

Chains of Translation: On Being a Pacific Thoreauvian

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In memory of my brother Richard von Dassow (1939-1967)

During the years I've been reading, writing, and thinking "professionally" about Thoreau, I've kept a cedar frond tacked over my desk – specifically, a frond of western red cedar, *Thuja plicata*, from a vigorous young tree that grows on the corner of the lot where I grew up in the suburbs of Seattle. I first began reading Thoreau in the shade of that cedar tree. I renew the frond on my periodic visits home. By such gestures do we make objects serve our desire; I'm always surprised how long its intricate, palmate lace stays green.

Henry David Thoreau crafted a voice and a mode of writing that make it all but impossible for his readers not to compare themselves with him. His demand to know where it was that he lived assumes meaning only to the extent that we ask where it is, then, that we live – and it is just here that I find myself most at odds with him. I'm even envious, not of when he lived, for the nineteenth century holds little nostalgia for a woman; nor of how he lived, for he shames me out of that temptation; but of where he lived. Thoreau was able to spend his life rooted in place, even through adulthood living in his family's house (which he helped rebuild and survey), the "Yellow House" on Main Street in Concord, Massachusetts. This was unusual even then in mobile America, and it was no accident: when the young Thoreau went off to Staten Island to tutor William Emerson's son and enter the literary culture of New York City, he suffered deeply and the experiment was aborted. Young American men

were supposed to seek their fortune by leaving home; Henry found his by returning home, never to leave again.

I feel this acutely, because of my own deep sense of personal displacement. Though born in the territory of Alaska (and reared on stories of the "good old days" in the mythical Far North), I grew up on the outskirts of Seattle, a northern Pacific seaport in America's forgotten "far corner," a region among the last to be settled and bearing the least part in the great standard *topoi* of America. I threw myself into my home place: played alone outdoors, exploring and homesteading the woods and ravines around our rustic house, and later I turned myself into a precocious "expert" in local plant ecology and animal behavior. I tied my identity as intimately as possible with the nature of the coastal Pacific Northwest. The impulse lasted until my amateur's love ran into the cabinets and trays of professional university field biology – a collision which transformed me into an English major, reading – who else? – Thoreau. I modeled my nature essays after his, and in my Master's essay I tried to plumb the phenomenology of the mysterious interface between Man and Nature.

Of canonical American writers, Thoreau is the most deeply grounded in particulars of place, yet I never noticed. "Nature" seemed a universal concept, an abstract form into which one poured whatever local content was at hand. The exact entities to which his words referred were blanks on the page into which I wrote myself, as if knowledge were weightless and transferred without loss from his century to mine, his coast to mine, his gender to mine.

Twenty years later, I've gone over to the other side. I'm obsessed with the weight of knowledge, its specific gravity. Recently I hiked through old growth forest into the high alpine country of Washington's Olympic National Park, and overwhelmed my companion on our return by naming, mile after mile, every plant within view of the trail. I'd forgotten I had such knowledge, yet here it all was, unfurling itself before me, the embodied display of my own pre-Thoreauvian identity. I was disgusted: what a waste to know so much that is, both in my academic world and in my current way-station on the eastern rim of Pennsylvania, so utterly without point. How could I ever have believed knowledge was unbounded, weightless? It is deeply bound and immensely heavy. Look at the miles of it that wouldn't fit into the moving van that whisked us

from home on the Pacific to a school in the Midwest to a job an hour from the Atlantic. This is very hard to communicate casually. I will never forget introducing myself to an East Coast colleague who hastened to reassure me, "Oh, I'm not from around here either! I'm from Connecticut." My colleague can get into her car after class and be home for tea, without breaking any speed limits. If a Connecticut Yankee feels displaced in Pennsylvania, then I may as well be from another planet.

Yet if I'd stayed on that planet, I would never have experienced the way distance can open awareness. I had been blithely unpacking Washington from the books into which Thoreau had labored to pack Massachusetts. It was not until I moved east and saw Thoreau's country for myself that I recognized my mistake and the work I had to do: Thoreau hadn't been writing about my place, the cool gray-green watersilk hills half-sunk into the ocean, pooling among coastal mountains. Walden Pond turned out to be a beautiful vestpocket lake, almost alpine in its seeming isolation from the surrounding landscape, and that pleasing discovery reinforced everything I had read in *Walden*. But all the plants and birds and landforms and streets and houses Thoreau had loved were alien to me, and I felt viscerally displaced. True, I gained a more accurate sense of the nature "behind his words, but in one blow I lost the subtle substitutions I had, without thinking, been making between his world and mine. The objects in his world no longer told my story. Knowing his world alienated me from his words, from the imaginative universe I had built from them; and worse, knowing his words had alienated me from my place, literally. To study them and the complexities gathered in them meant exile from Seattle. That is the loss marked by my perpetual cedar frond.

Literary study became a way of incorporating a wider loss, using Thoreau, like my cedar frond, to perform a certain kind of cultural work. Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between environment, a given reality "to which we respond in automatic and unconscious ways," and landscape, "an achievement of the mature mind" which construes or orders reality.' Thus for Tuan, landscape is a "fusion" of "disparate perspectives":



1 Yi-Fu Tuan, "Thought and Landscape: The Eye and the Mind's Eye." *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* ed. D. W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) 100, 93.

... when a person faces the environment he may see alternately an operational farm, a pleasant scene, and a type of social order. Should these different sets of clues amalgamate into a vividly coherent whole in his mind's eye, what he sees is landscape. But there is no instrument, no stereoscope, that will enable him to achieve the integration. ...²

But one instrument that can prompt this integration is, ironically, distance. Tuan observes that being rooted in a place is different than cultivating a "sense of place" – truly rooted communities are unlikely to have museums and societies for the preservation of the past. "The effort to evoke a sense of place and of the past is often deliberate and conscious. To the extent that the effort is conscious it is the mind at work; and the mind – if allowed its imperial sway – will annul the past by making it all present knowledge."³ Museums collect displaced objects and offer them in redesigned context, which, if the mind's "imperial sway" succeeds, offer the illusion of authenticity by annulling the memory of distance.

This is why objects are so interesting: they can argue with the mind, interrupt its imperial sway. "Objects anchor time," Tuan observes.⁴ Their presence can counter the mind's parochial presentness, in the same way that confronting the actual Walden Pond forced me to acknowledge the distance in space and history between Thoreau's landscape and mine. Thus is opened a new field of investigation: how is such distance traversed? Thoreau appeals to us because for all his rootedness he projects a profound sense of place and moreover, of a place endangered. His world moves too rapidly to receive our nostalgia, for the railroad is at his back and the lumberman's axe is never far away. He himself made his living surveying land, the first step to its transformation by the imperial sway of the American mind: he knew himself implicated in the coming of what he called the "evil days." Environment – nature as abstract concept – became charged with the responsibilities of landscape because in our modern life we are perpetually being distanced from it by loss. My childhood woods are paved now, the trees cut, the ravines commanded by the mansions build by Boeing and Microsoft and refugees from the

² Ibid., 97.

³ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977) 198.

⁴ Ibid., 187.

cutting and paving of California. But I am hardly alone – to have loved a place is, for most of us, to grieve.

Against grief, Thoreau took a stand at Walden Pond, bragging "as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."⁵ What they would wake up to was dawn, not the coming dusk: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star" (333). These words, the conclusion of *Walden*, are a gesture past grief, as if belief in apocalypse were to ensure its coming. Both the generic fear of apocalypse and the individualist gesture of defiance – escaping the evil days by building one's own private Paradise – are deeply build into the myth of America, and this is the kind of universal story that attracted me in the closing years of the Viet Nam War and the first Earth Day. Thoreau famously went to Walden to build his own world, even to his "own sun and moon and stars" (130) – yet this popular icon masks the second half of Thoreau's claim, that the world he built was to be not a retreat but a platform. His metaphors enlarge relentlessly on Walden as a "place for business," for transactions with the "Celestial Empire" (20-21) – which demanded of him not isolation but all manner of exchanges. With the axe he borrowed he cut trees on the land he also borrowed, to frame the cabin he finished with boards recycled from a railroad worker's shanty, a cabin he sold off, to be dismantled to patch a barn.

Thoreau's double movement both masks and advertises this transactional basis in things – the poetic curve of his prose moves out toward abstraction, the weightless words that travel so well around the globe; and also back into the material objects which anchor him on borrowed land a mile from Concord, cutting pines in the spring of 1845 with a borrowed axe. Apocalypse, nostalgia, and American individualism are powerful but weightless. Thoreau's approach was to anchor them in a world of heft and swing, and to find in the very process of anchoring faith in the dawn. The integration of this double perspective enabled him to fuse his divided world into a single, coherent landscape.

To ground our own faith in Thoreauvian fashion, we cannot copy him, but must forge our own mature version of this double movement.

5 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), title page.

When I started reading Thoreau, how did I read passages like the following?

It was pleasant to see my whole household effects out on the grass, malting a little pile like a gypsy's pack, and my three-legged table, from which I did not remove the books and pen and ink, standing amid the pines and hickories. . . . A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs; pine cones, chestnut burs, and strawberry leaves are strewn about. (113)

I like to imagine I had his "household effects" standing under Douglas fir and hemlock, with Oregon grape growing under his table, salal run round its legs, and fir cones, cedar twigs and madrona leaves strewn about. More likely I flattened his specifics into "green stuff," reading for the meaning and confident I was close enough, that the specifics made no real difference. Yet if this made Thoreau commensurate with my world, why then was I so taken aback by the novelty of Massachusetts flora? And excited, too – here was a whole new Thoreau to whom the specifics did matter, and who wasn't at all commensurate with my world – at least not without some serious work. Thoreau's chain of translation still led from local Massachusetts to global truth, but not back down to the Olympic Mountains. Since I couldn't just take over his sense of place, I had to reconstitute it for myself, step by step, from the ground up.

A first step is to go back to that cedar frond. Thoreau never saw a western red cedar. They grow on the lowland fringe of northern North America and require a soft, moist, mild climate. Given those conditions, cedars are a tough and ambitious tribe, strong and graceful, growing to tremendous girth and height. Cedar wood splits easily into boards, and the bark into cloth-like strips; the Northwest Coast Indians planked their houses with it, wove the bark into clothing, and carved the soft but durable wood into totem poles. Unlike most conifers, to take out a cedar you must take it from the roots. When a gale tops a cedar, the uppermost branches shoot upward to make a new top. Young cedars are skirted with graceful skeins of delicate green lace; ancient cedars stand like blasted candelabra, teeth to the wind. What the cedar marks is a whole aspect of American nature that Thoreau never experienced, a West so far west that it faces the far east. The abstract polarity that inscribed America – West and East, Nature and Culture, Wild and Civil – by coming full circle collapses, leaving behind the unresolved complexity of material beings.

The cedar frond over my desk – growing dusty and fragile – becomes a metaphor for distance and a reminder of all in nature that does not bespeak Thoreau, but it also represents an effort at translation, a way to communicate his world into mine.

"Objects anchor time." Thoreau in *Walden* repudiated objects – his effort to live simply required him to jettison the burden of possessions that spoke not to immediate need but to the past, to tradition, to the clutter of a crowded middle-class Victorian home. Thoreau discarded one past to create a new, mythic alternative. His gesture extended to objects of nature: "I had," he tells us,

three pieces of limestone on my desk, but I was terrified to find that they required to be dusted daily, when the furniture of my mind was all undusted still, and I threw them out the window in disgust. How, then, could I have a Turnished house? I would rather sit in the open ail; Tor no dust gathers on the grass, unless where man has broken ground. (36)

The breaking of ground thrusts the eternal present of nature into the history of human enterprise, where the layering of dust marks the intrusion of time, gathering and weighing on the present moment. As a mystic, Thoreau discarded objects – even as he sold his Walden cabin for scrap, apparently without a pang, leaving his more materialistic descendants scrambling to find its final remains: a fragment of board in a crumbling barn, a hearth unearthed and preserved in Walden State Park. Next to the cabin site rises a cairn begun by Bronson Alcott in 1867 – a pile of stones where Thoreau's followers honor their hero, this man who threw his three pieces of limestone out the window, by piling up the stones they have brought with them, in luggage or handbag or backpack or pocket, from all over the globe. The man who repudiated objects is honored by the accumulation of the simplest and least valued objects of all, stones which anchor him in our own past, anchor our meditative passage through a plot of land made sacred by his presence, anchor public memory in physical reality.

The less public image is the Thoreau who stuffed his attic room in the Yellow House with collections of rocks, arrowheads, plants, birds' nests, birds' eggs, and whatever curious objects caught his eye. His serious collecting began after he left Walden Pond behind, as if the gap opened by leaving his home in nature could be filled by bringing nature home. It couldn't, of course – his collection marked not his belonging in nature

but his distance from it, even as he could write *Walden* only after leaving *Walden*. Yet even after reassembling nature under the imaginative grasp of *Walden*, his collection was still incomplete, lie still found work to do. Collecting and reassembling can become a way of cultivating a sense of place, a continual reassessment of the material elements that compose a landscape. Perhaps he found the collection's persistent incompleteness comforting, in that its gaps assured him there was still, in effect, more day to dawn, more in nature than even the most totalizing mind could grasp. Museums are said to create the illusion that the world's totality can be – has been – comprehended by the mind, even as the souvenir brings the far place and the distant past into the imperial here and now. Paradoxically, museums and souvenirs can also perform the opposite insight, marking the incompleteness of the mind's comprehension by displaying the gaps, and deflating the imperial here and now by evidencing distance.

Objects can resist oblivion – they can hold open the gap between here and there, the gap that myth would close. Thoreau dreamed of the American West, whereas 130 years later my own path was East, backwards. Could Thoreau's mythic evocation of the Pilgrim fathers on Plymouth Rock connect me to my past? When I make the effort I run up against family stories of pioneer mothers, German immigrant fathers and the dryland odors and sounds of failed homesteads in Eastern Washington. Only to the Easterner is the American West mythic; the Westerner coming East is forced to question the East's myth of itself.

Myth dissolves contradiction, smooths over gaps and heals breaks with narratives of wholeness. The most significant part of my cedar frond is the raw end where I broke it off the branch, detaching it to make it portable. That broken stem marks the instant when I created it as an object, for there are no objects in nature. The twig flows into the branch, branch into trunk, trunk into roots, roots into soil, soil into more roots, into house foundations and roadbeds and streambeds, a forest, a coastal ecosystem, an urban megalopolis that skips from Vancouver B.C. all the way to San Diego – where will I break the twig? Why this cedar, and not that hemlock? The series of choices I made, quite unconsciously, dramatized my identity to myself, including the drama of disconnection, departing. Yet the act of breaking connects, and the point of breakage recalls me to that moment, is that memory materialized. The stasis of the

object I made marks lime even while the living tree, 3,000 miles away, sets its cones, drops them, adds a new layer of growth and discards the old.

People drag all kinds of things home from the woods, the mountains, the deserts, the beaches. The conventional wisdom about' this is effectively expressed by Emerson in the poem "Each and All":

I wiped away the weeds and foam,
I fetched my sea-born treasures home;
But the poor, unsightly, noisome things
Had left their beauty on the shore
With the sun and the sand and the wild uproar.⁶

The beauty of the whole fools us into thinking the parts beautiful too, but beauty lies in wholeness. No object – no *natural* object, at least – can, therefore, be truly beautiful. The logic is even more interesting when Emerson humanizes it:

The lover watched his graceful maid,
As 'mid the virgin train she strayed,
Nor knew her beauty's best attire
Was woven still by the snow-white choir.
At last she came to his hermitage,
Like the bird from the woodlands to the cage; –
The gay enchantment was undone,
A gentle wife, but fairy none.

The nomination of objects is the poet's pathway to the "perfect whole," but only objects ensconced in their natural contexts. The shell, or the woman, is either whole and beautiful in context, or, ripped out of context, noisome and deflated, "down to earth in the worst sense. It doesn't occur to the poet that a shell fetched home has not been removed from context, but moved from one constructed context (where the poet strolling on the beach stoops to pick it up, admire and pocket it) to another constructed context (where the shell resting on the poet's mantle signifies his past act, perhaps his futile desire to possess nature, or his ironic desire to pretend to possess nature, or his successful desire to

⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Poems* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904) 5

possess a memory). The poet assumes that there are contexts, and then there are objects which can be removed from contexts to float in free space, as if they no longer cast a shadow. It's when this assumption is gendered and humanized that it betrays its weakness. Poor Lydian. What did she think of her husband's poem?

Something rather different happens in a passage from Thoreau's *Cape Cod*, an entire book about beaches and things on beaches, about the specific weight of objects and absences and the way certain objects delimit absence. Charity houses, for instance, put up to shelter victims of shipwreck, prove on inspection to be both nailed shut and utterly bereft of comfort: "Turning our backs on the outward world, we thus looked through the knot-hole into the humane house, into the very bowels of mercy; and for bread we found a stone. . . . we thought how cold is charity! how inhumane humanity! This, then, is what charity hides!"⁷ Words betray objects, objects give the lie to words.

One of Thoreau's most disturbing passages meditates at length on objectivity, deception, and betrayal: "Objects on the beach, whether men or inanimate things, look not only exceedingly grotesque, but much larger and more wonderful than they actually are." Bold and rugged cliffs, he reports, "proved to be low heaps of rags," lost cargo from a shipwreck. Shipwreck casts up another kind of cargo, too. "Once also it was my business to go in search of the relics of a human body, mangled by sharks, which had just been cast up, a week after a wreck, having got the direction from a light-house" On July 19, 1850, Margaret Fuller Ossoli, her husband, and her infant son were shipwrecked off Fire Island, New York. Emerson dispatched Thoreau to find their bodies and Margaret's manuscripts. Thoreau spent days combing the beach without success, but, as he wrote to his acquaintance Charles Sumner, he did find an unidentifiable body that was, perhaps, the remains of Sumner's missing brother. In the calm retrospective prose of *Cape Cod*, Thoreau's account continues:

I expected that I must look very narrowly to find so small an object, but . . . the relics were as conspicuous as if they lay in state on that sandy plain, or a generation had labored to pile up their cairn there. Close at hand they were simply some bones with a

⁷ Henry David Thoreau, *Cape Cod* (Princeton: PrincetonUP, 1988) 60.

*little flesh adhering to them, in fact, only a slight inequality in the sweep of the shore. There was nothing at all remarkable about them, and they were singularly inoffensive both to the senses and the imagination. But as I stood there they grew more and more imposing. They were alone with the beach and the sea, whose hollow roar seemed addressed to them, and I was impressed as if there was an understanding between them and the ocean which necessarily left me out, with my snivelling sympathies. That dead body had taken possession of the shore, and reigned over it as no living one could, in the name of a certain majesty which belonged to it.*⁸

To discuss the deceptive appearance of objects, "whether men or inanimate things," Thoreau chooses a man who is also a thing, leading to the queasy recognition of the body's ambivalent status. In this context, the mundane observation becomes quite shocking, perhaps the more so the harder Thoreau labors to make it sound like "nothing at all remarkable," entirely "inoffensive." The beach is the classic figure for the interface of decent, domestic humanity and the desperate, annihilating sea, domesticity's ultimate wilderness. This narrow middle zone is a terrible equalizer of objects. Upon its shelf, Thoreau reminds us, lie "The carcasses of men and beasts together . . . rotting and bleaching in the sun and waves, and each tide turns them in their beds, and tucks fresh sand under them."⁹ The sea is Mother Nature, our loving neighborhood butcher, tucking all her children in for the night. Yet what can we trust in this inhumanly innocent realm, where perception is distorted and common conception refuted? Is this zone where the waves beat bodies into objects the epicenter of our world, or the outermost margin where truths and bodies alike are turned inside out?

Thoreau's steely insistence on rendering this, even this, environment into landscape shapes it into the only truth that the human mind can accept: distortion is the truth after all. This small object really is grotesquely huge, this "simple" object overwhelms in complexity, this "slight inequality in the sweep of the shore" is an outrageous inequality, the unremarkable is remarked upon at length, the inoffensiveness is profoundly, metaphysically offensive. The human body – which, in a cosmic parody of shell-collecting, Thoreau is sent to gather and bring home – is broken out of all proper context. But to Thoreau the dawning

⁸ Ibid., 84-85.

⁹ Ibid., 147.

understanding is that it is, after all, in context, part of that very perfect whole. In fact, the bones are such a natural part of that whole that they unite in a secret sympathy, a mutual understanding which drives Thoreau, the living man "with my snivelling sympathies," altogether out. His tone is a little injured: "Whose side are you on?," he seems to ask. It turns out that he, not the body, is dispossessed, as if to be alive and conscious is to be dis-placed. Above all, it is the specific weight of the body, its presence as nothing but a body, that becomes unbearable. Its presence is a monument to absence.

Or to be more precise, Thoreau uses its presence to erect a monument to absence in a complex feat of ideological work, even as the stone cairn piled up by a generation of pilgrims marks the absence of Thoreau from Walden Pond. What was the absence in Thoreau's life that called him to such prose? Not nature, not this time. There was, not Charles's brother, but his own brother John, who had contracted lockjaw and died in Henry's arms eight years before. Thereafter Henry developed a case of sympathetic lockjaw, a tyranny of mind over body which terrified his family. His biographers find this moment crucial. Thoreau's every literary effort offered tribute to his lost brother, whom everyone had agreed was the brilliant one, the charming one, the promising one. It was, in a terrible irony, John's death that had freed Henry.

A cairn of books to honor his brother – not to speak of the cairn of books which pile over Thoreau's name in every scholarly library, all of which attest to the complex ideological work that has kept Henry Thoreau culturally alive. The pond itself is taken to be an anchor in time, weighing down an aspect of the past that we don't want to lose. A long political battle has been fought to keep Walden Pond in the nineteenth century – or rather, to recreate it in the image of Thoreau's myth, "forever wild" as the slogan goes, against the rising tide of twentieth-century commercial usage in which Walden Pond the middle-class shrine is also Walden Park, the popular Boston working-class bathing beach, and (so to speak) Walden Estates, the site of an exclusive upper-class neighborhood. Which whole is the real whole, which context the right one? The pond has become like Emerson's seashell, carried along with him after the beach has long since vanished under beach houses and fishing piers. With the "natural" and "authentic" context gone, would Emerson construct a simulacrum? Or amalgamate the many layers and perspectives into a

coherent whole that somehow acknowledges them all? If every object shows a visible break, and if the break is the true point of attachment to the original cognitive act of objectification, then the difficulty lies not in masking or suppressing the break but in cherishing the object *because* it is broken, because of the history bespoken by the break. Thoreau knew he lived in a damaged world and he came to value it anyway – he surrendered the dream of a perfect whole to focus on the broken, on the regeneration that sprang from the disruption, even the destruction, wrought in his time by railroads, axes, fire and – in the case of John Brown – violence. The broken and mangled body abandoned on the wide beach finally is given grandeur and dignity by a voice that sees the broken as not a violation of the whole, but the hidden attachment to wholeness made visible, a glimpse of the underside of the pattern in the carpet.

Because of Thoreau, *Walden* now has a tri-valent meaning: the word can designate the living pond, marker of our distance from and attachment to the past; it can also designate his classic book, or the concept the book encapsulates. The book itself is another object – not the canonical volume handled by pedants and students, armored with footnotes and annotations and generations of monographs – but the original vestpocket volume of 1854, simplicity itself, shocking in its lack of pretence or expectation. To behold it is to see the ground fall away from under one's scholarly feet. Once again, the object marks the gap between 1854 and now, the gap filled and masked by scholarly editions. Held in the hand, *Walden* becomes just a book again, the summer's latest reading: what has that promising young friend of Emerson got to say now? I see that book he's been working on finally came out!

Walden as a first edition is expensive – \$2,500, according to our librarian – but *Walden* as a concept is cheap, portable as glacial lakes and first editions are not. The concept – build your own world, be the only man in nature – can be obtained without the expense of visiting the pond or even of reading the book, though a proper Thoreauvian will protest that a concept gained so very cheaply loses most of its meaning; one has expended no life to earn it. What it loses is gravity, the weight of experience. To take up the chain of translation only at this farthest link is to experience nothing: the claim that ideas are universal turns out to be as hollow and empty as Thoreau's humane houses, their barrenness

sheltering no one. Thoreau, we like to say, "grounded" his ideas, he was "down to earth." I'd like to say that he loaded his writing with the real by constructing an unusually long chain of translation, from world-heavy Walden Woods at one end to free-floating concept at the other. His readers can pick up the chain at any point and follow it in either direction – in fact, Thoreau insists that we do so, that in no other way will we truly understand the concept. He consciously construed his conceptual world through particulars, but more, his fascination with perception led him to explore the way different perspectives made visible different sets of particulars, even in the same environment. When he "traveled a good deal in Concord," he traveled variously as antiquarian, classicist, social historian, businessman, folktlorist, civil engineer, school teacher, poet, naturalist, scientist, philosopher, mystic. The various perspectives were, in his conscious ordering mind, amalgamated into a "landscape" in Yi-Fu Tuan's sense; out of that mental landscape, scholars of various disciplines have precipitated various Thoreaus – a historian, a poet, a social critic, a naturalist This unravels various aspects of a single coherence, following a complex chain of translation – a braiding of chains – back into just that set of particulars of interest to this or that discipline. But how can we respond fully to the inclusiveness of his vision? It's easier to pick up the chain midway and follow it out to the common and familiar realm of universals, those large and mobile concepts like "individualism" and "nature." But moving backwards into the realm of particulars, the objects that Thoreau lifted from the whole, handled, reassembled, manipulated, is difficult because it requires us to re-engage the very problems discourse was invented to overleap, problems which theories of discourse barely discern. In theory, the mind of words faces a world of things, and only phenomena exist at that interface, which is permeable in neither direction. Like Ahab, try as we will, we cannot strike through the mask to seize the reality beyond. We gather next to Thoreau on the beach, staring into the shifting and unnameable ocean. He who ventures across that barrier is sure to be cast back onto the beach, a mangled relic of himself.

To venture beyond we need to trade the narrow beach for the wide forest, where the chain of reference isn't submerged or repressed but spread out in the open air, right on the grass like Thoreau's furniture. In this metaphor, reference doesn't face an uncrossable gulf, but grows from

the middle toward the ends. To begin, one dips into the unbroken flow and dips up an object, something to take along in one's journey, both breaking off and marking the break. "Reference" then is not what one points to, the external validation of an internal reality, but "that which remains constant through a series of transformations."¹⁰ In this tag-team relay of reference, "a word replaces a thing while conserving a trait that defines it,"¹¹ aligning each stage so that from the very last, one may always retrace one's steps to the first. The first act of taking up begins the sequence of translation from object to sign. The cedar frond in my hand is now an object; as I transfer it to the plastic bag that protects it, the object becomes precious; unpacked 3,000 miles away it becomes a sign of distance; tacked over my desk, it becomes a metonym for the specific place I desire but lack, and soon a metaphor for desire itself, herein translated into graphite scrawls on paper, next into electronic pulses on a screen, which printed out can be transported across the Atlantic, reprinted, and distributed, now halfway around the world from the tree which still thrives, in magnificent indifference to me. As Bruno Latour says of the objects brought back from the Amazon forest by field biologists,

We never detect the rupture between things and signs, and we never find ourselves faced with the imposition of arbitrary and discrete signs upon shapeless and continuous matter. We, only see an unbroken series of well-nested elements, each of which plays the role of sign for the previous and of thing for the succeeding.¹²

Each step conserves some trait, which through the sequence of alignments is amplified, gaining in legibility, compatibility, and mobility even as it steadily loses in locality, materiality, and particularity. The gulf between the wild sea and the cultivated shore is crossed by connecting the minutest of links into a delicate chain that binds us to the world, fills the world with invisible chains.

Yi-Fu Tuan values landscape because it encourages us to dream while anchoring our attention with components we can see and touch.¹³

10 Bruno Latour, "The 'Pédofil' of Boa Vista: A Photo-Philosophical Montage." Trans. Bart Simon and Katia Verresen. *Common Knowledge* 4.1 (Spring 1995): 170.

11 Ibid., 174.

12 Ibid., 169.

13 Tuan, "Thought and Landscape," 100.

Similarly, Thoreau's chains of translation from the weight of sensual immediacy to the weightlessness of ideas keep every step in view, not only giving his prose its peculiar density and sensitivity to place but also showing how the mind can glimpse transcendence in the commonplace, not by abandoning the material world like a castoff shell but by valuing precisely the stories only materiality can speak. Objects are used to embody and bespeak complex cultural stories. The story I have embodied in my cedar frond is one of discontinuity, difference, homelessness and exile, a story which emerged in a complex symbiosis with Thoreau's works and with my own quest to follow the trail of his words back into his world. My story no doubt betrays my own ideological working habits, including a wish to use knowledge to puncture (or, more generously, to elucidate) myth. When Thoreau writes of playing tag with a loon, I can triangulate on that loon as if it were a star which shone on him and shines on me, collapsing the distance between us the same way Walt Whitman, "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in 1856, triangulated from sun, river, and seagulls "oscillating their bodies" to greet us today "face to face." Because I too know the deep-diving common loon, its maniacal laugh and its eerie howl, I can imagine Thoreau and I share a world: I trace his words back to an object in my own nature, no doubt a reason this passage stays with me as many others have not. I can, with his help and the help of a loon on a long-ago Alaskan lake, relive this myth. But tracing his words back to breaks in our object-worlds helps me dissolve his myth back into the confusion of history, whereby even a suburban, female, twentieth-century Pacific Thoreauvian is linked, through the "transformed, aligned, constructed world"¹⁴ of Thoreau, to America, literature, nature, the past.

Thoreau offers the reader a process of self-definition through matter as memory – a matrix of memory that locates the individual in the context of the whole, not by swallowing others in the mind's imperial sway or being swallowed into the good of the whole, but by making visible and even tangible some part of the myriad and ever-changing associations that ravel up identity, doing and undoing at once. I broke off a bit of cedar to tell myself not where I am not, but exactly where and who I am. It's an answer to the question Thoreau was driven to by immersion in his own

¹⁴ Latour, 186.

wilderness, the barren heights of Mt. Ktaadn: "the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact!* Who are we? Where are we?"¹⁵ By catching hold of the middle, the world of objects which anchor us in place and time, Thoreau found not just an answer but a way back from dissonance to Concord: Take up the world where you are. Where you are broken, there is your point of contact.

¹⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* New York: Library of America, 1985, 646.