first of dark mourning or grief; yet a sprig rises to become a ship's spar and then a rugged cairn, holding her reign and majesty. A place otherwise redolent of death is transformed toward radiance and dawn: “Her bones were alone with the beach and the sea, whose roar seemed to address them . . . as if there were an understanding between them and the ocean that necessarily left me out” (123). So her communion with the endless surf lengthens the time she inhabits. Thoreau witnesses a communion too vast, long lasting, and impersonal to include him. Nevertheless, the beach cradles a fellow-writer and activist, and he has time to *give witness* to her majesty. On Ktaadn, in contrast, he is affronted by the impossibility of anything *like* communion, personal or impersonal, the impossibility even of contact with the terrain. It repels his presence,

his view goes blank and spirit flees, as if before a terror that cannot afford to be seen.

### TASTES AND SAUNTERING

Sight of the world is one path of access. Taste of the world strikes us differently. Thoreau is wise in the taste of wild apples, the taste of a breeze. But even here, matters of angle, scale, and placement obtrude. The refreshing taste of wild apples expands toward the gods and eternal youth. Wild apples “*pierce and sting and permeate* us with their spirit,” and hold the elixirs “that keep the gods forever young” (*Essays* 305, 295). To taste is to know spirit, to enjoy and suffer an immediacy of contact that brings moments of fulfillment. The world provides a sting that answers desire for impact. “What a healthy out-of-door appetite it takes to relish the apple of life, the apple of the world!” (306). The life of the world is the life of our tastes for apples or sharp winds, for damp earth beneath our feet or a stream’s curling eddy around blistered toes. The world’s life is the flickering of our mobile senses and visceral responses, and also the life of our words. The contacts Thoreau transmits are conveyed through words that reenact his primordial contacts—with the world, but also with the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*, of the *Gospels*, of Milton, and of endless others.

Thoreau is a saunterer. Seeing, hearing, and tasting, and a sense of breath and body in motion, and then stilled, converge in his tramping. Walking is an art, he says, that very few have mastered (*Essays* 149). (A parallel thought is that few know how to die.) To leave the enigma hanging—the rather offensive provocation that I may not know how to walk—leaves his words strange, and the world strange and wonderful. If we give our heart to that wonder, if we yield to the thought that we might yet learn to walk, we acknowledge the world as a holy place we have yet to enter. Henry Bugbee, a philosopher deeply indebted to Thoreau, characterizes philosophy as a “walking meditation of the place” (139).<sup>2</sup> This fits Thoreau’s practice exactly. He is a prodigious trampler, living the visceral contact with body, earth, and air that walking so wonderfully affords.

Sauntering is a beholding-in-motion, a moving in and toward the wondrous, sacred, or sublime. It uncovers and accepts the world as a place in motion, in unending creation. Sauntering is pilgrimage, but as Thoreau has it, not *away* from the ordinary toward the holy or sacred, but through the *midst* of the ordinary-become-sacred, or the sacred-become-ordinary. It is not passing from A to B but a happening joined to the sacramental act of taking steps steeped in the wilds all around. The holy appears *through* and *in* walking that is a receptive articulation and consecration.<sup>3</sup> Though we had heard that the sacred

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is housed just over the horizon, we arrive at the realization that ours is already a special, sacred place, given to our care and attention.

Where earth, sky, and waters, where blossom of trees, sounds of companions, and tastes of apples greet us, are imbibed and transformed, there we have sacred sites. Their sacrality is redeemed in their power to transform as we move therein. Contact is not ‘raw data’ but schooled, thought-seasoned, often toward the bounteous. As Thoreau has it, “We are comparatively deaf and dumb and blind, without smell or taste or feeling. . . . *What is it, then, to educate but to develop these germs [seeds] called the senses?*” (*Week* 382, emphasis added). We sense the taste of apples (gifts of the gods), the meteor flash that is John Brown, the communing of the sea with Fuller’s bones, achievements of sharpened eyes and ears. The world is not primitively *either* sacred or unsacred, but awaits its best advent through our tuned sensibilities. Thoreau helps hone them toward receiving the bounteous in its ephemeral passing. That passing is through, and of, unfinished creation, accrued in walking in the place. The poet-walker *in* and *of* a holy place, is also a singer and rower, matching breath, limbs, and motion to song. “We rowed by turns swiftly over the surface [of the lake], singing such boat songs as we could remember” (*Essays* 90). As all singers must, Thoreau listened—in expectation of howls answering evening songs from the boat; in expectation of the “droll trill” of a whippoorwill, its “wailing hymns.” the “idiotic hooting” of owls, the “thump” of the frog, the thunder that even the gods hear with awe.

In a college essay on the sublime, Thoreau holds that it is not triggered by fear, as Burke and Kant would hold (*Early Essays* 94). “Contact with the infinite,” he says, occurs through wonder and awe, and responds less to fear and death than delight and birth. What he later calls “dawn” supervenes on afflictions and dread. Because they were immortal, Greek gods could have no fear of death, he says, yet the thunder of Zeus could still bring them to awe as it clears the heavens for dawn.<sup>4</sup> Thoreau awakens hearingly to the lusty herald of a cock at first light, and also to godly thunder, yet he would not slight the wonder of more diminutive sounds. He builds simple walls against the elements, affording a dry place for sleep, where he’s serenaded “by the sound of raindrops on the cedar splints which covered the roof” (*Essays* 90).

#### **TRANSFORMATIVE CONTACT**

To have a love in and for the world is to be alive in and for its preservation, which assumes a knack for contact. Sight, taste, scent and hearing are modalities of impact that expand, close down, and transfigure – even as the world they contact expands, contracts, and

transfigures. On Ktaadn Thoreau's sense of the world falls away. Somewhere between desperation and ecstasy, he shouts "—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! The *solid* earth! The actual world! The *common sense!* *Contact! Contact!* *Who* are we? *Where* are we?" (*Essays* 113). We get contact and orientation (we hope), and then rely on our powers of articulation and conveyance. Sometimes a dumb stupor supervenes, but stupor aside, variations of impact (and of monotony or absence) achieve poetic translation. Words then enact the mobility and evanescence of the world at hand, across spectrums of importance. We take in importance from one angle to the next, from a *lack* of touch to vivid sight or hearing, from the corrupt to the redemptive. It's a poet's gift in which we all take part. When schooled toward the sacred, contact restores bounteous worlds. Thoreau's pen and capacity for contact deliver gentle and striking translations as he moves from stench to sweet lilies, from bare bones to saint's relics, from a noose that kills to a hanging that launches a meteor, John Brown.<sup>5</sup>

We give and take such translations from one angle to another, one placement to another, one time scale to another, one sense of verticality to another (reaching toward the gods or the higher law or the good). Or in moments of dark, things are flat, with no rise or fall, no verticality at all.<sup>6</sup> Thoreau gives us life through plays of words whose spring seems inevitable, compelling, like a dawn or thunder-clap. We *might* shut down, but why should we!

A single passion, a yearning for life's well-springs, makes Thoreau's political words of a piece with his sauntering or rowing. It's a passion amidst social desolation—for life to fund protest and moral appraisal; for life-springs to stiffen spirit on a climb on Ktaadn, or for waters that sooth in a walk through woods. He has passions to find and deliver life's swirls, to ride them, however wild, to write them as he finds them (and as they find him).

Thoreau takes sources of life to be the wild, untamed, unknown, or sublime.<sup>7</sup> The life of the world means contact with wildness, and contact with the life of our words, words that tap this wildness bringing new angles, new life (Critchley 10). In families, tribes, collectivities, and in solitude, we receive and give back articulations, for language is not a private preserve. Thoreau brings us to fields of words (as we read) that in turn sing the fields of Maine (as we hear). He keeps us among lustrous things and things austere: the call of the whippoorwill, the roll of the sea, the mist on Ktaadn, delivering us from shadow and collapse.

How does this happen? For thunder to enter and be in my world, scrubbing it clean with a bang, I must have ears attuned. (I can't be deaf, or too absorbed to notice.) And the heavens must roaringly provide. Thunder is renewing, mobile and evanescent: *there*—in and

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of the world. Portals for thunder or the thump of frogs, allow sheen or ornament to be added to the world, and also allow flow in reverse as sheen or terror *enter as ours* (or not). The ear gives power to thunder and thunder shapes the ear. Contacts transfigure bidirectionally. *Thoreau* is shaped by the entry of birdsong, and birdsong enters because his ear is so shaped. As his ear is schooled, his *world* is changed, and he marks that change poetically, recapitulating it as a voice of creation,<sup>8</sup> conveyed, for example, in *A Week*, or *Cape Cod*. Sound betokens the world transformed. In learning to listen the world is reborn.

Thoreau is not the same after writing *The Maine Woods* nor is Ktaadn, now misted in ghostly power. He's not the same after "Wild Apples," and the apples around Concord have changed, too, after Thoreau has us taste one frozen, then thawed. As Fuller's bones are transfigured, just so is the body spirited in secret from Harpers Ferry to Manhattan's Battery, and north again by rail North Elba for burial. John Brown's fugitive, secreted body cannot be the same after being taken up in Thoreau's "Plea" and "The Last Days."

### **APOCALYPSE**

It's not just the crow of a barnyard cock that transforms night to day, and not just a slender stick marking Fuller's bones that triggers the change from a cruel site of unnecessary death to the raising of a cairn and a communion of bones with the lap of the sea. On occasion, at issue is the raising up of an entire polity or nation or region—not particulars but a world itself, gripped by desolation and demanding restoration, as if vast suffering were a cosmic and inhuman punishment. Yet even as he addresses the darkness of the nation under slavery, or addresses even more "metaphysical" matters, Thoreau renders life at sites that yield *singularity of contact*: contact with Fuller, contact with John Brown.

There is a coming apocalypse, and John Brown is its prophet and avenging angel. The portal of scent keys his presence to slavery's Hell. Corruption has left its inescapable olfactory mark. In "Slavery in Massachusetts," Thoreau recounts the unbearable stench of Daniel Webster's joining slavers in support of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The Massachusetts Senator sponsored a bill that strengthened Southern power, and granted license to slavers infiltrating the North to hunt down blacks on the run.

Anthony Burns was the center of one of the more violent and celebrated cases of slave recapture and attempted rescue.<sup>9</sup> He was cornered by Southern hunters and jailed in the Boston courthouse, as the new federal law required. A crowd of several hundred abolitionists

and free blacks joined for a rescue attempt, battering a hole in the doors. The crowd grew to at least two thousand. In the assault, shots were fired. A jailer was killed. An acquaintance of Thoreau gained entry, but Burns was held inaccessible on the third floor.<sup>10</sup> Federal soldiers moved in, *foreign* soldiers, as it were—or at the least, enforcers of a despised law that was work of a foreign, alien, and corrupt power. Or so it was for Thoreau and a great number of angry and humiliated New Englanders.

Burns was paraded as a captured trophy between columns of cavalry and foot soldiers in full military dress, rifles loaded at the ready, even a horse-drawn cannon, should it be needed. The ceremonial parade was meant to demonstrate regal Federal power and the nullity of the slave. He was made to publicly endure a humiliatingly slow and shackled walk down to a Federal ship that would return him to the South. 50,000 citizens lined the streets shouting “shame!” at this spectacle, a second Boston massacre.<sup>11</sup> There was no New England spring that year for Thoreau. He mourns lost fragrance of woods and meadows. Everything offends his keen moral scent. In place of sauntering there is only a joyless slog through stench.

At last, graciously, access to a world-worth-saving is afforded his ever-alert senses. Wondrously, multiple registers of radiance appear. Fuller’s bones are bones, but became not only that. The woods were woods, then hell—and now, not only that (*Essays* 192). After walking us through page after page of moral pollution, he comes finally upon a fragile lily, so slight it is almost overlooked. His keen nose opens this site of surviving heaven—and closes out hell. Or perhaps hell remains, but the lily pushes back with hope. This might be the difficult wisdom of Staretz Silouan: “Keep your mind in hell, and despair not.”<sup>12</sup> The sweet scent of a swamp-lily opens to the wondrous.

Thoreau finds purity lodged in the muck of servility and slavery (*Essays* 193). The flower whose tendrils descend indecorously to a fouled anchorage gives off a fragrance rising from an aeon of accumulated grime. Mud feeds sweet bloom, and Thoreau finds hope in this. More or less permanent pollution may belie a moment of uncorrupted courage and honor. The lily’s scent, an aroma of instant transfiguration, cuts through, restoring the promise of a world reborn.

Julia Ward Howe was the wife of Samuel G. Howe, one of the undercover Secret Six, men who at great risk provided financial support for John Brown’s paramilitary anti-slavery work. She invokes the lily in verses published in 1862, too late for Thoreau to have heard them. They were set to the tune of “John Brown’s Body.” We hear the lily’s Gospel roots as the verse pushes hope forward into the coming bloody mess:

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In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,  
with a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me.  
As he died to make men holy,  
let us die to make men free.<sup>13</sup>

Thoreau had no doubt that John Brown died to make men free.

### RAISING THE DEAD

We've encountered the transfiguration of apples and bones and the stench of the woods and meadows, and we've met the transfiguration of Ktaadn to dark Chaos. Thoreau musters a new response to the death – and life – of John Brown by recalling what he has *heard* of the man and his fate. He offers an angle of *hearing*. On the day of Brown's death, he "heard that he was *hung*" but did not "*hear* that he was *dead*. . . ," and he lets the enigma linger. If he had heard that Brown was hung, why, for heaven's sake, would he *need* to hear that Brown was dead? Crediting Thoreau with sanity and full powers of articulation, we must work with his words as he gives them—not slough them off as confusion, mental lapse, or poetic acrobatics. He leaves time to let this paradox settle in, testing our imaginative patience, as it were. The incongruity is that a life might not perish in hanging, and that hanging might not bring death.

Thoreau seems to intimate that he had not *heard* that John Brown was dead -- because he *wasn't*. In being hung, Brown might have been given new life, as martyrs are. Or Brown might live because it's impossible to *believe*, or *comprehend*, that Brown is dead—not because the shock of the news can't be absorbed but because anyone as alive in action, principle, and spirit as John Brown cannot have died *for all the life in him*. It may be that Thoreau's missing the news suggests that Brown survives indefinitely, into an extended future, in just the way the life of a meteor or of a Schubert Sonata outlasts the microscopically small, clocked interval of its entry into, and departure from, the world. My most recent contact, two weeks ago now, with a Schubert Sonata, in one sense ended when my CD player stopped, and I paused before moving on. Yet I know simultaneously that the music has not ceased but extends sempiternally. Taking the long view, we might say that John Brown's origin is as old and dateless as Old Testament prophets or angels, and that his life extends forward from his hanging to our time and into an indeterminate beyond. The eloquence of his life outlasts the interval between his census-recorded life-and-death in much the same way as the radiance of a meteor outlasts the momentary flash of its light or the echoing rebounds of a Sonata outlasts my most recent hearing.

Life and death are anomalous phenomena in that they follow no single law of determination. My recording of Sonata 960 has stopped playing but that does not determine that it is not still alive—as ever. The gloaming shifts imperceptibly toward night but that does not determine that the day is not still alive—as ever. The threshold of my door belongs to the beckoning outside as I stride out to the back yard from the kitchen but that does not determine that the threshold does not also belong to the inside of the house. The anomalous location of thresholds may matter less than the anomalous extent of the life of a Schubert Sonata, and both may matter less than the anomaly of Brown’s death.<sup>14</sup> He was hung yet perhaps is not definitively dead.

Thoreau calls tidal creatures, belonging to sea and to land and to neither and both, “anomalous creatures.” Something anomalous escapes a law or pattern of expected and well-defined action or status, belonging only problematically to them. Brown is outside Federal law, but more to the point, he’s anomalous taxonomically, ontologically. There’s something deeply troubling about the questions whether this celebrated hanging gives or takes life. Brown’s status is anomalous, for a medic’s rule-bound conventions for determining its place and time are not absolutely determinative; he belongs to a mysterious wild.<sup>15</sup>

Thoreau has yet another sense in which John Brown slips out of the noose. He’s keyed to Daniel Webster’s *failure* to survive hanging. Webster’s vote for a strengthened fugitive slave law was his noose. He died even though census-takers found him living a year later. He is now in an anomalous zone: the laws of physiological death are not the laws of moral death. For a previously admired Northern Senator to promote a law that strengthened the powers of slavers to roam the New England countryside armed in pursuit of escaped slaves marked his moral death. Thoreau and Bronson Alcott each allude to gunshots in the woods signaling the re-capture or killing or terrorizing of a man, woman, or child on the way to Canada. On pain of federal arrest, the law forced citizens of Concord and Boston to assist in and not impede the capture of escaped slaves. In 1850 Theodore Parker preached in Boston that Webster “takes back his [previous anti-slavery] words and comes himself to be slavery’s slave” (Renehan 47). Webster is an anomaly, a slave, despite appearances. Webster died despite appearances.

In 1852, on the occasion of Webster’s physiological departure, Parker asks if he can now mourn the man who two years earlier had signed the hated bill. He answers that he cannot, for the good reason that Webster died and was mourned *two years earlier*. John Greenleaf Whittier reinforced the point: “When faith is lost, when honor dies, the man is dead!” (Renehan 47-48). Webster dies when he disavows his anti-slavery position; despite hanging, John Brown lives on as his avowed word lives on. When faith is secure and honor alive, the man

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is alive. Long before clerks mark him dead, Webster dies. Long after clerks stamp him “dead,” John Brown lives.

### ***MEMENTO MORI!***

If we credit Plato, to abandon the thought of death is to abandon philosophy. Court records list the living and dead, but those records do not reveal who really lives and dies. Thoreau cites the inscription, *Memento mori!*—Think of your death!—worrying that we hear this in only a “groveling” sense. We grovel before death rather than seek that angle from which life defeats death.<sup>16</sup> An exultant life passes through death to add more to life, to *complete* it. Thoreau claims, “we’ve wholly forgotten how to die,” abandoning life by letting death be merely life that is “rotted or sloughed off” (*Essays* 277). One end of a line of available overseers has death declared by medics or census-takers, the other, by assessors marking loss of character, radiance, or honor. The upshot? Brown’s hanging does not lessen or kill his character, radiance or honor, but enhances these. Thoreau “fails to hear” that Brown is dead—because he *lives*.

The cultures we inherit keep moral moments alive, keep persons of principle or great character alive through their display in texts or theater, in stories passed on by kin or by community action. Such moral moments are magnetic foci of admiration that fuel worthy aspirations and are fulfilled in worthy deeds and dispositions. Ideals of character, action, or bearing provide tacit or explicit models to measure life’s worth: frankness or honor, courage or great kindness, dedication to justice or to the needs of kin. In no obvious order, these pictures of worth embed as relatively inescapable parts of lived reality. An ideal, or sets of them and their components are sustained through our praising judgments of them, and through their continued affirmation by admired others. Aversions also play a role.<sup>17</sup> A despised or disfavored action or temperament reinforces its converse. Dispraise or mocking distance keeps the unworthy at bay.

An ideal’s strength can rest on self-mustered conviction, and also on affirmation by significant others. We affirm in concert, a fact hidden in a North-Atlantic ideological regime that would valorize absolute autonomy.<sup>18</sup> However, “*No man is an Island*,” and no woman either. We grow up in families and they never abandon us, even as we trade some members for others, even distant others. Conviction grows amidst parents, neighbors, friends, and adopted next-of-kin. Thoreau might be one such adopted next-of-kin, one who becomes our conscience.<sup>19</sup>

When ideals take on life, we depend on their successful conveyance through word and deed among a “we” of indefinite and changing extension and affinity. Exemplars are found and maintained

through depiction, song, and direct face-to-face exchange. In contact, we soak in their traits, bearing, and deeds. John Brown is an exemplar for Thoreau, and perhaps through praise, he becomes one for us. Thoreau works to convey Brown's immortal worth; he says, in effect, "*Here is Life! Behold!*" Brown's sixty-year life marks a successful if sometimes floundering biological achievement, the survival of a physically discrete body in time. As an animated *physiology*, Brown ceases with his hanging; yet his story, his life, his ensoulment, does not stop there. In the words of the Civil War camp song, Thoreau keeps him from "a-moulderin' in his grave."<sup>20</sup> Thoreau preserves Brown through writing, and as import, through resistance to slavery, both in the company he keeps and in his work escorting ex-captives on the underground railroad, acts kept alive in his writing and in the writing of others.

Beyond physiology, humans enter a cultural life that links sisters, mothers, brothers, friends, teachers, mayors, musicians, whose souls richly mix, are receptively porous to each other in the moment and over time. And we enter the abundance of Plato, Shakespeare, Christ, the Buddha, and endless others, an abundance that continues indefinitely past the demise of single physiologies. This flow of exchange over indefinitely expanding time and space constitutes what I call "infinite culture" and shapes what it is to be among the living.

What separates life from death? Remembering his accounts of walking, rowing, and seeking wild apples, we'd say that to be alive is to be immersed in taste, sound, touch, listening, sight—to behold—to be in contact with one's mobile surround. To be alive is also to nourish such contact in stride and song, in words and reenactments. This can be focused at three overlapping levels of resolution. We exercise *poetic* capacities of reception and transformation at the level of perception. A splinter appears as a spar. We exercise *moral* capacities of perception, deed, and character in styles of living that carry life beyond the confines of its merely physiological expression. (To risk bodily harm or social acceptability for an ideal is to let character trump considerations of physiology or conformity.) And we exercise *hermeneutical*, interpretive capacities, engaging, altering, and reproducing the cultures we inherit and inhabit. Powers of cultural articulation and conveyance let us articulate and reproduce our inherited poetic and moral surround, passed on in texts and folklore and endless conversation. We imbibe and pass on ways of understanding, and of comportment toward, kin and strangers and those exemplars we praise and admire. To engage at this level of hermeutical transmission includes exercising the expressive forms of politics, family life, the arts, schooling, and ever-so-many other strands of our complex cultural identities.

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Ktaadn becomes an outpost of the gods, Fuller's sandy remains become relics, John Brown becomes a meteor: these instance an animation of Ktaadn, Fuller, and Brown and instance an aliveness in Thoreau's powers of imaginative transposition and lyric transfiguration that we then receive. A moral-religious dimension is in play: he delivers "essays in intellectual love," Ortega-like "salvations," of Fuller, wild apples, or Walden.<sup>21</sup> In the event, *his* moral character and poetic-hermeneutic skills give *their* character immortality. Transposed slightly, *their* character, as he absorbs it, gives him power to *render* their immortality, which in turn underwrites *his* character (and immortality). Rendering Fuller's capacity to rise above her mangled body, or Ktaadn as the shrouded place where the gods attend unfinished business, or John Brown as a serene and terrible judge, tests our capacity to be alive. And we must not shut down with the further test that asks us to acknowledge that only a half-dozen persons have truly lived since the world began.

The bulk of villagers and citizens who have entered the census tables in and about Concord have *neither lived nor died*, in the configuration of those notions of interest to Thoreau. Can neighbors be dispossessed so easily, with a stroke of the pen? Thoreau raises the bar for having lived and places it out of reach, which might be perverse, but then again, might snap his neighbors—*us*—awake. In "Walking," he raises the bar for simply *walking*, saying that in his experience, only one or two persons have learned that art. How many have been alive to the taste of the evanescent world in all its poetic variety and intensity, the world of the saunterer, a world that is always already on the way to the holy? His impossible, humbling, or frankly exclusionary standards can seem impertinent. For the moment we might say that these upward revisions of what it takes to be walking or living appear frivolous mainly for those mired in village wisdom. For Thoreau, these startling reformulations are neither passing fancy nor conceptual tinkering.

One way or another, Thoreau's poetic translations are intended to be *moves into reality*, into contact that completes it and so also transfigures it. His translations are from one register of reality to its successor. By the light of the first, the successor may seem improbable, yet when the poetic touch is right, will seem mysteriously wonderful if not inevitable. Thoreau gives us contact with the reality of our not knowing how to walk or live or die—the reality of our having neither lived nor died, even as Washington and Franklin have neither lived nor died.

**BEHOLD!**

Thoreau meets John Brown for an evening some months before Harpers Ferry. Later, after his civilly certified death, he beholds John Brown transfigured. Brown would be ill-served by having the interval of his life recorded only as the clerk's notes on his birth and burial, or the astronomer's timing of the few seconds of a meteor-flash. A photographic plate can't pick up the extended cultural impact of a meteor, nor can it catch the meteor that is John Brown. The interval of Thoreau's beholding is much longer, for it is repeated again and again, with each reading generation, like my hearing and rehearing of Schubert's 960. And meteors are portents, as timeless as John Brown is timeless. He is revived yet again, a portent now a full century and a half later. Thoreau notes the dates for Brown leaving Concord, for his battle at Harpers Ferry, and for the day he mounts the gallows or is buried in North Elba. But these dates do not answer—in any deep sense—whether Brown is alive or dead. As a philosopher, Thoreau wonders how one can die if one has never lived, and how one can live if one's death does not echo through the tissues of one's life, making it add to, rather than deplete the life.

The fullness of Brown's life casts a shadow on the so-called "lives" of earlier notables. Washington and Franklin, for instance, did not really die, for Thoreau holds that their death failed to speak, failed to echo back through the life. Theirs was nothing like a *sacrificial* death, a death *for* something of importance. Brown dies for *freedom*, his death *speaks* for it, enriching the life devoted to it. This cannot be said of the death of Franklin or of Washington. "It seems," Thoreau writes, "as if no man had ever died in American before, for in order to die you must first have lived" (*Essays* 277). Tracing Brown's life from a plateau like that beneath Ktaadn's cloud-shrouded summit, the place of the gods, the place of creation, a census-keeper's tally of life and death dwindles in significance. An apotheosis brings John Brown into view, and so diminishes Franklin and Washington that their life-and-death is no more than a *mechanical tick*. As Thoreau wryly puts it, they merely "ran down like a clock"; they "were let off with out dying," released from the ranks, "they were merely missing one day" (277).

To rise to Ktaadn is to reign from the place where the world began. The fathers of the Republic do not so rise. The press noted funerals, dates, and accomplishments. Family and friends will miss them. But from the summit of Ktaadn where gods forge worlds, give life and take it—from that height, these were minor deaths, or no deaths at all. "No temple's *vail* was rent," Thoreau protests, "only a hole dug somewhere." Why should a vail be rent? Well, we want to *learn* something, not only from a life, but in a death. Thoreau finds no shattering revelation in commonplace demise. Brown's death rends a

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vail; it conveys—*is*—a revelation, an apocalypse.<sup>22</sup> To die on a gallows for the *best* of things throws light back on life, affirmatively. Gallows shimmer as a cross, and a death sheds radiant light. To listen to Brown's words from jail, Thoreau says, is to hear a new testament, and he confronts his countrymen with scathing irony: "You don't know your testament when you see it" (*Essays* 280).

### IMPOSSIBLE MEASURES

Thoreau has installed a standard for life-and-death that will seem harsh and ungenerous to those who hope to have lived, and hope that their deaths are fitting and instructive. Only he who fully lives can really die, and only he who really dies can have fully lived. In a loose sense this seems fair enough. But for Thoreau, Brown is not just one of a number who share the widely distributed characteristic of fully living (and dying). For Thoreau, he embodies a *measure* of living. He is not an example of something we would recognize without him, but an exemplar by means of whom we know an excellence, and without whom we would be ignorant. Everest is not just an example of a high alpine terrain; it is exemplary, the measure, of snowcapped majesty. In his apotheosis of John Brown, Thoreau drives the bar for *fully* living up and out of reach. Brown is placed in a select company that includes Socrates and Christ and but one or two others. Is the rest of humanity thus dispossessed? For an ordinary mortal aspiring to *realize* virtue or excellence, this standard might seem useless, or even brutally dismissive. Thoreau is disheartening and candid: "Only a half dozen or so have died [hence *lived*] since the world began" (*Essays* 277).

The question is not whether John Brown is a good man, or whether his actions are justifiable, all things considered, or whether Thoreau is correct to extol him.<sup>23</sup> The question I ask here is why we should respond affirmatively to a dismally *unrealizable* standard. Of course, Thoreau also says that only a few have learned to walk. The exemplary tramper is equally out of reach. So the question is, can Thoreau deploy the theme of exemplary virtue (in the life of John Brown or Socrates) and exemplary walking (in the stride of a saunterer) without deflating the aspirations of all who know, from the start, that the exemplary is out of reach – hopelessly out of reach?

Yet a standard hopelessly out of reach still shows us something *other* than the uninspired standards of passable life, or passable death. Something other than the conventional life exists—*somewhere—somehow*. To give leeway to a higher requirement can by itself pull us out of complacency (at least for a moment). That would be ecstasy, for to be ecstatic *is* to be pulled outside of oneself. A glimpse of the best, in the person of the exceptional Socrates or John Brown, makes the standards of the merely passable no longer the only

game in town. Excellence can be exultingly wonderful to view. In art, we admire genius in performance or composition. Yet showing us a skill or life that could never be ours should not end in belittling us or depriving us of life. Thoreau gives us a measure for living set at the highest notch. Should we therefore discredit it? That could seem like sour grapes, or *resentment*.

A standard we can never fully attain, or even hope to attain, can nevertheless sharpen our perceptions of excellence. Listening to a performer we could never become, we learn something special about musical depth. And hearing Brown's life as Thoreau does, we can hope to learn more about full life and death, despite our having no hope of scaling the heights Brown attains. From this angle, an exemplar does not so much give us a goal to attain as a new light that alters the landscape we traverse. We are given the glitter of new possibilities and the impossibility of old options. We get no new action-guide but a new orientation. We are awakened to a sensibility previously unknown. Our perceptions are translated to a new register. Perhaps slavery is more impossible than it was. The world after Brown is not the same as the world before Brown. He does not give us the specific *telos* of our action but casts his light over the space in which our specific actions will occur.

By the dim light of those who graze in a good-enough, passable pasture, Brown will be found mad, a fanatic, a fantasy-driven killer, subject to delusions of grandeur, an irresponsible man leading the naïve to disaster and threatening all civil order. Thoreau based his high assessment of Brown on first-hand acquaintance. Some months before Harpers Ferry, Brown had approached both Thoreau and Emerson for funds, without being terribly specific about his plans. Talking with him over dinner, both men were impressed by Brown's demeanor, courage, and character. In their view—and they were sharp observers of character—it was no fanatic or bungler that they faced. In his apotheosis, Thoreau saves Brown from the denigration and abuse he otherwise attracts, and saves Concord and its surrounds from their indifference to his testament. And for those who were already indignant at the debasement of government in enforcing slave practices, Thoreau's writing stiffens the spirit of resistance to evil and affirmation of good.

Finally, as we've seen, there's more than one standard to pit against the complacency of only passable living. In Thoreau's hands, John Brown is pitched to apocalyptic intensity. More gentle and perhaps more attainable are the standards wafting through "Walking," "Wild Apples," and *Walden*. So the choice, at last, is not, or need not be, solely between the party of Brown and the party of men of quiet desperation. Our ideals of full living are many and varied. We may fail at the demands John Brown exacts, and if Thoreau's practice

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sets the bar, we may also fail at truly walking. We can nevertheless sharpen our sensibilities in the light of their lives.

Thoreau also holds, beyond walking and living and dying well, that we might inhabit a paradise in the taste of a late December apple, newly thawed, picked some months after freezing, when its fermentation makes it the favorite of the gods. Need we fall short here, as well? Perhaps we can exalt in knowing wild apples, and that, for a moment, will be achievement enough.

### POROUS SOULS

When John Thoreau, Henry's brother, died of lockjaw, Henry nearly died with him. It was as if the bodies, their very physiologies, were porous, as disease, and death passed from one to the other. John died in Henry's arms, and Henry took on all the symptoms of John's disease. Their souls, too, became porous. John's death entered Henry's spirit, killing part of him, causing a psychic trauma. John's spirit entered also in the form of an impulse to write a long account of their time together. This resuscitation of John's spirit came out much later in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Henry takes in John's spirit, and sends it out in writing. Then later still, he takes in John Brown's spirit, and sends it out in writing. Or we could reverse the directionality: John Thoreau and John Brown each enters Henry's spirit to transform it, enters through the porous membrane that is his soul. Henry suffers Brown's affliction, and having allowed it entry, keeps it from the dead in writing two of his most eloquent and topical essays: "A Plea for Captain John Brown," written after Brown's arrest, and its companion, "The Last Days of John Brown," written for his burial. Writing becomes consecration as Brown's spirit enters Henry's and is returned blessed, to be receiver by waiting others.

Brown is not ordinarily, passably good. As Thoreau puts it, he is a transcendentalist in virtue of transcending garden-variety goodness. He risks his life escorting a dozen hunted strangers to a Canadian freedom through hostile and armed territory. His life, the life of his family, and the lives of those he escorted, were at risk. He pursues a heroic vocation. He would bring captives from captivity. He aroused a dread among the Missourians through whose territory he passed, Thoreau said, for it was known they confronted a man who would not be taken. As news of Harpers Ferry traveled north, he became a meteor, an avenging angel, a portent and first taste of apocalypse ahead. "He has a spark of divinity in him," Thoreau says, and attests, "Of all the men who were my contemporaries, it seemed to me that John Brown was the only one who *had not died*" (*Essays* 278, 288).

Thoreau is not pleading for Brown's life, as if it were something physiological to prolong or steal away under cover of night. Crito

offered Socrates an escape from certain execution; an ex-Kansas soldier offered Brown an escape, which he refused.<sup>24</sup> Brown's character, like Socrates', secures his "immortal life." Thoreau writes of life that can't be lost, immortal life. Thoreau saves Brown as Paul saves Jesus as Plato saves Socrates. Each figure is a place within a field of spirit, a porous place of mutual openness to others open to us. Soul or spirit is that open field of possibility, spread temporally forward and back, and spatially in every direction. To take place within the flows that constitute this field is to let saving words arc through it, to receive such words, reanimate them, and pass on their salvations to endless unknown others. Souls open as spirit—take in, give back.

### INFINITE CULTURE

We are biological creatures who are also essentially cultural, creatures that exercise power and undergo powerlessness in the reception, sustenance, and reproduction of a second nature, cultural spirit, as it were. We work in and under lasting institutions that are more than physiological inheritance: music, politics, and schooling; ways of burial, birth, and war; ways of painting, poetry, and sports; of raising kids and marrying them; of writing out lives. These forms are supra-personal or institutional and also intensely personal, forming the persons we are, our second natures, in play as we allow a culture's practices and its varied exemplars of them take residence as our inheritance.

Thoreau is invaded by his brother's suffering in a physiological transmission of symptoms, bother to brother.<sup>25</sup> By simple accounting, John had lockjaw and Henry didn't, Henry survives and John doesn't. But it's also clear that Henry is translated into a new somatic-psychic configuration (call him Henry-J, or John-H), whose spirit translates forward in the living (cultural) words of *A Week*, and translated still further afield as *A Week* finds its living breath in my classroom. Thus a many-times translated Concord spirit is active in our present, having flowed forward from lives robust 150 years ago.

Thoreau travels mysteriously from sister to sister, from brother to speech, from words to books, from books to new spirit, growing in animation and momentum (when robust). Perhaps in his present incarnation as *A Week*, *Walden*, and "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau is as robust as he ever was. In a world in and of anomalous spirit, declarations of what life-or-death amounts to are not definitive. To acknowledge the liveliness of Thoreau, or Henry-John, confirms the efficacy of cumulative generations of cultural reproduction, and confirms porous boundaries between Henry and *A Week*, between *A Week* and us, and between us and those to come.

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Porous membranes are gates that open or shut to another's somatic-psychic presence. We are reciprocally dependent in that when I shut down a gate to you, I kill part of you and part of myself. If enough souls shut down to a style of music, that style dies, ceases to be translated into ever-new life. If I shut down to the brothers-Thoreau, part of *A Week* will die. If collectively we die to the spirit of *A Week*, culturally we die a small (or large) death. Imagine if *A Week* goes unread and dies, and after it "Civil Disobedience" (or "Disobedience") and *Walden*. Henry will have suffered a death and a dimension of global interconnectedness will have died, as well. The death of "Resistance" will take with it a part of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and lessen the punch of the idea and practice of resistance that underlie parts of American and Modern Indian history. Happily, Thoreau and Gandhi survive as we read "Civil Disobedience" attentively. We die in solitude, to be sure, but also in community, collectively. A reader letting Thoreau's life have impact can occlude a town hall record of Thoreau death.

Thoreau does not write to pass on data but to dramatize, restage, relive, so that in reading we can restage, relive, live. Reliving Thoreau's *Week* or "Resistance" resuscitates a part of cultural life that stretches back to Thoreau's Concord, and rebounds forward through Gandhi and King and bounces back again to some of the oldest writing on the globe. Thoreau reached back to the *Gita* and over to Greece and Aeschylus and then forward and north to a Milton who in turn reaches back to Biblical time and space. To relive *A Week* in reading it is to intercept and then relive a river trip, let's say a *mere* century and a half ago, for it's also to relive passages on death and war that Thoreau culls and transmutes from the *Bhagavad Gita*. How can we picture this longevity?

We might think of rippling circles radiating from a stone tossed in the middle of quiet lake, the spatial extensions from a center read as temporal extensions, as well. Or we might think of carbon radiating from an ancient bone, still sending out its powerful signals from a distant past, say the past of the *Gita*, or the more recent past of "A Plea" or *A Week*. But both the image of widening ripples and the image of radiation from a shard of ancient life predict steady disintegration of signal, and some cultural texts seem to know only expanding strength in their circles of signal. With time, their energy is dispersed in strengths that far exceed the power of their initial signals. So cultural dispersion is more like the spread of an ancient species of forest life, a dispersion and broadcast marked by multiple advances and declines, transmutations and adaptations. The *Gita* in the woods outside Concord is not exactly the *Gita* in third-century Bombay or in nineteenth-century London. Nevertheless, despite endless translation-mistranslation, "A Plea" or "Slavery in Massachusetts" reanimates

our present second nature. These Concord essays only gain strength as we hear beneath their surface *Aeschylus* or the *Book of Job* or the *Gita*, as their resonance confirms an infinite culture.

In preparing his transmissions, at once literary, religious, and philosophical, Thoreau hopes for readers. He envisions them as the next step in the ever-emerging reality of his writing. As his spirit and the spirit of John Brown intertwine, so both intertwine with the interanimations that lie ahead.<sup>26</sup> The burden of Thoreau's writing rests with him, but not with him alone, and at the present, we might hazard that his hopes are requited. If not everywhere, he yet has his attentive circle of readers keeping him alive. And we can hope for more ahead.

### **NOT MERELY MATTER**

Cultural events spring out of their underlying material contexts. Catgut and varnish, wood and steel, are the material underlay for the sweet sound of a violin. But the spread of a new concerto around the globe is a transmission that springs free from a plane of catgut and steel. John's material life-and-death can spring into Henry's. The *Gita*, as a material book, can pass into the spirit of *A Week*. As we read *A Week*, we absorb a Henry animated by John and the *Gita*. Who knows the boundless material underlay of the *Gita* or Henry or John? For *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, we need at least lumber, paper, water, and pencils—and the institutions of publishing and libraries—and then cultural ceremonies of schooling in history and verse, and ears that can hear, all of which allow spirit to spring free.

The powers of bodily expressiveness begin with an underlay of physiology and bodily mobility, but bodily expressions then spring free, say in an Anthony Hopkins performance. The powers of poetic expressiveness begin with an underlay of intelligible, simple speech, but can spring free in the eloquence of a Thoreau. His remark that he had not heard of John Brown's death is a crucial moment in the raising of Brown from physiological extinction to spiritual perdurance. A spirit plays on the surface of an expressive body, and a spirit plays on the surface of a prose and poetry penned by Thoreau. John Brown is recreated, translated as spirit in "A Plea" and "Last Days."

If we let powers at play in the words of the texts speak to us as our own, we're transformed, transfigured by reading and words. Through openness to eloquence we achieve openness to otherness. We see the other as our own, and ourselves in the other. And we find that our community of words contain and renew the spirit of Thoreau, the spirit of Ktaadn, the spirit of wild apples or lilies and the spirit of Fuller's bones and John Brown's death. That is enough to keep us alive.

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### NOTES

The author would like to thank Marcia Robinson and Clark West, who each in their way made this reading possible. Clark West challenged us, in a Thoreau seminar, to see Thoreau whole; I thank him for that.

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<sup>1</sup> This passage is worked up from his journals (*Journal* 2:49; 2:80). Although Fuller is not named in *Cape Cod*, it's clear that this passage alludes to his search for Fuller's bones in the sands of Fire Island where he was sent from Concord to retrieve her effects and her body. The bones that he found were too decomposed to be identified as hers; only some of her clothing was found, and none of her writing.

<sup>2</sup> See also Edward F. Mooney, *The Loss of Intimacy in American Thought from Thoreau to Cavell*, Continuum, 2009. Ch. 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> See Bugbee; see also Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in its Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Thunder, the top of Ktaadn, or floating alone looking skyward in a boat—these mark moments of “the sublime” or “infinite” for Thoreau. Rousseau, too, has a reverie, looking up from a boat's bottom to find a glimpse of “the infinite” (*Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, no. 5). “The sublime” spans a field from “brute” physiological impact (we have an involuntary startle reflex) to hermeneutical interpretation forever unfinished—the continuous translations in “infinite culture”—and then on to possible “ontological import”: a “revelation of the infinite,” an “intrusion of the undeconstructible,” or “being tempered by a wondrous appearance of the divine” (the unknown). I discuss the complexity of “the” sublime in *The Loss of Intimacy*, Ch. 4. Heidegger's sublime privileges light-in-a-clearing over sound-spaces-opened (say, by thunder, the splash of a fish, or the sustained tones of great music). Does this demotion of sound (and the ear) make a difference?

<sup>5</sup> Thoreau speaks of Brown's hanging as the day of his “translation” from a man having his last meal with his wife to “a divine spark,” and “a meteor,” making Brown “more alive than he ever was. He has earned immortality,” and is now “in the clearest light that shines on this land” (*Essays* 288).

<sup>6</sup> Thoreau calls on our knack for *seeing as*, for *hearing as*, for *tasting as*. The classic discussion of “seeing as” is in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, where he considers the reversible duck-rabbit figure. The duck grips us as a duck even as we might willingly reverse its aspect so that the rabbit grips us. A mood of dismay at a child's mess can grip us even as we might reverse its aspect so that the child's exuberant creativity emerges dominant. John Brown's hanging can change aspect, can become John Brown's glory.

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<sup>7</sup> The wild can be figured as the domain of the will. There's some etymological support for this association (which Thoreau cites), as well as important resonances with Nietzsche's contrast of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, or Schopenhauer's contrast of Will and Idea. See my "Wonder and Affliction: Thoreau's Dionysian World", *Thoreau as Philosopher*, ed. Rick Furtak, Stanford, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> See note 16, above. Consider the Whirlwind voice delivered to Job. The shattering of the old world opens Job to the new.

<sup>9</sup> "Slavery in Massachusetts" was Thoreau's exasperated, angry, even despairing, but ultimately affirming response to the Burns case, delivered July 4, 1854, at an abolitionist protest and rally in Framingham, MA. It was published in Garrison's *Liberator* on July 21.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a friend of Thoreau, gained entry. Higginson became a member of The Secret Six who financially supported John Brown's Kansas paramilitary activity and Brown's attack at Harpers Ferry. He was also an editorial confidant at the *Atlantic* of the young Emily Dickinson.

<sup>11</sup> Long columns of military in full dress separated the avenue of Burns' solitary walk from a crowd estimated at 50,000. He was made to march flanked by four Federal companies in full regalia, two companies of Boston militia, and several artillery companies, including a cannon. It was a ridiculous show meant to ridicule the Abolitionist cause and Burns himself. The soldiers were given orders to shoot into the crowd at any sign of "disturbance"—hence a potential restaging of the Boston Massacre. Austin Willey, editor of Maine's *Portland Inquiry*, in the June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1854 issue, p. 2, has Southern slave-catchers gloating, "teaching New Englanders a lesson" through the ugly capture and quasi-military incarceration of Anthony Burns. The headline for Willey's account is "Rubbing it in! Man-hunting in Boston". I thank Marcia Robinson for this source.

<sup>12</sup> The Russian monk Staretz Silouan (1866-1938) is credited with this injunction, which is both heartening and depressing, for it asks us to attend, impossibly, to suicide bombs, and to the despair-shattering smile of an innocent child; to our demons, and at times to a bountiful lily. Silouan is quoted on the frontispiece to Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (New York: Schocken, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> "John's Brown's Body" was already a popular military camp song. The tune, with different words, began as a campfire spiritual, sung to the tune we sing today as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

<sup>14</sup> The possibility of something both living on and not living on is related to Kristeva's discussions of abjection and death, discussed in Ludger H. Viefhues-Baily, *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear: A Cavellian Reading of Gender, Origin and Religion in Modern Skepticism* (Ashgate, 2007) Ch. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Fuller's bones are discovered in that tidal strip between land and sea that seems more important to Thoreau, in his beach walks, than either land or sea. He calls "anomalous creatures" those who inhabit neither land nor sea but both—clams and jelly fish, for instance (see *Cape*

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*Cod*, Ch. IV, p. 81). The possibility of something both living on and not living on, both dying and not dying, both being “inside” (“in consciousness”) and “outside” (“objectively in the world”) is illuminated by Kristeva’s discussions of abjection and death. Her views are discussed in Viefhues-Bailey, *Beyond the Philosopher’s Fear*, Ashgate, 2007, Ch. 5. Thoreau belongs to the anomalous wild, as does John Brown. He belongs to the wild of the beach, and to the wild of the swamp and meadow, to the dark vortices that offer and withhold life, that contain and don’t contain life. The lily belongs in the ambit of his walking, to a strip of swampy mud, and also to a fragrant circle of redeeming beauty.

<sup>16</sup> Kierkegaard suggests that Socrates escapes death at the moment of his death sentence, for from that moment on no threat of death can coerce him. And his immortality is confirmed as he refuses to escape, which would be to go back on his word. See *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 1985), 141. Thoreau may well be hearing John Brown’s hanging against the background of the trial and death and prison conversations of Socrates.

<sup>17</sup> Kristeva traces the simultaneous emergence of ideals and their opposites from an undifferentiated field. See the discussion by Viefhues-Bailey, *Beyond the Philosopher’s Fear*.

<sup>18</sup> See my “What has Hegel to Do with Henry James? Acknowledgment, Dependence, and Having a Life of One’s Own,” *Inquiry*, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> On a textual other as *conscience*, see James Conant, “Nietzsche’s Perfectionism: a reading of Schopenhauer as Educator,” in *Nietzsche’s Postmoralism*, ed. Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), p. 208.

<sup>20</sup> The Union civil war song begins “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave/ But his soul goes marching on.” To moulder is to turn to dust; one who makes mouldings translates lumber to dust.

<sup>21</sup> Ortega calls his *Meditations on Quixote* “essays in intellectual love,” and humanist “salvations.” See my discussion, *For Love of the World*, Ch. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Apocalypse can mean cataclysmic destruction, but it can also mean prophetic revelation (that perhaps foretells destruction and renewal).

<sup>23</sup> I ask how Thoreau’s position can be plausible in its own terms, which means a charitable reconstruction of the *intelligibility* of the position (from the standpoint of the writer). Whether John Brown was *justified* in his actions, or whether Thoreau was justified in praising them, is another matter. Along those lines (in another paper) we might consider a) whether our moral landscape can accommodate “moral terrorists,” as it were; b) whether Brown might be not so much a terrorist as a pre-maturely enlisted the Union Army officer (he jumped the gun), c) whether he is a reincarnation of the farmers and villagers of Concord who opened fire on those surely legitimate defenders of civic order and the law, the British Army, and d) whether his action was one in a sequence of earlier battles, a tactical response, say, to the slavers’ sack of Lawrence, Kansas.

<sup>24</sup> The soldier's name was Silas Soule.

<sup>25</sup> See Wai Chee Dimock's brilliant discussion in *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), Ch. 1, "Global Civil Society: Thoreau on Three Continents." She has John and Henry linked not only psychically but somatically, like Siamese twins: the somatic-psychic border is porous.

<sup>26</sup> Thoreau read a draft of "Wild Apples" in February 1860, less than three months after Brown was hanged. The day after Brown's death, no doubt under immunological stress from the event, Thoreau caught the cold that led to the bronchitis and tuberculosis that would kill him. He died May 6, 1862. "Wild Apples" was published in November, 1862, and so might be considered Thoreau's "Amen." His walking and politics converge.

### Appendix: Further Notes

#### *On "translation"*

In the last paragraph of "Last Days of John Brown," Thoreau figures the day of his death as the day of his "translation"—as if Brown's words and actions now begin lengthy translation, perhaps from an earthly to a heavenly text, but surely from his words and actions into words that Thoreau and others will offer to ensure he has not spoken in vain. Thus Brown is translated from the gallows to new life, and to an indefinitely extending life. In a different instance of translation, the old body is buried in North Elba, yet a new body appears translated to canvas, one painted by Thomas Hovenden nearly three decades later, ca. 1884, now hanging in The Philadelphia Museum of Art. Thoreau foretells this cultural translation days before Brown's demise, predicting that the likeness of Brown will appear as an "ornament in some future national gallery" (final paragraph, "A Plea"). The man's spirit was also translated through its rendering by James Redpath (*Echoes of Harpers Ferry*, 1860), and later, W.E.B. DuBois (*John Brown*, 1909), and Russell Banks (*Cloudsplitter: A Novel*, 1998).

#### *The Burns case and before*

In the Shadrach case (1851), the rescue of a purported slave from the Boston courthouse was successful: a group of free Blacks stormed the courtroom, taking the guards by surprise, grabbed Shadrach, and fled through a large supportive crowd to a waiting carriage. In the Sims case (1851), a rescue failed. Guards were prepared this time and in great enough number to keep a large crowd from breaking into the courthouse. Sims was returned to Georgia where his "master" gave him a near-fatal public whipping as a lesson to would-be rescuers in the north. Marcia Robinson steered me toward contemporary newspaper accounts of this failed rescue and the Burns case in Garrison's *Liberator* and in Austin Willey's *Portland Inquirer*. Burns was kidnapped (or arrested) on Wednes-

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day May 24, 1854. Friday, free blacks and the white abolitionists met separately to plan his rescue. Theodore Parker, Wendell Phillips, Thomas Wentworth Higginson and others voted that night to muster a confrontation the next morning. Their black counterparts, who had been meeting separately, had already come to the streets to storm the courthouse. The attempted rescue that night became an improvised but concerted effort. There were enough guards within to repel them. Burns was tried under increased guard May 27-31. The verdict was delayed so that Federal and Boston military and civic authorities had time to orchestrate a show of force. The verdict was delivered June 2. The militias dressed Burns in silk and brightly colored pantaloons for a showy and humiliating walk to the ship for delivery South.

### *On Victor Hugo's plea*

Victor Hugo wrote a plea for Brown's life from his Guernsey exile. It was dated December 2, 1859, the day Brown was hung, and was widely published in Europe and America: "Politically speaking, the murder of John Brown would be an irreparable mistake. It would create in the Union a latent fissure that would in the long run break it. Brown's suffering might strengthen slavery in Virginia, but it would upend all American democracy. You save your shame, but you kill your glory. Morally speaking, it seems a part of the human light would put itself out, that the very notion of justice and injustice would hide itself in darkness, on that day where one would see the assassination of Emancipation by Liberty itself. [...] Let America know and ponder on this: there is something more frightening than Cain killing Abel, and that is Washington killing Spartacus."

### *On 'an ethical sublime'*

I have argued elsewhere for "an ethical sublime," an occasion with ethical impact that resembles non-moral sublimity. The non-moral sublime—a thunderclap across dark skies, the sudden breaching of a whale from a placid sea—breaks up our routine and "ordinary" perceptions and copings. The ethical sublime is an occasion when moral copings and "ordinary" perceptions are broken up by a startling, forbidding, and alluring eruption, perhaps the appearance of a person who "rends the veil" of the commonplace, delivering the way he or she *is* in life that makes an inescapable demand on me to reorient myself, admitting new moral possibilities, and new moral impossibilities, into my moral landscape. I might shift, for instance, from seeing slavery as bad, to seeing it as intolerable. An exemplar who shatters the commonplace does not provide a new moral rule. Exemplars can be guides, increasing the depth of our moral sensibilities, even though we would never hope to "replicate" their lives.

### *On a Plurality of Planes of Moral Evaluation*

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It would be impossible to rank the importance of the taste of a wild apple, the need to pay one's bills, the necessity to speak for John Brown, the necessity to honor Margaret Fuller. There can be a flow from routine fulfillment of routine obligation (the threshold requirements of a passably not dishonorable life) to the imbibing of apples in ongoing creation (that nurtures one's moral-aesthetic attention and responsiveness) and then to one's 'recognition' of the meteor that is John Brown—or another exalted moral paragon. How one negotiates these shifting terrains is itself an ethical issue, a burden of Dante, Cervantes, Kierkegaard, Thoreau, to wrestle with or display, as they are able. We live amidst shifting moral landscapes with varying demands that resist systematization.

*On the complex unity of Thoreau's production*

Thoreau ends his last essay, "Walking," with a long quote from the Old Testament *Book of Joel* that cites the Lord's dissatisfaction with his people and the consequent destruction by plague of all orchards, including life-giving apple orchards. Thoreau's citation of the destructiveness of the Lord should be linked to the presumption, quite common in the years leading up to the Civil War, that the coming bloodshed would be God's vengeance on a sinful slave-holding people. Thoreau is happy to move effortlessly from Hindu to Greek to Hebraic to Christian divinities. The penultimate section of the essay recounts Thoreau's Dionysian joy in drinking a frozen, thawed, and fermented apple. Innocent, pagan, Dionysian delight precedes God's wrath, but surely *not* as punishment for pleasure. Jehovah's wrath, for Thoreau, is reserved for slavery and all those who permit it. It's a credit to Thoreau's genius that unlike the writing of *Walden*, which filled nearly a decade (1844-54), his eloquent political essays are started and completed in a matter of weeks in the heat of unrelenting political skirmishes.

If we pair "Slavery in Massachusetts" with "Wild Apples" we find a chiasmus, a crossing of opposites recurrent in Thoreau's writing. The fundamental movement of "Slavery in Massachusetts" is dark disillusionment with the stench of slavery's corruption, yet it ends with the hope of the lily. The fundamental movement of "Wild Apples" is gentle celebration of the land and its fruits (even though orchards are sadly replacing the wild), yet it ends with the disillusioned wrath of God. Paradise and Hell are intertwined, intermixed, perhaps even interanimating. If we are on the verge of apocalypse, perhaps always on the verge, what will be revealed? For Thoreau, at least, I sense it will be something like the rhythms of an endless creation worth praising, where perishing heralds resuscitation and life heralds perishing. This interplay of heaven and hell is as central to Thoreau as his fundamental impulse of love for the world, the affirming and preserving impulse that lets his political writings implicate the preservation of human character and freedom and also the preservation of the expressive animation of nature. Simultaneously, this impulse lets his evocations of nature implicate the

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preservation of character and freedom among the creatures, human and otherwise, who traverse and inhabit it. (My original impetus to work out the interplay between “John Brown” and “Wild Apples” came from Clark West.)

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