Thoreau’s Response to Derrida: Thoreau’s Yogic Myth and the Myth of Logocentricism

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Abstract: From Jacques Derrida’s standpoint, individuals believing in a transcendental reality will unavoidably uphold speech as the truest expression of self-presence. According to religious ideology, speech is superior to writing because it emerges directly from the essence of a person, while writing, on the other hand, entails a greater possibility of deception or error in communication because it appears at a distance, indirectly on the page. Derrida refers to this opposition favoring speech over writing as logocentricism. For him, the speech/writing dichotomy that has its source in metaphysics is a bastion of the dualistic perspective that dominates and distorts thought. Derrida emphasizes that those who believe in a spiritual reality cannot escape the hierarchical exigencies of logocentricism. However, the writings of American Transcendentalist Henry Thoreau open up an alternative to logocentric thinking that has not been recognized by post-structuralist philosophers. Thoreau, a believer in spiritual reality with his emersion in the ancient metaphysical philosophy of India, chooses writing over speech.

Keywords: Thoreau, Derrida, Bhagavad Gita, bricolage

Introduction

“This body is just the external crust of the mind. They are not two different things; they are just the oyster and its shell” (Swami Vivekananda).

“Yes and no are lies—A true answer will not aim to establish anything, but rather to set all well afloat” (Henry Thoreau, Journal: June 23, 1840).

One of the principle characteristics of western metaphysical thought, according to the analysis of Jacques Derrida, is the privileging of speech over writing. Among western philosophers occupying a heritage from Plato to the present, speech is preferred as the mode of communication that most closely approximates thought; spoken words most nearly capture the intent of the self-presence which is the central impulse behind a communicative act. In demonstrating that self-presence is actually a function and a fabrication of language, Derrida brilliantly deconstructs the primacy of speech in the speech/writing opposition, and concomitantly jeopardizes fundamentalist assumptions regarding the existence of an essential
self, or of a truth within the reach of the relativities of language, the guiding assumptions of the foundationalist philosophical orientation Derrida calls “logocentrism.”

Judging from Derrida’s (1974) analysis and argument, it seems virtually impossible that an individual, philosopher or no, could hold to the concept of an essential self and not privilege speech:

The privilege of the phone does not depend upon a choice that might have avoided. It corresponds to a moment of the system (let us say, of the “life” of “history” or of “being-as-self-relationship”). The system of “hearing/understanding-ones’self-speak” [s’entendre parler] through the phonic substance—which presents itself as non-exterior, non-worldly and therefore non-empirical or non-contingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world origin, arising from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside….transcendental and empirical, etc. (pp. 7-8)

If, as an individual believing in a transcendental reality, I unavoidably uphold speech as self-presence, I also carry with me a whole series of metaphysical oppositions established in hierarchical order, for as in the speech before writing dichotomy, logocentrism assumes a greater degree of presence in the first term, while the second, or inferior term, indicates a fall, a disruption, contamination or absence:

All metaphysicians have proceeded thus, from Plato to Rousseau, from Descartes to Husserl: good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. This is not just one metaphysical gesture among others; it is the metaphysical exigency, the most constant, profound, and potent procedure (Derrida, as quoted in Culler, 1982, p.93).

And if I am a writer and a philosopher, believing in a transcendental reality, and therefore encumbered by the metaphysical exigency Derrida describes, then I will value explicit meaning—as truth—over indeterminacy, and clarity over rhetoric. And if I am the follower of a fundamentalist religion, then with the dualistic “potent procedure” Derrida describes, I will divide the believer from the infidel, the saved from the damned. What post-structuralist criticism challenges, I will champion.

There is, however, an alternative possibility. Imagine a writer who simultaneously believes in the essential self and prizes writing over speech, who asserts the existence of absolute truth and indeterminacy. Such a writer would call into question the presumed incompatibility between foundationalism and the ambiguous “play” of language. Such a writer is Henry Thoreau (1854/1962), who while boldly attesting in Walden that “there is a solid bottom everywhere,” nevertheless continually affirms the superiority of the written over the spoken word: “However much we may admire the orator’s occasional burst of eloquence, the noblest written words are
commonly as far above the fleeting spoken language as the firmament with its stars is behind the clouds. There are the stars, and they who can may read them” (p.100). Thoreau’s preference for written language is not limited to cases of public oration. According to Derrida (1974), Thoreau, as a Transcendentalist, should favor the sphere of one-to-one familiar address over the distance that writing imposes: “Self-presence, transparent proximity in the face-to-face of countenance and the immediate range of voice, this determination of social authenticity is therefore classic: Rousseauistic but the inheritor of Platonism”(p.138). Although he was an admirer of both Rousseau and Plato, Thoreau does not conform to Derrida’s expectations. On the contrary, he views his writing as more authentic than his social self: “You may rely on it that you have the best of me in my books, and that I am not worth seeing personally—the stuttering, blundering, clodhopper that I am. Even poetry, you know, is in one sense an infinite brag and exaggeration. Not that I do not stand on all I have written—but what am I to the truth I freely utter”(as quoted in Burkett & Joyce, 1989, p.5). Note that this final statement is not posed as a question. Here is a conundrum: A man who calls himself “a mystic, a Transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot….” (as quoted in Wolf, 1974, p.13) blatantly violates the bounds of logocentricism. Notwithstanding, and perhaps aided by the “infinite brag and exaggeration” of poetry, he believes his written word expresses more of the truth of what is “best” in him than his mere “self-presence” could ever convey. How did Thoreau, steeped in western metaphysics, educated to be a preacher or school teacher in the mid-nineteenth century, make this post-structuralist move away from logocentricism into the realm of rhetorical “play”? Quite simply, and complexly, through bricolage.

In everyday parlance, the French term “bricoleur” corresponds to the English “Jack-of-all-trades” with one important distinction. The bricoleur assembles whatever tools or materials are available to him in order to create his projects. His schemes are dependent upon the discards he haphazardly finds and the implements he is able to borrow. As Claude Levi-Strauss (1966) stipulates in *The Savage Mind*, the bricoleur’s game is to make do “with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock,” so that the possible uses of the elements gathered “always remain limited by the particular history” and the originally intended purpose of each piece (pp. 17-19). Levi-Strauss finds bricolage an apt analogy for the creative work of mythological thought. The mythopoetic mind addresses itself “to a collection of oddments left over from human endeavors, that is, only a subset of the culture,” and by reorganizing these materials, builds “ideological castles out of the debris of what was once social discourse.” Although unscientific in his methods, the bricoleur can reach “brilliant and unforeseen” results on either the technical or the intellectual plane (pp.19-21).

In virtually every aspect of his endeavors, practical and intellectual, Thoreau’s activities conformed to Levi-Strauss’ description of bricolage. As a technical bricoleur, Thoreau built his house near Walden Pond with borrowed tools, dismantling and reconstructing the shanty of an itinerant Irish laborer. He built the chimney with abandoned bricks and river rocks, mixing his own mortar from local soil. Even his cellar was formerly occupied by a woodchuck. His
intellectual bricolage began much earlier. During his senior year at Harvard, Thoreau borrowed Cousin’s *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*. Cousin was the leading expositor of the French philosophical school known as Eclecticism, and though there is little interest in this movement today, during the nineteenth century its credo was widely discussed and very influential in Europe and America. According to Eclecticism, truth is not the particular possession of any single sect of philosophical perspective. Therefore, the best approach to philosophical inquiry is to study a variety of schools and rely upon intuition and reason to determine what truths have been contributed by each, or what truths are universally held. When Thoreau settled in Concord after college and began to associate with Emerson, he learned that his new friend shared an interest in Cousin, and together they continued to read the works of Eclecticism (Sattelmyer, 1981, pp. 20-21).

However, Thoreau began to take bricolage too seriously for Emerson’s taste. When Emerson introduced the younger man to East Indian literature, they differed significantly in their degrees of enthusiasm. The books it took Emerson twenty years to appreciate swept Thoreau away in one year (Jackson, 1981, p.63). With every translation of Indian thought he read, his admiration and reverence deepened:

> That title, “The Laws of Menu with the Gloss of Colluca,” comes to me with such a volume of sound as if it had swept unobstructed over the planes of Hindustan; and when my eye rests on yonder birches, or the sun in the water, or the shadows of the trees, it seems to signify the laws of them all. They are the laws of you and me, a fragrance wafted down from those old times, and no more to be refuted than the wind. When my mind travels eastward and backward to those remote years of the gods, I seem to draw near the habitation of the morning, and the dawn at length has a place. I remember the book as an hour before sunrise (Thoreau, 1854/1962. Hereafter, quotations from *Walden* will be cited “W” with page numbers).

But merely to appreciate was not enough for Thoreau. The bricoleur must not only collect, he must construct, as Levi-Strauss (1966) writes, “giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between limited possibilities. The ‘bricoleur’ may not ever complete his purpose, but he always puts something of himself in it”(p.21). Thoreau was determined to put his life into his enterprise: “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to live, according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust” (W. 12). The various western philosophies he studied as a devotee of Eclecticism, the works of Asian antiquity from India, China, and Persia, and the Bible, not as taught in any particular Christian church, but as read and understood by Thoreau independently, constituted the heterogeneous repertoire of Thoreau’s intellectual bricolage, and became the elements of his mythopoetic creations. But it was primarily the contributions of Indian literature that allowed him to live his myth, and he embroidered the ideas into the texture of his writing.
Of all the philosophies in Thoreau’s kit, the one embodied in the *Bhagavad Gita* (Vyasa, 500 BCE/1977) predominantly offered him a systematic program to the attainment of transcendental realization. In Indian thought, it is not enough to believe that a transcendental principle is at operation in the world: The goal is to experience divinity directly, in this life. The pre-eminence of the *Bhagavad Gita*, or “Song of God,” in Indian mythology rests on its poetical beauty, its universal scope, and its synthesis of the four yogas, or paths to realization of God, into a cohesive whole. The perfected human being, according to the *Gita*, is a harmonious and balanced blending of intellectual discrimination (jnana yoga), selfless action (karma yoga), and one-pointed meditation (raja yoga). In a letter written to a friend in 1849, Thoreau indicates his acceptance of yoga:

> Depend on it that rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the yoga faithfully. The yogin, absorbed in contemplation, contributes in his degree to creation: he breathes a divine perfume, he hears wonderful things. Divine forms traverse him without tearing him and united to the nature which is proper to him, he goes, he acts as animating original matter. To some extent, and at rare intervals, even I am a yogin (quoted in Jackson, 1981, p.65).

Thoreau’s ascetic nature and willingness to act upon his beliefs found a vehicle for expression in yoga’s promise that through disciplining, or “yoking,” the mind he could achieve higher consciousness. In the myth of *Walden*, Thoreau becomes the first American “sannyasi,” a spiritual aspirant who, following the teaching of the *Vedas*, lives a life of austerity, chastity, and solitary contemplation for the sake of self-realization.

Though our investigation of Thoreau’s intellectual bricolage and his mythopoetic activities has not yet succeeded in answering the question which spawned this paper—“Why isn’t Thoreau logocentric?”—I have reason for this delay. It’s important that you are convinced of Thoreau’s assimilation of Indian philosophy, that as a bricoleur he gathered ideas and wove them into the fabric of his mind: “In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial, and I doubt if that philosophy is not to be referred to a previous state of existence, so remote is its sublimity from our conceptions” (*W.* 295). It is upon this “remoteness” from our conceptions that I will focus now.

The *Bhagavad Gita* takes place during a crisis. It is the eve of battle, and the epic warrior Arjuna surveys the field, accompanied by his mentor and charioteer, Sri Krishna. Suddenly, Arjuna loses heart. He is about to fight in a civil war, and he will have to kill his kinsmen and friends. Even though he believes his cause is righteous, he cannot bear to think of the clash of armies and the deaths of those he loves. In despair, he resolves to do nothing. Sri Krishna understands Arjuna’s despondency, but he counsels his friend to stand up and fight. “If you think you kill anyone, if you think anyone dies,” he tells Arjuna, “you are mistaken.” Arjuna suffers from the delusion endemic to humanity: the identification of the Self with the mind and body. You are not the
you are not your thoughts; you are not the mind. Indian philosophy repeats these phrases again and again in a variety of forms. You are the infinite, unchanging, imperishable Spirit: you are Brahman

“Man, in his ignorance, identifies himself with the material sheaths that encompass his true Self. Transcending these, he becomes one with Brahman, who is pure bliss” (“Taittiriya Upanishad,” 800 BCE/1978). The western concept of “soul” corresponds to the mental and causal sheaths, subtle forms of matter as described by Indian thought, but there is no term in English by which to express the unchangeable part in human beings, what Indian philosophy calls “Atman.” Herein lies the “remoteness” of Indian philosophy from logocentric conceptions; this is why Perry Miller accuses Thoreau of blasphemous arrogance in identifying himself “with the Absolute, not even using Emerson’s palliating circumlocution ‘Oversoul’” (quoted in Wolf, 1974, p.21). But for those, who like Thoreau, accept the teachings of the Vedic scriptures, Atman is none other than Brahman—Sat, Chit, Ananda—absolute and perfect Wisdom, Knowledge, and Bliss. When, as a result of spiritual practice, a person transcends the senses, the mind, the intellect, and the ego and experiences Atman’s identity with Brahman, the world of various and temporary names and forms disappears. It is an experience beyond the capacities of thought to attain or language to describe.

From the perspective of the Bhagavad Gita “the Socratic penchant, what Nietzsche defined as ‘the unshakable faith that thought, using the thread of logic, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being’ (Culler, 1982, p.23), is an illusion. Through yoga, the systematic endeavor to control the fluctuations of the mind, an aspirant gradually becomes more aware of the limitations of the mind:

You are one with the Supreme. If all these desires were the principal attributes of the soul, then you could never get rid of them. All those thoughts and ideas belong to the mind and not to Atman. So you will be able to separate your mind from your Self. You will then be just like a witness (sakshi) looking down upon your mind from above and the thoughts and ideas are just bubbling up. That will make you see what is the difference between mind and the Atman—the unreality and the Reality (Abhedananda, 1969, p.139).

Practicing yoga, devoting much of his time to contemplative exercise, Thoreau made the teachings of the Gita live:

I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that it is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of imagination only, so far as he was concerned. (W. 132-133)
In this passage, Thoreau demonstrates a highly sophisticated understanding of Indian philosophy. Believing, as he does, that his thoughts are not the bearers of his Self-presence, how can he be logocentric? Indeed, he is not. His fealty is to writing. “How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book” (W. 105). For Thoreau, bragging in Walden as lustily “as chanticleer in the morning” about the success of his philosophical experiment, literature has the potential to incite, to arouse, to goad us to awaken from our spiritual somnolence, though he has “never met a man who was quite awake” (W. 72).

“Man lives in a fairy world,” Sri Krishna tells Arjuna, “deceived by the glamour of opposite sensations, infatuated by desire and aversion…The saint is awake when the world sleeps, and he ignores that for which the world lives” (Vyasa, 1977, p.72). As described by Indian philosophy, the “fairy world” we call objective reality is a dream, somewhat more stable than the fluctuations of mind we experience during our nightly slumber. Out of the undifferentiated, primordial energy of nature the various phenomena arise, much as our own mental energy produces our personal dream-objects and dreamscapes. Because mind and matter are derived from one substance, “the universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions” (W. 94); there is no boundary where subject stops and object begins. But everything, all the laws and powers of nature, rests in Brahman, the self-effulgent source of all consciousness. “Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us is the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are” (W. 132). Human freedom is not of the mind, for that too is bound by the laws of nature. Only Atman, in its identity with Brahman, is unlimited and free. Quoting “the Hindu philosopher,” Thoreau writes, “‘So soul, from the circumstances in which it is placed, mistakes its own character, until the truth is revealed to it by some holy teacher, and then it knows itself to be Brahma.’ I perceive that we inhabitants of New England live this mean life we do because our vision does not penetrate the surface of things. We think that is which appears to be” (W. 94). The mind, dreaming its phenomenal dream, identifying with its own ephemeral thoughts, loses sight of the Atman and becomes lost in the maze of time, space, and causation—Maya. Consequently, “man’s capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried” (W. 8). Thinking we are no more than the biomental complex, we accept certain limitations as inevitable.

In his essay, “Anti-Foundationalism,” Stanley Fish (1987) describes the circumstances surrounding and impinging upon the “situated self.” Contrary to the logocentric tradition of a “free and independent self” (which is really self-delusion), anti-foundationalism “reveals the subject to be always and already tethered by the local community norms and standards that constitute and enable its rational acts. Such a subject may be many things. . . .But one thing it cannot be is free to originate its own set of isolated beliefs without systematic constraints” (p.69). Fish is not far off from the Indian description of a “jiva” (self with a small “s”), enmeshed in maya, except that Indian philosophy would add to the encumbrances that tether and constitute the subject: historical forces beyond its control; a personal history (physiological, hereditary, environmental, and psychological); plus a karmic fate—a chain of haphazard and/or intentional acts stretching through an innumerable series of past lives in and endless regression of cause and
effect. (The very thought makes me feel like Jacob Marley’s ghost.) The jiva is an ineluctably conditioned creature. And yet, there is potential for greater freedom.

Paradoxically, the mind is not only the instrument of bondage to maya, it is also the means of liberation from illusion. “I know no more encouraging fact,” Thoreau proclaims, “than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor” (W. 88). This conviction is a wellspring of Thoreau’s optimism. But he is also aware that in order to enact this elevation, an individual must be “awake enough for effective intellectual exertion,” must be able to use the discriminating powers of mind to slice through the “petty fears and petty pleasures that are but the shadow of reality.” Typically, by “closing the eyes and slumbering and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit everywhere, which is still built on purely illusory foundations” (W. 93). Living in solitude by Walden Pond, Thoreau seeks to disengage himself, not from humanity, but from the “slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe” (W. 95) and renders the liberating powers of the mind begrimed and vitiated.

Thoreau needs isolation to develop his new way of thinking; he needs to minimize the influence of a traditional ideology that permeates thought like a second nature. He resists the mental torpor of complacency and dull acceptance by relentlessly testing and intellectually cutting through the superfluities and superficialities his neighbors favor, to reach the marrow, next to the bone, where life is sweetest. “The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things” (W. 96). Naturally, the behavior resulting from his dissident thoughts makes him somewhat of an oddity in the district. His tailoress, for example, cannot comprehend his thorough disregard of fashion. He will insist upon having clothes sewn solely with regard to durability and comfort, because Thoreau knows that it is “the luxurious and dissipated who set the fashions which the herd so diligently follow” (W. 34). A farmer adamantly assures him that it is impossible to live on vegetable matter alone, while walking, Thoreau wryly notes, “behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plough along in spite of every obstacle” (W. 7). Other farmers criticize his unorthodox techniques for cultivating beans: He plants too late in the season and fails to use fertilizer. Yet he is able to make “the earth say beans instead of grass” with considerable success by mixing potash he has at hand into the soil of the bean-rows with vigorous daily hoeing. A true bricoleur, Thoreau “makes-do” admirably, using the resources available to him without participating in the anxiety his neighbors feel, who fret and strain after the material excesses they are driven by conformity to obtain. Consequently, he has the leisure and the psychic energy to seek and pluck the “finer fruits” of life.

Unavoidably, his bricolage—both technical and intellectual—carries him into apostasy. In a curious way, his description of bread-making is a fitting symbol for his distance from both the practice and doctrine of the community. Thoreau makes a meticulous study of this “ancient and indispensable art.” Through trial and error he tests various combinations of ingredients, “consulting such authorities as offered,” finding at last “a mixture of rye and Indian meal most convenient and agreeable.” He bakes his loaves before his fire, “out of doors on a shingle or the end of a stick of timber sawed off in building my house,” and it is “no little amusement to bake
several loaves of this in succession, tending and turning them as carefully as an Egyptian hatching his eggs.” Certainly, this procedure alone is a departure from the bread-making of the townspeople, but he deviates most significantly from the convention when he learns that he can eliminate yeast, an ingredient he has been taught is absolutely necessary:

Leaven, which some deem the soul of bread, the spiritus which fills its cellular tissue, which is religiously preserved like vestal fire, -- some precious bottle-full, I suppose, first brought over in the Mayflower, did the business for America, and its influence is still rising, swelling, spreading, in cerealian billows over the land—this seed I regularly and faithfully procured from the village, till at length one morning I forgot the rules, and scalded my yeast; by which accident I discovered that even this was not indispensable. . . .(W. 59-60)

Despite the protestations of “housewives” and “elderly people,” who prophesy “a speedy decay of the vital forces,” Thoreau eliminates it from the dough, and finds “it not to be an essential ingredient, and after going without it for a year am still in the land of the living.” Moreover, he is freed from the “discomfiture” of carrying around a bottle of yeast in his pocket. In his further research upon the subject of bread, he learns that he makes it “according to the recipe which Marcus Porcuis Cato gave about two centuries before Christ” (W. 60).

But leavening is not the only tradition brought over on the Mayflower that Thoreau discards. Much as his departure from the conventional procedure of bread-making is the result of a propitious accident, so the vectors of his intellectual bricolage impel him along an unplanned, divergent philosophical course. He is the only citizen of Concord in his day to resign from the local church. He does not abandon the Bible; Walden is peppered with allusions to both the Old and New Testaments, but he rejects the logocentric notion of a single, totalizing statement of the truth:

That age will be rich indeed when those relics which we call the Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even less known Scriptures of the nations shall have still further accumulated, when the Vaticans shall be filled with the Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares, and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale to heaven at last. (W.102)

Confounding the logocentric tendency toward the discrete functions of literary genres, Thoreau’s conception of “Vaticans,” or literary sanctuaries, includes not only the world’s scriptures but secular literature, and not the only works of the past but of all the eras yet to be. Thus the scope of potential truths, scaling the possibilities of human thought, is vast.

Because his frame of reference is so different, so expansive rather than exclusionary, the villagers are bound to misconstrue Thoreau’s actions. They see him rambling, solitary, through the woods of Concord, and they think him a selfish loiterer. But Thoreau is on a quest: “I long
ago lost a hound, a bay horse, and a turtle dove, and am still on their trail. Many are the travelers I have spoken concerning them. . . and they seemed as anxious to recover them as if they had lost them themselves” (W. 15). Travelers, like Thoreau, who understand life as a journey and a seeking, are endeavoring to recover the spirituality they sense within and without themselves, as something lost, yet still vaguely perceived. Like Spirit obscured by the illusory power of maya, they hear “the hound and the tramp of the horse,” even “see the dove disappear behind a cloud” (W. 15). Such intimations of the divinity present in nature are an incentive to the quest. From the perspective of the spiritual journey, the material acquisitions most people prize are encumbrances, distractions, or, to use one of Thoreau’s favorite puns—“trappings.” “As long as possible live free and uncommitted,” Thoreau advises. “It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail” (W. 82). “None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty” (W. 12). What he learns through his intellectual insight from his unobstructed vantage point at Walden Pond is that the mind attached to the world must draw upon it the forces of the world. We are, as Thoreau points out, the tools of our tools, possessed by our possessions—not so much the keepers of herds as the kept. The mind that renounces the attractions of the world loosens the ropes of worldly contingencies. In Indian philosophy such detachment is necessary in the process of mental purification. The more detached and pure the mind, the easier it is to control the thought waves, and the more focused is contemplation, until, achieving one-pointed meditation on divinity, thought waves cease, the mind is quiescent, and the Atman reveals its identity with Brahman, a state in which there are no qualities, and therefore, no limitations—the union with Eternity, the Awakening Thoreau yearns for.

Unfortunately, practicing detachment and meditation can be terribly dry, and desires that are repressed rather than sublimated have a way of reappearing in more implacable disguises. Therefore, the Gita advocates the yogas of devotion and work. Choose an Ideal, it doesn’t matter what god or creed you follow as long as you find something to which you can offer your heart: “However men try to worship Me, so do I welcome them. By whatever path they travel, it leads to Me at last” (Vyasa, 1972, p.41). Work, but offer in mental sacrifice the results of your efforts: “He whose every action is done for my sake, to whom I am the final goal, who loves Me and hates no one—Oh My dearest Son, only he can realize Me”(p.114). Of these elements of the Bhagavad Gita—austerity, detachment, devotion, and contemplation—that Thoreau wove prominently into his myth of Walden, the most evident of all, I believe, is devotion, in his love of Nature:

Worship the Powers of Nature thereby, and let them nourish you in return; thus supporting each other, you shall attain your highest welfare. For fed on sacrifice, Nature will give you all the enjoyment you can desire. But he who enjoys what she gives without returning is, indeed, a robber. (Vyasa, p.33)

Adoring Nature as his chosen Ideal, it is appropriate that Thoreau should offer to Her the paean of his writing.
Derrida’s essay, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourses of the Human Sciences,” provides a fascinating perspective on the work of Levi-Strauss, particularly regarding the concept of bricolage as Levi-Strauss employed it in his study of myth. According to Derrida (1990), ethnology as Levi-Strauss practiced it could not have been born without the “decentering” which Levi-Strauss’ mythological bricolage evidences, without the “dislocation of European culture—and in consequence, the history of metaphysics and its concepts”—from its position as “the culture of reference” (p.153). Along the same lines of thought, ecology, as Thoreau practiced it, could not have been born without the “decentering” Thoreau’s bricolage endorsed—dislodging mankind from its anthropocentric position.

Sages look equally upon all, whether he be a minister of learning and humility, or an infidel, or whether it be a cow, and elephant or a dog. (Vyasa, p.55)

In the myth of *Walden*, Nature is not the “remoter creation” of Emerson’s conception, but no less than Thoreau’s equal, a manifestation, as he is, of the primordial energy—the universal mind: “I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. . . .” (W. 127). In Nature’s indifference to death and suffering he finds confirmation of Sri Krishna’s injunctions to Arjuna not to despair or grieve—that the seeming destruction of life constitutes merely a transformation from one form of existence into another, and not an annihilation of being:

. . . . all Nature would be affected, and the sun’s brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanely, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve. Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? (W. 135-136)

The transformation of energy goes on relentlessly in Nature. “Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mold myself?” Thoreau asks (W. 136). “The very globe continually transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit. . . . What is man but a mass of thawing clay? The ball of the human finger is but a drop congealed” (W. 304-305). Relishing his intimacy, his “intelligence with the earth,” extolling the involvement he experiences as a perceptive observer of natural processes, Thoreau continually blurs and even erases the conventional boundaries between plant, animal, and human.

Even in their respective struggles the various categories of being evince their homology. While hoeing in his bean-field one morning, he hears the “waifs” of martial music coming from the village, and the guns sounding “as if a puff ball had burst.” the reverberations of a distant celebration inspire “an inexpressible confidence” in him, for the vigilance of the trainers is surety that the “liberties of Massachusetts and our fatherland” are in safe keeping. But, despite this praise, there are implications that he doesn’t see human military endeavors in entirely the same light as the townfolk. The distant revelry gives him a “vague sense” of contagion, “of some sort of itching and disease on the horizon.” Hearing the “trumpet that sings of fame,” he feels as if he could “split a Mexican with good relish—for why should we always stand on trifles?”—and he looks around for “a woodchuck or a skunk to exercise my chivalry upon” (W. 159). Humorously, he portrays the infectious irrationality and absurdity of belligerent blood lust. Although Thoreau
does not condemn military practice outright, he nevertheless questions the motivations prompting bellicose enthusiasm. But Nature seems to require a certain degree of combativeness. Every day, as the champion of the bean-field, he does battle with an invading army of weeds, “filling up the trenches with weedy dead. Many a lusty crest-waving Hector that towered a whole foot above his crowding comrades, fell before my weapon and rolled in the dust” (W. 159-160).

Nature is suffused with internecine warfare, the struggle spanning the entire panorama of life. Thoreau describes in some detail the combat he witnesses between two races of ants. His account of the events of the fight is interspersed with remarks that not only anthropomorphize the behavior of the ants, but actually elevate their actions above human conduct: “On every side they were engaged in deadly conduct, yet without any noise that I could hear, and human soldiers never fought so resolutely. . . . It was evident that their battle-cry was Conquer or die” (W. 227).

Richard Bridgman (1982), in his critical appraisal, Dark Thoreau, reproaches the “distasteful zest” with which Thoreau dwells on the episode. “What was the point of this extended description? To show that ants share behavior with humans? To show human endeavors were finally as inconsequential as those of ants?” (p.126) Thoreau patterns his description on the Iliad—which is rife with hewn limbs and lopped-off heads—and perhaps, in thus emphasizing the valor of the ants, who fight despite horrible wounds, Thoreau seeks to overcome the human tendency to devalue and underestimate the capacities of other species. “I was myself excited somewhat even as if they had been men. The more you think of it, the less the difference . . . There was not a hireling there. I have no doubt it was a principle they fought for . . .” (W. 228).

Rather than inconsequential, the battle of the ants is just as momentous in its ramifications for the ants, as the outcome of human warfare is for people.

In March of 1853, Thoreau received an invitation to join the American Association for the Advancement of Science. His reputation as a naturalist and his friendly acquaintance with an officer of the organization made him an attractive candidate for membership. However, as he notes in his journal, he respectfully declined: “Now though I could state to a select few that department of inquiry which engages me, and should be rejoiced by an opportunity to do so, I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing stock of the scientific community . . .”(as quoted in Wolf, 1974, p.158). How could a group of objective, empirical scientists comprehend that what Thoreau found in Nature was “the presence of something kindred to me . . . the perennial source of our life. . . ?” Would they concur that the universe “is an ocean of subtle intelligences”? (W. 131-132). As Derrida (1990) explains in his elaboration upon Levi-Strauss’ formulation of bricolage, the difference between the scientist and the bricoleur is not in their methods of acquiring information, nor in the questions they ask, but in their respective attitudes toward nature, the subject of their research. The scientist refers all he learns to a logically constructed theory—a center (p.158); he objectifies the world to order it in the service of a hypothesis. The bricoleur, on the other hand, uses the knowledge he gathers to weave myths. Although Thoreau studied nature as assiduously as any scientist, he did so with the ardency of a lover becoming intimate with his beloved, and I believe in his adoration of Nature, he found a sublimation for his sexuality:
I feel that I draw nearest to understanding the great secret of my life in my closest intercourse with nature. There is a reality and a health in present nature which cannot be contemplated in antiquity—I suppose what in other men is religion is in me love of nature. (Thoreau, 1986, p.382)

Nature was a shrine to Thoreau, a goddess, and a language.

“The play of difference, which, as Saussure reminded us, is the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign, is in itself a silent play,” Derrida writes. “Inaudible is the difference between two phonemes which alone permit them to be and operate as such” (as quoted in Thompkins, 1990, p.29). Similar, I would like to “scandalously” suggest, is the play of the phenomena of the world. Imperceptible and undifferentiated is the Spirit that makes diversity possible. We see the systematic operation of this language—Nature. Her “lange” is primordial energy, home of all potentialities; her “parole” are the finite and various forms we see before us; but the silence from which all these differences arise is intangible and ineffable: “I am the Omniscient Self that abides in the playground of Matter. . . .” (Vyasa, p.127). Since “differance,” according to Derrida, is that which allows us to think in terms of the contrastive/comparative relationships at the root of language, it constitutes the very possibility of thinking rationally, and consequently, it cannot itself ever appear: It is what enables other things to appear. Therefore, it annuls the opposition of presence/absence (Tompkins, 1990, p.29).

Beyond the senses, It yet shines through every sense perception. Bound to nothing, It yet sustains everything. Unaffected by the Qualities, It still enjoys them all. . . . Know thou further that Nature and God have no beginning. (Vyasa, p.127)

Thus, linking analogously the Derridean description of the functioning of language (a description, by the way, that strikes me as rather mystical), with the Indian Vedic philosophical conception of the cosmos, the world can be seen as a kind of language, a play of diversity in a beginningless discourse. Thoreau, too, arrived at this understanding, although not within a post-structuralist context:

If I am overflowing with life and rich in experience for which I lack expression, then nature will be my language full of poetry,—all nature will fable, and every natural phenomenon be a myth. The man of science, who is not seeking for expression but for a fact to be expressed merely, studies nature as a dead language. I pray for such inward experience as will make nature significant. (Thoreau, 1853/1927, p.112)

The objective world is a written language, expressing the qualities, including the intelligence, of primordial nature. Happening upon a brood of chicks, Thoreau is enthralled by the remarkable expression of their eyes. “All intelligence seems reflected in them. . . . Such an eye was not born when the bird was, but is coeval with the sky it reflects” (W. 225). And since he, too, is an integral part of nature, what he reads tells him about himself, reveals the “depths” of his own
character. As a writer himself, Thoreau further unites himself to the processes of nature, and
becomes an agent of her creativity: “A truly good book is something as natural, as unexpectedly
fair and perfect, as a wild flower discovered on the prairies of the West or in the jungles of the
East” (as quoted in Burkett & Steward, 1989, p.149). He is fecund with words. Thoreau’s
challenge lies in translating the ideas he holds, that are so “remote” from conventional opinions,
into a parole his audience can appreciate, if not comprehend: “I desire to speak somewhere
without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am
convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression” (W.
321). The harsh, negative criticism of his first book, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack
Rivers (Thoreau, 1849/1947), made him aware of the complex demands of his task.

Most of the complaints lodged against A Week by Thoreau’s contemporaries concerned his
digressions, which meander like the rivers, his obscurities, and his touting of Oriental thought.
George Ripley, in a New York Tribune review, disparages Thoreau’s “misplaced Pantheistic
attack on the Christian faith.” Thoreau’s “assertion that he considered ‘the sacred books of the
Brahmins in nothing inferior to the Christian Bible’ led Ripley to explode that he found
Thoreau’s treatment ‘revolting alike to good sense and good taste’” (as quoted in Jackson, 1981,
p.68). And James Russell Lowell, who remained a life-long enemy of Thoreau’s writing,
sneered, “What. . . have Concord and Merrimack to do with Boodh?” Lowell attributed
Thoreau’s tendency to obfuscation to the “same taste that makes him so fond of Hindoo
philosophy, which would seem admirably suited to men, if men were only oysters” (as quoted in
Jackson, p.68). There is a certain truth to Lowell’s observation. Because Thoreau had immersed
himself so wholeheartedly in a philosophy that denies the validity of thought as presence, a
philosophy that negates the idea of absolute reason, a philosophy that asserts that the thinking
subject can only experience relative truth, Thoreau had lost touch with the precepts of Christian
fundamentalism and logocentricism and instead had embraced indeterminacy: “We are
acquainted with a mere pellicle of the globe on which we live. Most have not delved six feet
beneath the surface, nor leaped as many feet above it. We know not where we are. Besides, we
are sound asleep nearly half our time. Yet we esteem ourselves wise, and have established order
on the surface” (W. 329). This is not the message most of Thoreau’s contemporaries wanted to
hear. They wanted the reassurance of their dogmatic beliefs, not uncertainty.

Nevertheless, Thoreau could not abandon literature. As his voluminous journal attests, he
defined himself through writing. It was his “genius,” his special gift, and he felt compelled to
impart the message of his personal myth to the world:

I would fain communicate the wealth of my life to man, would really give them
what is most precious in my gift. I would secrete the pearls with the shellfish and
lay up honey with the bees for them. . . . I inclose and foster the pearl till it is
grown. I wish to communicate those parts of my life which I would gladly live
again. (Thoreau, 1842/1927, p.30)
Thoreau sincerely believed that he had a special dispensation to deliver to his neighbors; like the Old Testament prophets, like the Puritan fathers with their vision of the City on the Hill, Thoreau had a jeremiad to proclaim: “We are a race of tit-men. . . . We need to be provoked,--goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot” (W. 105-106). But because of the unorthodoxy of his conceptions, he needed an extravagant and challenging rhetoric; he needed to discombobulate the logocentrically formulated expectations of his readers.

In his essay “Structure, Sign, and Play. . . .” Derrida (1990) explains how a writer attempting to undermine a particular point-of-view must accept into his argument the premises of the discourse sustaining the perspective he opposes “at the very moment when he denounces them. this necessity is irreducible.” The “quality” and “fecundity” of a critical stance will therefore depend upon how the writer negotiates the problem of “borrowing from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself. A problem of economy and strategy” (p.154). Thoreau, an expert “borrower,” faces such a problem in “Economy,” the opening chapter of Walden. In order to engage his readers as fully as possible in the elaboration of his philosophical bricolage, before they can begin to comprehend his myth or sympathize with his yogic “experiment,” he must somehow subvert their complacency and upset traditional notions. To do this, he uses rhetorical distortions or dislocations, rather than Transcendental doctrines per se. Rhetorically, he turns on their heads the conventional values he considers imimical to spiritual awakening. He devalues property, for example, when he pities the young men “whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms. . . . for these are more easily acquired than got rid of” (W. 3). Do his neighbors pride themselves on being free? They are worse off than the southern slaves, for it is “worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself” (W. 5); they are tyrannized not only by public opinion, but by the limiting despairing notions they have of themselves. Are the wealthy to be envied? They are “the most impoverished class of all. . . .” Do they think they know the truth? “No way of thinking or doing, however ancient, can be trusted without proof. What everybody echoes or in silence passes by as true today may turn out to be falsehood tomorrow, mere smoke of opinion” (W. 6). Thoreau advocates living life as an experiment—constantly testing the “truth” of the propositions we are inclined by our proclivities, or by our ingrained habits and preconceptions to accept. With extravagant rhetorical gestures—puns and hyperbole, mock heroics and loaded questions, all manner of wordplay—he exasperates, teases, coaches, and urges his readers into new perspectives.

But it is through his celebration of indeterminacy in language that Thoreau most evinces his distance from logocentricism. There is, he believes, a spiritual foundation to the world which can be known through spiritual practice (just as he determines through concerted effort that there is a bottom to Walden Pond).

There is one absolute existence. On its surface appear the myriad forms of the phenomenal world like bubbles on the ocean.

*Bhagavata Purana* (1000 BCE/1971, p.74)
Because Reality is beyond speech and mind, the access to absolute existence is, in Thoreau’s words, silence:

Silence is the universal refuge. . . . A good book is the silent plectrum with which our silent lyres are struck. . . . This is the most the book maker can attain to. If he make his volume a foil whereon the waves of silence may break it is well. . . . It were vain for me to interpret the silence—she cannot be done in English. . . . For when at length he dives into her—so vast is the disproportion of the told to the untold, that the former will seem but the bubble on the surface where he disappeared. (Thoreau, 1849/1947, pp. 391-393)

Like nature, written language can point the way and “lift a corner of the veil hiding the deity,” but it cannot fully reveal. Ultimately, both nature and language must be “overcome.” This is a difficult position for Thoreau to maintain, and he does so almost in spite of himself. He is most inconsistent and unconvincing when he discusses the necessity of conquering the instinct to hunt, using the consuming of flesh as a trope for sensuality: “The wonder is how they, how you and I, can live this slimy beastly life, eating and drinking” (W. 215). Yet elsewhere in the same chapter, “Higher Laws,” he states, “Whatever humanity I might conjure up against it was all factitious, and concerned my philosophy more than my feelings” (W. 208). But if he is unable to plunge once-and-for-all into purity and silence, he can make his writing a revelation, in beautiful prose, of the impossibility of totalization of meaning in language—“The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement” (W. 322). Walden invites perpetual rereading—its volatility asks constant reinterpretation. “I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extra-vagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth. . . .” (W. 221). So as to be an adequate foil to the silence hidden behind the words, making the words possible.

Thoreau considered it a “valuable experience to be lost in the woods anytime.” Only when we are completely disoriented “do we appreciate the vastness and strangeness of Nature.” In the same way, when we “wander” in Thoreau’s language, we begin to question the structure, the map, of our thoughts, “and not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (W. 168-169). We begin. His pronouncement, a new dispensation, is a signpost to a persistent journey in language leading to a transcendent realization: Our being is neither in the spoken nor the written word.

References


