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ARTICLE

Human Labor and Natural Labor in Henry David Thoreau's Works

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This article argues that Thoreau's concept of "labor" presented as a defense of poiesis—any generative, world-altering activity. Thoreau understood Nature's labor as the ultimate creation for humans to imitate. Human labor best approached this ideal in the absence of market-based divisions of labor, particularly when mental and physical labor were united (even undifferentiated beyond their contemporary, reified distinction, a distinction which deeply troubled Thoreau). Thoreau's epistemology undergirds my discussion of his theory of labor. As I argue, his attempts to transcend divisions between subject and object, between ideal and material—divisions pertinent to his intellectual influences and interlocutors—were isomorphic to his attempts to transcend divisions of mental and physical labor, insofar as sensuous knowing itself was laborious. As Thoreau sought to know Nature and bring human labor closer to it, he expressed a consistent, dialectically complex philosophy, in which political economy and aesthetics, science and poetry, ran in parallel.

In a late-career essay on huckleberries, Henry David Thoreau offered a parable of the division of labor. He began with a "professional huckleberry picker," who hired out a landowner's field to gather berries with a "patent" rake. A third person entered, "a professed cook," who was "superintending" the making of a huckleberry pudding. The pudding was "intended" for a "Professor," who sat "in his library writing a book—a work on the *Vaccinieae*" (*Vaccinieae* being the huckleberry's scientific taxonomical tribe). The "result of this downward course," Thoreau predicted, "will be seen in that work," which will be "worthless." To save the professor's book, Thoreau proposed "a different kind of division of labor," that the professor "divide himself freely between his library and the huckleberry field."[1]

[1]Henry David Thoreau, "Huckleberries" (1970), in *Collected Essays and Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell (New York, 2001) (henceforth *CEP*), 468–501, at 494. The other editions of Thoreau's work used in this paper will be as follows: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), ed. Carl F. Hovde, William L. Howarth, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell (Princeton, 1980) (henceforth *Week*); *Cape Cod* (1865), ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer (Princeton, 2004) (henceforth *CC*); *Early Essays and Miscellanies*, ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer, Edwin Moser, and Alexander C. Kern (Princeton, 1975) (henceforth *EEM*); *Journal*, 8 vols., ed. Robert Sattelmeyer (Princeton, 1981–2002); *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick (Princeton, 1973) (henceforth *RP*); *The Maine Woods* (1864), ed. Joseph J. Moldenhauer

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This parable considered not only a division of labor in a basic sense—different people completing specialized tasks—but also a number of conceptual dualisms that particularly concerned Thoreau. The labor division here was specifically between *physical* labor (picking berries) and *mental* labor (writing books), a division that vexed and fascinated antebellum Americans—ranging from Transcendentalists to labor reformers to slaveholders—as they articulated its strictly dichotomous terms, generally in favor of mental labor long seen as more leisurely, high-class, and pure.[2] The professor's mental labor harbored further divisions relevant to contemporary scientific and philosophical debates: abstract versus experiential knowledge, rational versus empirical sources, ideal versus material worlds.[3] Divided thought paralleled divided labor.

This parable of the professor's labor (or, rather, division thereof) could be read into a common vision of Thoreau holding a negative or begrudging view of labor, with "labor" narrowly understood as activity performed out of self-reproductive necessity, whether monetarily compensated on the market (as wage labor), or not (as sustenance farming, cooking, washing, and so on).[4] Here, activity separate from that of presumed necessity may be opposed to labor as "leisure," or, depending on its content, "work" in the Arendtian sense: those activities concerned not with the "biological process" of cyclical production and consumption needed for bodily life, but with the "durability of human artifice," transcending the limits of mere necessity. Hannah Arendt, indeed like Thoreau, lamented the conversion of once "work"-like activity into "labor" under modern capitalism—the market domination of necessity.[5] Yet unlike Arendt, Thoreau did not see in necessary labor *as such* an impossibility of human freedom; under the right conditions (i.e. removed

(Princeton, 2004) (henceforth *MW*); *Translations*, ed. K. P. van Anglen (Princeton, 1986); and *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (1854) (New York, 2017) (henceforth *Walden*).

[2]On this distinction in antebellum thought, as well as its older origins in Western philosophy, see Jonathan A. Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor in Antebellum America* (New Haven, 1991), 1–53; Nicholas K. Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago, 1993), 1–58; Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Leiden, 2021), 15, 54–5, 78–86; Anne C. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830–1850* (New Haven, 1981), 109–17, 133–5; and my own "An American Prometheus: Labor in the Mind of Antebellum Slaveholders" (unpublished undergraduate thesis, Princeton University, 2021).

[3]On these debates relevant to Thoreau see Laura Dassow Walls, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison, 1995); Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley, 2001), 75–139.

[4]See William A. Gleason, *The Leisure Ethic: Work and Play in American Literature, 1840–1940* (Stanford, 1999), 27–56; David Dowling, "Commercial Method and Thoreau's Economy of Subsistence Writing," *Concord Saunterer* 16 (2008), 84–102; Leo Stoller, in *After Walden: Thoreau's Changing Views on Economic Man* (Stanford, 1957); John P. Diggins, "Thoreau, Marx, and the 'Riddle' of Alienation," *Social Research* 39/4 (1972), 571–98, at 576–9, 583–9; Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850–1920* (Chicago, 1978), 1; Brian Walker, "Thoreau's Alternative Economics: Work, Liberty, and Democratic Cultivation," in Jack Turner, ed., *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau* (Lexington, 2009), 39–67. A slight exception to this category of literature—though still having a narrow understanding of labor-as-necessity—is in Raymond's studies emphasizing Thoreau's later-life appreciation for work and its spiritual significance. See David B. Raymond, "Henry David Thoreau and the American Work Ethic," *Concord Saunterer* 17 (2009), 137–56; Raymond, "The Aim of the Laborer: Critical Assessments of Henry David Thoreau's Philosophy of Work," *Concord Saunterer* 28 (2020), 130–52.

[5]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 2018), Chs. 3, "Labor," and 4, "Work," 79–174.

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from the market's division of labor, as in his experiment at Walden Pond), it could be performed with as much care and deliberation as those artistic pursuits of Arendt's "work." Throughout his writings, a range of crafts like farming, pottery, logging, carpentry, blacksmithing, sailing, fishing, hide curing, canoe building, thread making, and candle making all receive praise from Thoreau, himself a jack-of-all-trades.[6]

Thoreau did not philosophically endorse such a labor/work distinction, even if he critically noted its material manifestation in the shifting realms of necessary and non-necessary (re)productive activity.[7] Rather, I argue that it is more fruitful to understand labor in his thought more broadly as *poiesis*—any generative, creative, world-altering activity, inclusive of both necessary labor and non-market aesthetic production. As Thoreau summarized, the "free labor of man, even the creative and beautiful arts," was "the delight of the ages."[8] Even prior to the realm of necessary labor, Thoreau noted an innate human urge to alter the world, manifesting ever so mundanely: "They who come rarely to the woods take some little piece of the forest into their hands to play with by the way."[9] If this unleisurely Thoreau took anything from the political economy he read as a Harvard undergraduate, it was an embrace of labor as an asset rather than as divine punishment.[10]

Following this expansive notion of labor, I argue that Thoreau was neither critical nor ambivalent towards labor, but expressed a defense of labor bound to his appreciation of Nature. Thoreau understood Nature as both the best laborer, and the highest product: her labors were undivided, self-contained. In contrast, human labor—further divided in the market—leaned upon a fundamental ontological division, as we regarded Nature as an external form upon which to work. Thoreau, seeking better labor, meant to bridge this gap. This aim was part of Thoreau's wider philosophical effort to transcend mind/body dualisms, and demonstrate the dialectical, relational interchange between, even the *unity* of, subject and object. Disciplinarily, Thoreau sought dissolution between poetry (mind)

[6]For a selection see *Week*, 45; Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1862), in *CEP*, 225–55, at 243; *Walden*, 210; *MW*, 42–4, 76, 95, 101, 125–6, 133, 149, 187–9, 204, 229–30, 281–2; *CC* 110–15, 210. On Thoreau's identity as a laborer see Robert A. Gross, "Thoreau and the Laborers of Concord," *Raritan* 33/1 (2013), 50–66; Stoller, *After Walden*, 52–3, 115–16.

[7]I further explore the historical question of necessary/non-necessary labor in my forthcoming "A Natural Critic of Political Economy: Thoreau, Marx, and the Temporal Problem of Labor," in Alex Moskowitz and Ted Stolze, eds., *Radical Transcendentalisms* (Leiden, 2025).

[8]Henry David Thoreau, "Reform and the Reformers," in *RP*, 181–97, at 188.

[9]*Walden*, 104.

[10]On this shift in perceptions of labor reflected in classical political economy see Andrea Komlosy, *Work: The Last 1,000 Years* (London, 2018), 12–13; as related to Thoreau's specifically see T. D. Birch and F. Metting, "The Economic Design of Walden," *New England Quarterly* 65/4 (1992), 587–602, at 588, 595–602. For further consideration of Thoreau's dialogue with classical political economists see Herbert F. Smith, "Thoreau among the Classical Political Economists," *ESQ* 23/2 (1977), 114–22; Richard H. Dillman, "Thoreau's Humane Economics: A Reflection of Jean Baptiste Say's Economic Philosophy," *ESQ* 25/1 (1979), 20–25; Susan E. Gallagher, "Emancipation from the 'Invisible Hand': Thoreau's 'Economy of Living'," in Kristen Case and K. P. van Anglen, eds., *Thoreau at Two Hundred: Essays and Reassessments* (Cambridge, 2016), 45–56; Robert D. Richardson, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley, 1986), 166–9.

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and science (world).[11] In his words, we must live, "betwixt spirit and matter, such a human life as we can."[12]

Indeed, there was a systemic coherence in Thoreau's eclectic philosophy. For Thoreau, just as one needed ideal and material worlds, one needed both mental and physical labor. As many scholars have noted, Thoreau's understanding of perception had significant bearing on his social and ethical thought; there was a one-to-one relationship between the unifying tendencies of Thoreau's epistemology and his theory of labor, his aesthetics, and his political economy.[13] These analogic connections partially reflect the fuzzy disciplining of "economy" as a concept in Thoreau's time—it is telling that he read Jean-Baptiste Say alongside John Locke's epistemology in a single Harvard philosophy course.[14]

Per Thoreau, knowing was laborious; knowing shaped laboring. Nature was the ultimate of our knowledge, and her labors inspired humanity's creations. Thoreau intimated a directionality of the human labor process, characterized by his desire to "live deliberately":[15] we derived ideas from perceived Nature; we conceived of what we sought to create; we willed it into material existence. Deliberate labor began with knowledge; mentation preceding creation was central to Thoreau's attempt to unify his divided world.

[11]See Branka Arsić, "Our Things: Thoreau on Objects, Relics, and Archives," *Qui Parle* 23/1 (2014), 157–81, at 165, 170; H. Daniel Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work: Memory and Perception in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, the Journal, and Walden* (New Haven, 1990), 67–8; Michael Jonik, "'The Maze of Phenomena': Perception and Particular Knowledge in Thoreau's Journal," in Francois Specq, Laura Dassow Walls, and Michel Granger, eds., *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon* (Athens, GA, 2013), 150–62; Dieter Schulz, "Nature, Knowledge, and the Method of Thoreau's Excursions," in ibid., 130–39; Kristen Case, "Thoreau's Radical Empiricism: The Kalendar, Pragmatism, and Science," in ibid., 140–49; Stoller, *After Walden*, 40–41; Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 85–93, 132–211, 246–52; Tauber, *Moral Agency of Knowing*, 95–6, 113–18, 130, 140–42, 157.

[12]*Week*, 73–4.

[13]George Kateb, "Thoreau's *Journal*: Reading Nature," in Branka Arsić, ed., *American Impersonal: Essays with Sharon Cameron* (New York, 2014), 131–65; Kateb, "Thoreau, Henry David," in Gregory Claeys, ed., *Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought* (Thousand Oaks, 2013), 793–5; Alex Moskowitz, "Economic Imperception; or, Reading *Capital* on the Beach with Thoreau," *American Literary History* 32/2 (2020), 221–42; Shannon L. Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal: Alienation, Participation, and Modernity* (Madison, 2010), 3–33, 85–144; Mariotti, "Thoreau, Adorno, and the Critical Potential of Particularity," in Turner, *A Political Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, 393–422; Benjamin Pickford, "Cape Cod, Literature, and the Illocality of Thinking about Capital," in Francois Specq, Laura Dassow Walls, and Julien Nègre, eds., *Thoreau beyond Borders: New International Essays on America's Most Famous Nature Writer* (Amherst, 2020), 179–94; Stoller, *After Walden*, 67–8, 72, 87–9, 102.

[14]Dillman, "Thoreau's Humane Economics," 20–21. On Thoreau's capacious notion of "economy" see Harold Hellenbrand, "'A True Integrity Day by Day': Thoreau's Organic Economy in *Walden*," *ESQ* 25/2 (1979), 71–8. On the contemporary shifting meanings of economic language Thoreau played upon see Leonard N. Neufeldt, *The Economist: Henry Thoreau and Enterprise* (Oxford, 1989), 30–33, 173–9. On the historical–linguistic development of "economy" as a reified discipline see Keith Tribe, *The Economy of the Word: Language, History, and Economics* (Oxford, 2015), 21–88.

[15]*Walden*, 72. On Thoreau's philosophy as a practice of deliberation *against* the market's vicissitudes see Richard Prud'Homme, "Walden's Economy of Living," *Raritan* 20/3 (2001), 107–31, at 107–12; Sherman Paul, *The Shores of America: Thoreau's Inward Exploration* (Urbana, 1972), 22; Peter Wirzbicki, *Fighting for the Higher Law: Black and White Transcendentalists against Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2021), 119; Gallagher, "Emancipation from the 'Invisible Hand'," 45.

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Through Thoreau's epistemology, then, it is possible to address his concerns over the historically contemporary mental/physical labor divide, his ideal of undivided poetic labor, and his deification of natural labor. Related contradictions in his often paradoxical, chiasmic thought can be resolved with recourse to his epistemological foundations, as will be most apparent in his criticism of commodity production. Commodities, for Thoreau, were the worst of human labor—they were the most divided, as exemplified by the professor's purchased huckleberries. Yet the critique of the commodity provided an opportunity: Thoreau's strongest push for unity resided in his critique of the most divided.

Epistemological labor, laborious epistemology

In *Capital*, Karl Marx specified labor as a "process between man and nature," producing creations which first "existed ideally" in the laborer's mind, and were then executed with "purposeful will."[16] These qualities—a priori conception, and intentionality—are heuristically useful in locating Thoreau's understanding of labor. Consider the artist of Kouroo, in the fable in the final chapter of *Walden*. It first "came into [the artist's] mind to make a staff"; the artist then worked with "purpose and resolution" until results matched preceding image.[17]

As much as in material craft, a priori conception and intentionality were present in *knowing*, too. Thoreau frequently asserted the need to conceive what was seen *before* seeing. Most explicitly, we "cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it."[18] Thoreau in some way echoed his sometime mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, in the 1844 essay "Experience": informed by our "temperament" and "moods," when we see, "We animate what we can, and we see only what we animate." Emerson here is insistent on the primacy of the subject—the "receiver of the Godhead"—over the perceived object, sometimes to a degree of frustration with the ensuing, limiting mediation of perception ("we have no means of correcting these colored and distorted lenses").[19] Indeed, he suggests a fleetingness, only manageable through "self-trust," in "seeing things under private aspects": we always are experiencing a "succession of moods." As our minds move, so too does a world of "illusoriness." In this essay, for Emerson, there is no tarrying with the particularity of the phenomenal world.[20]

Thoreau's sense of a priori subjectivity, though, is less mercurial.[21] Rather, it is purposeful, agential, trainable: repeatedly, Thoreau wrote that observation required "intention of the eye."[22] Insofar as knowing was deliberated intercourse between human and Nature, knowing was *labor*: we "carve and paint the very atmosphere

[16]Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (1867), trans. Ben Fowkes (London, 1990), 283–4.

[17]*Walden*, 262–3.

[18]Henry David Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints" (1862), in *CEP*, 367–95, at 393–4; cf. *Week*, 292; Thoreau, "Walking," 234.

[19]Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures* (New York, 1983), 469–92, at 473, 476, 487–8, 490.

[20]On Emerson's aversion to the particular, *contra* Thoreau, see Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal*, 58–81.

[21]See Kateb, "Thoreau's *Journal*," 141–2, on how Thoreau's epistemology resisted shifts of mere "mood."

[22]Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," 394; *Week*, 48; *CC*, 95.

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and medium through which we look."[23] Constructive perception thus was not self-sufficient or totalizing with respect to perceived phenomena (as Emerson's sometimes threatened to be), but, in a Lockean turn, *mediated* through extant material—a priori conceptions dialectically derived from "corresponding experience," the source of "knowledge."[24]

Thoreau developed this epistemology amidst contemporary scientific–philosophical debates. An idealist Coleridgean tradition (within which Emerson moved) posited a harmonious world order gleanable via divine human Reason; in opposition, an emerging positivism insisted upon already apparent facts in the material world, universally accessible by aggregated observation. Both sides relied upon a protean notion of Baconian induction, and a strict ideal/material dualism. The difference lay in which side of this dualism—the ideal or the material—was favored in knowledge formation.[25]

Thoreau eschewed this binarism early on, advocating "intercourse and sympathy" with the world—neither presumed knowing ability nor distanced empiricism. One could "not learn from inference and deduction"; conversely, the "Baconian" method of empirical induction was "as false as any other."[26] Still, Thoreau's epistemology required—like physical labor—material *immersion*. Atop Mount Katahdin in Maine, he trembled "in awe" of "matter": "Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it … the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! … *Contact! Contact!*"[27] Laura Dassow Walls has thus dubbed Thoreau's epistemology an "epistemology of contact"—worldly involvement "to the uttermost limit of his capacity to see."[28] As Thoreau mused, only when we came "into actual contact with Truth" were we "related to her in the most direct and intimate way."[29] He expressed knowing-by-contact as material labor: "The intellect is a cleaver; it discerns and rifts its way into the secret of things."[30]

Such a metaphor outgrew its figurative frame; material labor was *itself* a way of knowing. This point has been recently and personally detailed by philosopher

[23]*Walden*, 72. On Thoreau's necessarily active, creative perception see also Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition* (San Francisco, 1981), 53, 70, 93, 109, 118–19; Laura Dassow Walls, "Romancing the Real: Thoreau's Technology of Inscription," in William E. Cain, ed., *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau* (Oxford, 2000), 123–52, at 133–7; Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 18, 64–5, 127, 147, 169–79, 215.

[24]*Week*, 365. On Thoreau's dialectic between the a priori and experience see Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work*, 62–3, 68, 82–5; Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 95; Tauber, *Moral Agency of Knowing*, 98–102, 152–3. See Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 15–35, for a historical account of empiricist philosophy in Thoreau's intellectual milieu. On Thoreau and the Transcendentalists' accommodation of aspects of Lockean and Baconian empiricism see Frederick C. Dahlstrand, "Science, Religion, and the Transcendentalist Response to a Changing America," *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1988, 1–25, at 1–9; René Wellek, "The Minor Transcendentalists and German Philosophy," in Brian M. Barbour, ed., *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism* (Notre Dame, 1973), 103–23, at 114–15. For emphases on Transcendentalist critiques of Lockean empiricism see Cameron Thompson, "John Locke and New England Transcendentalism," in ibid., 83–102; Wirzbicki, *Fighting for the Higher Law*, 28–31.

[25]For summaries of these debates see Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 15–35, 53–70; Tauber, *Moral Agency of Knowing*, 88–92, 104–39.

[26]Henry David Thoreau, "Natural History of Massachusetts" (1842), in *CEP*, 20–41, at 41.

[27]*MW*, 71, original emphasis.

[28]Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 126; cf. 140–41, 147–57, 228.

[29]*Week*, 292.

[30]*Walden*, 78–9.

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Matthew Crawford in his account of craftwork's educative immersion in particularity, countering such work's recent historical separation from the abstracting activity of the mind: "from its earliest practice, craft knowledge has entailed knowledge of the 'ways' of one's materials."[31] While Crawford writes intimately of motorcycle parts, Thoreau offers tales of a more elemental labor. He became "better acquainted with" Walden's pines as he felled them. Planting beans, "determined to know" them, he asked, "What shall I learn of beans"? Building a chimney, he "learned more than usual of the qualities of bricks and trowels."[32] In these instances Thoreau articulated a feedback loop blurring epistemological and material labor —labor, whether of knowing or of materially doing, required a priori conception, but that knowledge derived from material immersion, which itself was a labor, and so on, until both epistemological and material labor demanded one another.

Indeed, then, both epistemological and material labor demanded cultivation. Perception was improvable: "to educate" was "to develop … the senses."[33] Even so-called "animal instinct" was actually "a sharpened and educated sense."[34] In Maine, Thoreau wanted to "study" the "ways" of Indian guides, including skills of both *sensing* and *doing*. Following guide Joe Aietton, Thoreau not only "watched [Aeitton's] motions," but also "listened attentively to his observations."[35]

Furthermore, epistemological and material labor addressed a socio-theological challenge set by Emerson: the challenge of preserving spiritual striving in an age of religious disillusion. For historically minded literary critics, Emerson proposed a solution similar to that of the young Marx, relocating divinity within humanity itself.[36] Yet Thoreau pressed further, directly binding human divinity to creative ability. Distrusting afterlife-oriented ethics, Thoreau poetized against organized religion's monopoly of "conscience": "Give me simple laboring folk, / Who love their work, / Whose virtue is a song / To cheer God along."[37] Indicatively, Thoreau saw the Greek titan Prometheus, hero of labor, as among humanity's "great benefactors."[38] Prometheus had stolen divine fire and bestowed it upon humanity, giving us creative power. In Romantic praise, Thoreau followed Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, whose works he personally owned: Shelley had his play *Prometheus Unbound*; Byron his ode to "Prometheus"; Thoreau his published translation of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*.[39]

[31]Matthew B. Crawford, *Shop Class as Soul Craft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* (London, 2009), 21–7; cf. 78–82, 90–92, 161–79, 199.

[32]*Walden*, 34, 130, 125, 194.

[33]*Week*, 382.

[34]*MW*, 185.

[35]Ibid., 95.

[36]See Irving Howe, *The American Newness: Culture and Politics in the Age of Emerson* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 20–21, 43–4; Alfred Kazin, *An American Procession: The Major American Writers from 1830 to 1930—The Crucial Century* (New York, 1985), xiii–xv, 25–31. On Emerson and the problem of religion generally see also David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 15–24.

[37]*Week*, 74–5.

[38]Thoreau, "Reform and the Reformers," 186.

[39]See Thoreau, *Translations*, 3–53, 160–64. On Thoreau's reading of these authors see Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with Bibliographical Catalogue* (Princeton, 1988), 144, 155. Shelley and Byron's Promethean works can be found in the following editions

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Promethean allusions littered Thoreau's works, as in his epistemic epiphany atop Katahdin: confronted by Nature, he demanded, "What is the Titan that has possession of me?"[40] Prometheus' gift engendered a disconcerting rift with the worldly, a tangible mind/body split, the ontological gap between human and Nature that constituted human labor as discretely *human*. But crucially—and paradoxically—this rift allowed our now divine, now separate mind to intentionally act upon, and hopefully recombine with, our world. The ability to labor, as we shall see, would set the conditions for its own dissolution.

In Prometheus, then, epistemological and material labor shared a godly source: on the epistemological side, senses were "divine germs"; the "steady exercise of the divine faculty" gave "shape" to "vision." And materially, contemporary reformist dreams of labor-less utopias were unfeasible to Thoreau, given the presence of "a certain *divine energy* in every man, but sparingly employed as yet."[41] Labor all told indeed was a heroic "Promethean energy" that made "nature yield her increase"; the "weapons" of our "most important victories" were "the bush-whack, the turf-cutter, the spade, and the bog-hoe."[42] Thoreau's aforementioned cleaver intellect fit right in this litany of material labor's tools, "burrowing" through the world.[43] Human subjects' active, laborious presence in the world proved central to Thoreau's epistemological project.[44]

His Prometheanism, his confidence in the divinity of the human labor process, thus verged upon anthropocentrism. From early unpublished works through his mature writing, Thoreau variously put forth humans as the "focus" of "all the rays" or all "sleepless eyes," as "central" to a universe "built round about us," as the point from which the "landscape radiated." He connected action and perception: superior observers recorded not what "happened to them," but "how they have happened to the universe."[45]

Labor therefore began as fundamental epistemological interaction with the world, extending materially. Binding noumenal and phenomenal, labor could materialize a Platonic ideal: "The forms of beauty fall naturally around the path of him who is in the *performance of his proper work*."[46] But this praise was also circumscription—so few performed "proper" work.

Labor—head versus hand

Perturbed by modern individuals' myriad divisions, Thoreau declared that an "inconsistent aspirant man … divided against himself, cannot

in Thoreau's personal library: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and John Keats, *The Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats, Complete in One Volume* (Philadelphia, 1832), 325–52; Lord Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron, in Verse and Prose; Including Letters, Journals, etc. With a Sketch of His Life* (New York, 1835), "Poems" section, esp. 201.

[40]*MW*, 71.

[41]*CC*, 59–60; *Week*, 382; Henry David Thoreau, "Paradise (to Be) Regained" (1843), in *CEP*, 115–37, at 131, added emphasis.

[42]Henry David Thoreau, "The Landlord" (1843), in *CEP*, 108–14, at 110; Thoreau, "Walking," 243.

[43]*Walden*, 79.

[44]On this point see Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 75–6, 112, 119; Schulz, "Nature, Knowledge, and the Method of Thoreau's Excursions," 134–6; Case, "Thoreau's Radical Empiricism," 144; Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 203–7; Tauber, *Moral Agency of Knowing*, 131–2.

[45]Henry David Thoreau, "The Service" (1840), in *CEP*, 8–19, at 9; *CC*, 138; *Walden*, 65; *Week*, 326, 331. ("The Service" was rejected for publication by the *Dial*—see *CEP*, 658).

[46]*Week*, 318, added emphasis.

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stand."[47] Politically, he urged self-consistency, exhorting audiences to contest pro-slavery statutes and be a full "human" above any particularistic loyalties of state or profession.[48] But current arrangements of labor made full humanity difficult (here Thoreau echoed Emerson's criticism of the division of labor in "The American Scholar"): "It is not the tailor alone who is the ninth part of a man; it is as much the preacher, and the merchant, and the farmer. Where is this division of labor to end?"[49] Thoreau included thinkers and writers here, following Say, who considered the "labor of the philosopher" to be productive labor.[50] Reflecting antebellum concerns, then, the labor division which most worried Thoreau was that between mental (not merely epistemological) and physical labor.

The problem began pedagogically. Universities, where students learned while hired "operatives" physically laid "the foundations"—where, for instance, professors studied huckleberries while others picked them—followed "a division of labor to its extreme." Pupils of abstraction were "defrauded" of life experience; the economists "Smith, Ricardo, and Say" replaced the "economy of living." Students risked becoming like a proverbial "conceited fellow" who gave "advice to workmen" but could not perform their work.[51] Instead, Thoreau promoted experiential education.[52] Echoing contemporary reformers, he admonished that the "scholar" forgot the "necessity of labor" with "things," despite requiring "steady labor with the hands" to give "impetus to his thought."[53] Twice in print, Thoreau asserted the mental benefits of callouses.[54]

The epistemological unity that Thoreau sought between ideal and material encompassed mental and physical labor. He oscillated on whether the mind or the body led self-cultivation—in one instance, "spiritual discipline must answer to his corporeal"; in another, "let his mind descend into his body and redeem

[47]Ibid., 36.

[48]See Henry David Thoreau, "Wendell Phillips before Concord Lyceum," in *CEP*, 162; Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience" (1866), in *CEP*, 203–24, at 204, 213; Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts" (1854), in *CEP*, 333–47, at 342; Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown" (1860), in *CEP*, 396–417, at 416; Thoreau, "The Last Days of John Brown" (1860), in *CEP*, 422–8, at 426. Cf. Wirzbicki, *Fighting for the Higher Law*, 161–74; Stoller, *After Walden*, 20–24, 128–53.

[49]*Walden*, 36; cf. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, 51–71, especially 53-4.

[50]Jean-Baptiste Say, *A Treatise on Political Economy* (1803), trans. C. R. Prinsep (Philadelphia, 1834), 89. (This is the Say edition that Thoreau read; see Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 265). On this point Say diverged from Adam Smith, who included various "men of letters" in the realm of unproductive labor. See Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), ed. R. H. Campbell, A. S. Skinner, and W. B. Todd (Oxford, 1976), II.iii.1–2. Based on Sattelmeyer's study of Thoreau's readings and his library, it is not clear whether Thoreau read the *Wealth of Nations*, though Thoreau does explicitly refer to it in his undergraduate essays. See Henry David Thoreau, "Privileges and Pleasures of a Literary Man" (1835), in *EEM*, 19–21, at 19.

[51]*Walden*, 40–41, 198.

[52]Thoreau, "Huckleberries," 490–92, 496, 500; Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," 397–8; Thoreau, "The Last Days of John Brown," 426.

[53]*Week*, 105, 107; see also an earlier version of this passage in Henry David Thoreau, "Sir Walter Raleigh" (1843), in *CEP*, 57–88, at 84. On the antebellum reformist precedent for Thoreau's advocacy of physical activity see Gleason, *The Leisure Ethic*, 30–31; Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor*, 40, 46; Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow*, 16–18.

[54]"Walking," 229; *Week*, 106.

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it."[55] This apparent inconsistency may be constructively glossed as a paradoxical writer asserting *parity* of body and mind, co-constitutive of labor. Indeed, Thoreau sought writers to "address" the "world of laborers," lamenting the inadequacy of both Emerson, a writer of "thinkers," and Thomas Carlyle, a writer of "action."[56] Neither could address laborers, who required both thought *and* action —their labor connected the divine spark of intention with material substance. It embodied the "natural remedy" that Thoreau offered against labor's division: equal "proportion" of "thought to experience."[57] For Thoreau, that is, physical labor—*precisely because* of its necessary mentation prior to material action, *because* it required mind and body together, undivided—immanently contained a transcendence beyond its own binary categorization as "physical" labor.

Here, Thoreau surpassed other Transcendentalists concerned with labor, like George Ripley or Elizabeth Peabody, who preserved a strict mental/physical labor binary, undergirded by mental labor's implied superiority. Such reformers only suggested that these two labors be equally shared by all.[58] Thoreau, though, dissolved the binary as such. His metaphors of labor articulated mental labor as physical labor, and vice versa (as Stanley Cavell has written, each labor "was isomorphic with every other" for Thoreau).[59] Fishing was like reading; "old books" were "sculptured in the granite"; Carlyle was a "notable workingman" with "workmanlike" books; hearth smoke was a "hieroglyphic."[60] Most explicitly, Thoreau connected writing and farming. In cultivation, farmers had "written on the face of the earth"; in his beanfield Thoreau made "the earth say beans instead of grass." He ploughed literary records, working "in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker."[61] In turn, writers should imitate farmers: "A sentence should read as if its author, had he held a plow instead of a pen, could have drawn a furrow."[62]

Not just conceptually dissolvable, then, the mental/physical labor binary was empirically inaccurate.[63] Thoreau appreciated when physical labor incorporated writing, as when a whaler "cut his initials" into his catch, or when loggers carved

[55]Henry David Thoreau, "Chastity and Sensuality" (1865), in *CEP*, 329–32, at 330; *Walden*, 179. See also *Week*, 106, for another example of mind relying on body, and *Week*, 361, on the necessary balance of physical with mental labor.

[56]*Week*, 106; Henry David Thoreau, "Thomas Carlyle and His Works" (1847), in *CEP*, 165–202, at 190.

[57]"Walking," 229.

[58]See Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor*, 25–7, 45–6; Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement*, 110–14, 133–5; Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow*, 15–16, 38–9, 85, 225–31. On Thoreau's strained relationship with reformers see Stoller, *After Walden*, 9–11.

[59]Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 61–2.

[60]*Week*, 25, 376; Thoreau, "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," 172, 183–4; Henry David Thoreau, "A Winter Walk" (1843), in *CEP*, 92–107, at 100.

[61]*Week*, 8; *Walden*, 126, 131. For literary interpretation of these metaphors see Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 22–5.

[62]*Week*, 107; for a similar remark in relation to poetry see Henry David Thoreau, "Homer. Ossian. Chaucer" (1844), in *CEP*, 138–54, at 148. On Thoreau's intellectual work of writing as "a labor of the hands" see Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago, 1985), 42; Cavell, *The Sense of Walden*, 27–9; Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow*, 34, 85, 213.

[63]See Glickstein, *Concepts of Free Labor*, 24, as well as Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, *passim*. Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow*, 42–3, notes that the head/hand distinction was more "ideological" than "actual."

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claimant marks into their logs.[64] Loggers' labors pointed to a Thoreauvian pun: they were loggers chopping trees, but also *loggers* as writers upon the landscape, *logging* presence with axe–pen upon forest–parchment. They, like farmer–writers, typified the mental/physical labor synthesis that Thoreau sought for all.

Undivided poetic labor

Thoreau admired undivided, self-sufficient laborers (including himself), in apparent respect for a Jeffersonian-republican yeoman ideal he in some way aspired to in his Walden settlement.[65] More broadly, though, he located this ideal in the *poet*. Like all labor to Thoreau, poetic labor was fundamentally epistemological: "A true account of the actual is the rarest poetry, for common sense always takes a … superficial view."[66] Effectively, then, for Thoreau—familiar through his education with German idealism, and part of an American intellectual movement named for Kant's "transcendental" philosophy of the a priori—observation sought a unified Kantian thing-in-itself, something beyond the superficial view of mere sense.[67] Sensed phenomena were transcended by anticipation of what-could-be-seen; we ascertained "beauty now invisible" through the "higher heaven" of "pure sense." One jumped "from seeing things as men describe them" to "seeing them as men cannot describe them"; from the "superficial" to the "reality of things."[68] We mistook what "*appears*" for what "*is*." Sense data were necessary but not sufficient to locate "the interval between" what "*appears*" and what "*is*," in which occurred conceptual preparation—Thoreau's "intention of the eye."[69]

And, crucially, the poet's eye *was the most intentional*. Bridging noumena and phenomena towards "the actual," the poet began the epistemological labor of "distinguish[ing] his proper objects."[70] Poets bridged disciplines (the poet "uses the results of science and philosophy and generalizes their widest deductions"), as well as mental and physical labor (the poet put a farm "in rhyme," "milked it," and "got all the cream").[71] And while rare in their abilities, poets were not exclusive.

[64] *CC*, 114; *MW*, 42, cf. 52, 97.

[65] See, for example, *Walden*, 47, 51–2; *MW*, 14; *CC*, 203. For more on Thoreau's admiration of self-sufficient yeomen see Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 36; Raymond, "Henry David Thoreau and the American Work Ethic," 148–50; Stoller, *After Walden*, 12–13, 28. Connecting this admiration to his antislavery commitments see James S. Finley, "A Free Soiler in His Own Broad Sense: Henry David Thoreau and the Free Soil Movement," in Case and Van Anglen, *Thoreau at Two Hundred*, 31–44.

[66] *Week*, 325–6; cf. Paul, *The Shores of America*, 209–10, on the poet as piercing the exterior world.

[67] Thoreau received his education on German idealism from many sources, including Coleridge, Carlyle, and J. B. Stallo. See Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 6–7, 19–22, 30–31, 46. On similarities between Kant and Thoreau see Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 64–5, 94–5, 103–7; Jonik, "The Maze of Phenomena," 150–51. On the extent of German thought's influence on Transcendentalism more generally see Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York, 2007), 25–31, 50–56; Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England: A History* (Philadelphia, 1972), 1–59, 105–28; Wellek, "The Minor Transcendentalists and German Thought," 103–23; Wirzbicki, *Fighting for the Higher Law*, 34–9; Richardson, *Henry Thoreau*, 54–7, 71–6.

[68] *Week*, 382, 386, 359; see similarly "Walking," 245; *Walden*, 77.

[69] *Walden*, 77; *Week*, 387, original emphasis.

[70] *Walden*, 171.

[71] *Week*, 363 (cf. Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 35–7, 149–57); *Walden*, 66.

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Yes, only "one in a hundred millions" lived poetically, but anyone potentially could do so, as Thoreau's writing–farming interchange implied: "Poets" were born in "country pastures."[72] Humble, soil-inscribing farmers were "greater men than Homer," speaking "truly *labored* sentences" and "always" choosing "the right word."[73] Prisoners, woodsmen, and abolitionists were poetic, like any labor "pursued" with "freedom": "man is the great poet, and not Homer … our language itself, and the common arts of life are his work."[74] Poetry was "the only … free labor"; undivided labor of self-sustenance "universally" developed the "poetic faculty."[75] The "true poem" melded with sensuous life: as "one undivided unimpeded expression," true poetry was what the poet "*has become through his work*."[76]

Poets thus met Thoreau's demands of subject/object dissolution, bringing materiality to mental labor as they "transplanted" words to the "page with earth adhering to their roots."[77] Poetry was "subsidence," not only as undivided labor, but also as natural facility—the poet was "he that hath fat enough, like bears … to suck his claws all winter." Poetry was humanity's "natural fruit," as "the oak bears an acorn"; it was "as if nature spoke." The poet was but a vessel: "Nature furnishes him … with stereotyped lines and sentences."[78] Nature was poetry's "raw material of tropes and symbols," whereas in the "language of our parlors"—in a separate space of leisure "so far" from the "workshop"—our "metaphors and tropes" were "necessarily so far-fetched."[79] In a word, literature degraded as labor divided.

Poetry was ideal labor insofar as it was closest to Nature; beside her products, humanity's were inadequate: "what deed," Thoreau asked, "does not fall maimed and imperfect from our hands?"[80] Our art generally made a "low state comfortable" and a "higher state forgotten."[81] From Thoreau's admiration of human labor, then, we have paradoxically derived—via Nature—his impression of its limits. Though human labor's very ability and process were godly, its products historically fell short.

Nature: labor's peak

Thoreau understood Nature as a product of labor, though he vacillated on whether the laborer responsible was a separate God, or Nature herself. Nature could be a "perfect art; the art of God."[82] Yet also, as a creator, "Nature made" the "dwelling

[72]*Walden*, 72; Henry David Thoreau, "Wild Apples" (1862), in *CEP*, 444–67, at 456.

[73]*Week*, 8, 107, original emphasis; Thoreau, "Wild Apples," 458.

[74]*Week*, 95, 209, cf. 265. On the poetic abilities of prisoners see Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," 218; of a woodsman see *Walden*, 116–21; of the abolitionist John Brown see Thoreau, "The Last Days of John Brown," 426.

[75]Thoreau, "Thomas Carlyle and His Works," 188; *Walden*, 36.

[76]*Week*, 343, 329, original emphasis.

[77]"Walking," 244.

[78]*Week*, 91–2, 99, cf. 342. For further discussion of Thoreau's effort to make the laborer disappear into Nature herself see Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow*, 93–5, 221–2, 231.

[79]Thoreau, *Journal*, 6:105; *Walden*, 197.

[80]*Week*, 312.

[81]*Walden*, 30.

[82]*Week*, 318. For other examples of Thoreau referring to a creator God see also *Walden*, 108, 110, 156, 246, 248, 265; *MW*, 71; Henry David Thoreau, "A Walk to Wachusett" (1843), in *CEP*, 42–56, at 53.

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of man" as "the mother of humanity."[83] This uncertainty pointed towards a transcendence of another dualism—of masculine *productive* and feminine *reproductive* labor.[84] Male creator-God and female self-regenerating Nature, both responsible for natural art, disappeared into one another (just as poets, recall, nearly merged into Nature): Nature "herself is an art so cunning that the artist never appears in his work."[85]

In the idea of self-generating Nature, Thoreau echoed naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, whom he read soon after publishing the line quoted above on Nature the artist; Humboldt himself had elaborated Kant's earlier surmise: a "natural product … must bear itself alternately as cause and as effect" and must be "self-organising."[86] Kant differentiated Nature from a "mere work of art," the latter being a "product of one rational cause"; this aesthetic preference for Nature over art stemmed from his notion that Nature's products were *unintentional*.[87] Hegel would later diverge, excluding Nature from aesthetics; for him the "beauty of art is *higher* than nature" precisely *because* of Nature's unintentionality.[88] Thoreau—eventually familiar with this assertion through J. B. Stallo's summary of Hegel—effectively synthesized the Kantian and Hegelian positions.[89] Like Kant he raised Nature *above* artifice, and could frame Nature as her own creator. But, in also

[83]*MW*, 70; *Walden*, 248; cf. *Week*, 62; Thoreau, "Huckleberries," 480, on nature's self-creation/regeneration.

[84]Bromell initially asserts that Thoreau favored a feminine reproductive labor in his natural history of humanity, but then suggests Thoreau's ambivalence/synthesis of masculine and feminine. See Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow*, 87–93, 235–7. Similarly on Thoreau's melding of "Mother" and "Father" languages see Cavell, *Senses of Walden*, 16.

[85]*Week*, 316.

[86]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (1790), trans. J. H. Bernard (Mineola, 2005), §65. On Kant's influence on Humboldt, and Humboldt's subsequent influence on Thoreau, see Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 73–147.

[87]Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §65. On nature and intentionality in Kant's aesthetics as related to Thoreau see Theo Davis, *Ornamental Aesthetics: The Poetry of Attending in Thoreau, Dickinson, and Whitman* (Oxford, 2016), 67–70, esp. n. 75; Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 73–4, 180–81, 189.

[88]G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (1835), trans. T. M. Knox, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1975), 1–2, cf. 29–30, original emphasis.

[89]This Hegelian point is suggested in J. B. Stallo, *General Principles of the Philosophy of Nature: With an Outline of Its Recent Developments among the Germans, Embracing the Philosophical Systems of Schelling and Hegel, and Oken's System of Nature* (London, 1848), 409, 482–3. See Sattelemeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 46; and Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 119–20 on Thoreau's engagement with this text. It should be noted that Thoreau wrote some, if not all, of the following relevant quotes from *Week* and *MW* before his reading of Stallo in 1848–9; my assertion is not that Thoreau *knowingly* synthesized Kant and Hegel, nor that he necessarily came to his conclusions from a single reading of Stallo's summary, parts of which he disliked. The point of synthesis here is mostly a heuristic one; the mention of Stallo is a mere suggestion of potential intellectual-historical influence (there is some possibility, as Thoreau revised *Week* up to its 1849 publication, that he was inspired by recent readings of German idealism; Stallo was not his only source of German thought). On Thoreau's years-long drafting of *Week*, and examples of "Nature as crafter" in a pre-1849 draft, see Linck C. Johnson, *Thoreau's Complex Weave: The Writing of A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, with the Text of the First Draft* (Charlottesville, 1986), ix–xii, 374; Johnson, "Historical Introduction," in *Week*, 433–500, at 450–69. On the 1848 publication of an essay that would be part of *MW* see Steven Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace: Thoreau's Development as a Professional Writer* (Columbus, OH, 1999), 150–59.

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suggesting an external *maker* of Nature (albeit one that "never appears"), he implied the admirable *intentionality* of her products.[90]

Mother Nature was the master craftsman; her intended products were *herself*: "see how finely Nature finishes off her work." The "finest workers in stone" were not "steel tools, but the gentle touches of air and water." Nature's "art exhibits itself even in the shavings and the dust which we make"—she made art of refuse. She "has perfected herself by an eternity of practice." Even if self-generating, Nature regarded her materials as external to herself: the "chemistry of nature" would "work up" the "raw materials … dropped from an unseen quarry."[91]

Within Nature, too, were knowing laborers. A potential contradiction: did not Thoreau posit humankind as epistemologically "central" to the universe? Yes, but this was but a step towards a *multiplicity* of sense-making centers: "the universe is a sphere whose center is wherever there is intelligence." And intelligent loci existed beyond humanity.[92] Thoreau viewed Nature; her products actively reciprocated: "encouraging society may be found in any natural object." Pine needles "swelled with sympathy."[93] By reciprocity Thoreau even felt himself objectified. An owl he observed gazed back, "endeavoring to realize me, vague object … that interrupted his visions."[94]

If humans did not monopolize epistemological labor, then neither did they monopolize material labor. Animal nests exhibited admirable "labor" and "art."[95] Often, Thoreau expressed praise of animal labor in comparisons of human labor. A boat was an "amphibious animal" informed by the "shapely fish" and the "graceful bird."[96] Outdoor human labor was "part of the industry of nature, like the work of hornets"; people were "as busy as the brooks or bees."[97] Here, Nature's labors were mobilized not for their own sake, but as vehicles of metaphors describing *human* labor. Yet these comparisons risked belittling Nature: Nature did not represent or symbolize; she was substance, *preceding* humanity. Like the ploughed fields of farmer–poets, Nature was text.[98] When read, then, she ought not to be the *vehicle*, but the *tenor* of metaphor—"Is not Nature, rightly read, that of which she is commonly taken to be the symbol merely?"[99]

[90]George Kateb explicitly cites Thoreau's belief in a "maker" of Nature as a reason for his belief in Nature's beauty, and the subsequent interchange of Nature and humanity in aesthetic creation; see Kateb, "Thoreau's *Journal*," 136, 151.

[91]*Week*, 159, 248, 319; *MW*, 63; cf. Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 142, for Thoreau on Nature-as-artist.

[92]*Week*, 349. On this "horizontal" epistemology as different from Emerson's "vertical" correspondence between mind and object see Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work*, 54; cf. Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 167–8, 227.

[93]*Walden*, 105–6.

[94]Ibid., 214.

[95]*Week*, 7, 26, 33.

[96]Ibid., 16, cf. 49: "as birds fly and fishes swim, so these men sailed."

[97]Ibid., 216–18.

[98]For examples of Thoreau suggesting Nature as text see *Week*, 107, 248, 316; Thoreau, "Natural History of Massachusetts," 38–9; Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," 388; *CC*, 54. For more on Thoreau's "reading" of Nature's text see Schulz, "Nature, Knowledge, and the Method of Thoreau's Excursions," 130–31, 137; Peck, *Thoreau's Morning Work*, 50–52, 59; Cavell, *The Sense of Walden*, 26; Walls, "Romancing the Real," 131.

[99]*Week*, 382.

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Yet we often read Nature *wrongly*. Thoreau chastised himself for doing do, for mistaking her for humanity—moose calls mistaken for axe strokes, trees for smokestacks, wind for locomotives.[100] Confusion was understandable; as he frequently reiterated, human labors attempted mimesis of Nature: "Man's art has wisely imitated those forms into which all matter is most inclined to run, as foliage and fruit."[101] In this phrasing Thoreau offered a corrective reading, asserting Nature as originary substance rather than symbolic mirror. Our copies of Nature came short. Gardens were "paltry imitations" at a "petty scale"; "beautiful moulds" paled alongside "molten earth"; swamps triumphed backyards, trees triumphed columns; "no painter can paint" Nature's multisensory details; Earth could not be "represented on a map."[102] Even the "best poetry" stumbled, incomparable to the "poem Autumn." No "poet's string" contained the "strong wilderness tints" of wild birds.[103]

These aggrandizements of Nature counter images of an austere Thoreau, as her art emerged as *extravagant* beside humanity's sorry imitations.[104] Human art could "never match" Nature's "luxury and superfluity." She "indulged her fancy," working with "license," producing a "florid style."[105] Nature gave "ornamentation" even to human-made things, like the lichens adorning a cabin.[106] In contrast, "household ornaments will seem plebeian," because Nature's products were superfluous *beyond* the phenomenal, possessing a "generosity at the roots." In mere human art, "all is seen." Anticipating unpoetic, superficial perception, it could only "varnish and gild."[107] No "reasonable man ever supposed that ornaments were something outward," yet most human-made ornaments were "hollow." Instead, ornamentation should be deep, beyond the superficial, and should come "in contact with our lives, like the tenement of the shellfish."[108]

[100] *MW*, 99–100, 175, 203.

[101] *Week*, 319. For further statements of human labor as derivative of natural forms see also Thoreau, "Paradise (to Be) Regained," 136; Henry David Thoreau, "The Succession of Forest Trees" (1860), in *CEP*, 429–43, at 436, 438; *MW*, 175.

[102] *MW*, 155–6; *Week*, 319; *Walden*, 249; "Walking," 241–2, 254; Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," 376, 386, 393; *CC*, 50. It is interesting to note a very similar image—with a similar anxiety—supplied by Thoreau's literary contemporary Walt Whitman: "Have you reckon'd that the landscape took substance and / form that it might be painted in a picture? … Or the brown land and the blue sea for maps and charts?" See Walt Whitman, "A Song for Occupations" (1855–1881), in Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York, 2013), 180–87, at 183.

[103] "Walking," 244–5; *Week*, 377, 57.

[104] For a suggestion of a parsimonious Thoreau see Birch and Metting, "The Economic Design of Walden," 588–90. On natural extravagance see Richard Grusin, "Thoreau, Extravagance, and the Economy of Nature," *American Literary History* 5/1 (1993), 30–50.

[105] *Week*, 318; Thoreau, "Natural History of Massachusetts," 36–7. For similar suggestions of Nature's artistic superfluity or ornamentality, cf. *Week*, 48, 319; Thoreau, "Huckleberries," 496. At times, Thoreau admittedly did designate human arts as superfluous in a negative way. See *Walden*, 13, 25, 29; *Week*, 338.

[106] *MW*, 125.

[107] Thoreau, "Natural History of Massachusetts," 37 (cf. *Walden*, 31); *Week*, 318, 376.

[108] *Walden*, 32, 37–8, cf. 21 for a further example contrasting fashionable clothes and tattoos. On Thoreau's theory of ornamentation as connected to depth of use and material relationality see Anna Campbell and James Campbell, "Trails to Walden Pond: Pragmatic Aesthetics and Relational Aesthetics Approach the Examined Life," *The Pluralist* 11/2 (2016), 1–10, at 4–5; Davis, *Ornamental Aesthetics*, 54–60, 84–7.

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Extravagant in depth, Nature "swallowed up," or could "blot out," the "works of man," "wasting no thought" on us.[109] Meanwhile, Thoreau often repeated, humanity's epistemological labors failed to comprehend Nature. He summarized via Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy."[110] What Nature we *could* see was distorted. On Cape Cod's vast beaches, distances became "impossible to estimate"; objects warped in perceived size against the ocean's "immensity."[111]

If human labors never reached Nature's, then Thoreau's design of human/Nature synthesis neared impossibility. Ironically, our attempts to transcend division from Nature—by laboring towards absolute mimesis of Natural perfection—perpetuated this very division, as we only labored all the more in pursuit of transcendence, in activities of labor which in their constitution remained ontologically distinct from Nature itself. In a Faustian twist, even if we *were* to reach labor's peak, melding with Nature, it would mean *relinquishing* our labor, like Thoreau's idealized poets did as Nature's near-passive vessels. Per Thoreau's writerly terms, the acme of "Creation" would be its negation: "Silence."[112] Yet Thoreau, in his nonstop writing, knew he had not labored enough to reach transcendence. As a laborer, like all humanity, he could never escape his own expressive subjectivity.[113] So long as we had our divine spark, we would not stop laboring, and so would remain separate from Nature, the greatest laborer. As George Kateb has written, Nature for Thoreau was necessarily "other" from humanity—we could not fully commune with it—even if it was not "alien," not completely inaccessible, as it remained our greatest inspiration.[114]

It seems that Thoreau traded his quest for synthesis-through-labor with Nature for a sometimes celebratory, sometimes critical, defense of human labor. Inasmuch as he accepted this trade-off, though, he wanted human labor *itself* to be as undivided as possible. A market society founded on the division of labor thus presented a challenge.

Human labor and the commodity

Much scholarship has argued that Thoreau was not an absolute critic of the market, often suggesting that he only became critical with age. He has additionally been

[109] *Week*, 316; Thoreau, "A Winter Walk," 105; *CC*, 147. For other instances of Nature's indifference to or superiority to humankind see also *Week*, 113–14, 316.

[110] "Walking," 250. The reference is to William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. In the Shakespeare edition in Thoreau's personal library (per Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading*, 267) the source allusion can be found as follows: *The Dramatic Works of William Shakespeare*, vol. 2 (Hartford, 1833), 414–48, at 421 (Act I, scene v). For similar notes on Nature's vastness eschewing our knowledge see "Walking," 251; Henry David Thoreau, "Life without Principle" (1862), in *CEP*, 348–66, at 357; Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," 393; *Walden*, 257.

[111] *CC*, 52, 84, 96, 105.

[112] *Week*, 391–3.

[113] For further discussion of these features of Thoreau's writing see Tauber, *Moral Agency of Knowing*, 82–3, 92, 114, 162; Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow*, 238; Walls, "Romancing the Real," 138–9; Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, 50–51; Diggins, "Thoreau, Marx, and the 'Riddle' of Alienation," 587.

[114] Kateb, "Thoreau's *Journal*," 139. See also ibid., 144: Thoreau did not teach the "desirability of human disappearance."

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painted as a reformist advocating gradual change; a conciliator seeking the best possible life in an unappealing market; an embodiment of laissez-faire individualism; or a parodist who admired enterprise, and co-opted its language towards spiritual, nonmaterial purposes.[115] Yet such interpretations rely too much upon the practical constraints of the life that Thoreau, like most of his contemporaries, *inevitably* led in the market (narrowly equating the "material" with the "market," contrary to Thoreau's far more capacious embrace of the material world), or on rhetorical discourse analysis—in either case, at the expense of his substantive philosophical critique.

Even if Thoreau's early works contain *some* ambivalence towards the market, he clearly espoused a consistent moral critique of commercial wealth from his undergraduate years through his late career.[116] Moreover, Thoreau rooted any questions of material labor in epistemological labor, and his epistemological system (as demonstrated) persisted throughout his *oeuvre*. We can thus read Thoreau's epistemology as containing an immanent germ of market critique, insofar as it posited commodities (the market's core units) to be problems of representation and sensemaking. This critique developed across many writings, culminating in an unequivocal attack on market society in his essay on huckleberries.

Private property derived from circumscribed sight: we were "regarding the soil as property"; privatized fields came "under a veil."[117] Applying "purely utilitarian eyes" of profit to Nature's works, we "do not value or perceive" her beauty.[118] People preferred a "partial" reading of Nature's art because such a reading "fits and measures them and their commodities best."[119] Thoreau's most totalizing market criticism, in its tactile language, recalls his "epistemology of contact": "trade curses everything it handles."[120] Trade was a barrier to the physicality of *knowing*—"money comes between a man and his objects." So "warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade," we perceived not "truth, but the reflection of truth."[121]

[115]See Judith P. Saunders, "Economic Metaphor Redefined: The Transcendental Capitalist at Walden," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Henry David Thoreau's Walden* (New York, 1987), 59–67; Richard F. Teichgraeber III, *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom: Situating Emerson and Thoreau in the American Market* (Baltimore, 1995), 44–74; Dowling, "Commercial Method," 96–8; Neufeldt, *The Economist*, xi, 16–17, 23–98; Walker, "Thoreau's Alternative Economics," 39–67; Stoller, *After Walden*, 48–107; Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 43–4; Birch and Metting, "The Economic Design of Walden," 594–5.

[116]See, for example, Henry David Thoreau, "Men Whose Pursuit Is Money" (1834), in *EEM*, 5–7; Thoreau, "The Commercial Spirit of Modern Times" (1837), in *EEM*, 115–18; Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," 343; Thoreau, "Life without Principle," 349, 354, 363; *CC*, 12. As Kateb, "Thoreau, Henry David," 793, writes, Thoreau's "work and life are dominated" by a "principled aversion" to wealth and its pursuit.

[117]*Walden*, 134; Thoreau, "Huckleberries," 493.

[118]Thoreau, "Huckleberries," 496, 498. On this point about the market conditioning of vision in Thoreau see Pickford, "Cape Cod, Literature, and the Illocality of Thinking about Capital," 184–6; Moskowitz, "Economic Imperception," 222–8; Prud'Homme, "Walden's Economy of Living," 114.

[119]*Week*, 362.

[120]*Walden*, 56. On the tactile implications of this metaphor see Prud'Homme, "Walden's Economy of Living," 109.

[121]Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," 214; Thoreau, "Life without Principle," 363.

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If all human-made objects already were inferior as *representations* of Nature, then commodities were the worst among them. Being copies of Nature further convertible to cash, commodities were *representations of representations*. Currency, Thoreau wrote (diverging from Say), had an impermanent value beside the goods it "merely represents."[122] Bemoaning the market-derived poverty of Maine Indians, Thoreau punned, "the white man has driven off their game, and substituted a cent in its place."[123] Replacing objects with minted symbols was like replacing animals with their musk; *cent* and *scent* were both unguaranteeable representations. Commodities were a con.[124] Their double abstraction from natural ur-objects engendered a creeping surrealism. Anything could be converted to anything if nothing had substance—to "get his shoestrings" a farmer "speculates in herds of cattle."[125] This world of representation bolstered Thoreau's criticism of human-made objects' superficiality. Here we near Marx's commodity fetishism (the notion that perceived commodity forms stand in for material processes undergirding their existence), especially considering that Thoreau tied commodity production and alienated labor in ways reminiscent of Marx.[126]

Thoreau claimed that laborers could not "afford to sustain the manliest relations to men" if their labor was "depreciated in the market." In the cash nexus, they lacked work "of any consequence."[127] Such work indicated and perpetuated epistemological distortions. Divided laborers could only "manage to see" their present employment.[128] They were objectified, in an instrumentalizing way distinct from Thoreau's reciprocal experience with the owl: subordinate to "meaningless labor,"

[122]Thoreau, "The Succession of Forest Trees," 443; *Walden*, 202. See Say, "Of the Reason Why Money Is neither a Sign nor a Measure," Bk. I, Ch. 21, Sec. 6, in Say, *A Treatise on Political Economy*, 244–52, esp. 244–6, 248–9. Here Thoreau sounded more like Smith on money-as-representation—see Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, I.xi.c.34–6, I.xi.m.21, II.ii.14, IV.i.17. Dillman, on this count, seems to misread Say in suggesting that Thoreau's theory of monetary representation was similar to Say's. See Dillman, "Thoreau's Humane Economics," 21–2.

[123]*MW*, 146.

[124]On Thoreau's concern over the market as a confidence game of representation, an emptying of reality, see Jonathan Levy, *Ages of American Capitalism: A History of the United States* (New York, 2021), 126–49; cf. Arsić, "Our Things," 158; Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 38, 41.

[125]*Walden*, 27. As Benjamin Pickford, "Cape Cod, Literature and the Illocality of Thinking about Capital," 186, notes with respect to Thoreau's explorations of capital in *Cape Cod*, there is an attendant "unraveling of an epistemological dependence on sight." On commodities as governed by, or even *generating*, epistemological abstraction see Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 16–24, 35–8, 50–56. I thank Paul North for the idea of "surrealism" in the commodity form, spoken in a 7 Feb. 2022 seminar (sponsored by the Princeton University Program in European Cultural Studies, Department of Comparative Literature, and Department of German) on his and Paul Reitter's coming English translation of Marx's *Capital*.

[126]On commodity fetishism—woefully underdescribed in the aside here—see Marx, *Capital*, 164–7. For comparisons between Thoreau and Marx on commodification and alienated labor see my own "A Natural Critic of Political Economy"; Staughton Lynd, *Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism* (London, 1969), 92–6; Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 39; Gallagher, "Emancipation from the 'Invisible Hand'," 49; Wirzbicki, *Fighting for the Higher Law*, 116–19. For an argument insisting on Marx and Thoreau's differences see Diggins, "Thoreau, Marx, and the 'Riddle' of Alienation," 571–98.

[127]*Walden*, 6, 74.

[128]*CC*, 207.

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people became "tools of their tools."[129] In a move common in contemporary labor politics, Thoreau likened alienated northern laborers to southern slaves.[130] Certainly a gesture towards servility, this comparison was also a metaphysical slight. Slaves were people reduced to objects—enslavement was "to make mankind into sausages."[131]

Evaluating logging, Thoreau delineated this tie between market-degraded labor and epistemological corruption. Though initially praising loggers, he later derided them as "hirelings," mere animals getting a living.[132] With profit-distorted vision, anything they "regarded as fit neither for timber nor fuel" to sell was but a "weed."[133] Loggers did not engage trees *as such*: they "behold" the pine only "in the shape of many broad boards brought to market." The logger "admires the log … more than the tree," and "a dead pine, is no more a pine than a dead human carcass is a man."[134]

Again, Thoreau saw material labor as epistemological method. But loggers' tree-killing labor *failed to know*: one could not know an object if the relevant labor negated that very object. The logger destroyed the inward superfluity characteristic of a natural object; he could not "converse with the spirit of the tree he fells." Furthermore, loggers' mistaken material labor recapitulated the mistaken methods of perceiving which defined the disciplinary distinctions that Thoreau disliked: he elsewhere noted the inconsistency between killing a turtle "for the sake of science" and the aim of "poetic perception."[135]

Did Thoreau not implicate himself here? How could he, without contradiction, claim that he became "better acquainted" with Walden's pines by chopping them? There remained a key difference between loggers and Thoreau. Though both chopped trees, loggers chopped them as commodities; Thoreau did not. Thoreau felled pines to build his Walden cabin, which he meant to mimic Nature's in-depth extravagance by connecting noumenal and phenomenal life: "architectural beauty" grew "from within outward, out of the necessities … of the indweller."[136] That is, he felled pines with an aim of *deliberation*, of translation between inward idea and outward manifestation. Thoreau's labor did not fully kill the pine's spirit—i.e. he perceived the pine *as a pine*—because he sought to replicate Nature's intentional labors.

In contrast, the loggers were completely abstracted from Nature's intentional creations in their first step of perception: they saw not pines, but boards; not just boards, but *commodified* boards, fungible objects, representations lacking substance. The objects' identity mattered not to the loggers; there could be no

[129]Thoreau, "Life without Principle," 349; *Walden*, 30; for similar remarks of humans becoming subordinate to their objects see ibid., 45, 75.

[130]*Walden*, 6–7, 28, 56.

[131]Thoreau, "Slavery in Massachusetts," 337.

[132]*MW*, 101, 119, 228. On Thoreau's late-career project to reform logging see Stoller, *After Walden*, 75–6.

[133]*MW*, 41, 129, 82–3, 298; cf. Mariotti, "Thoreau, Adorno, and the Critical Potential of Particularity," 409, on profit's distortion of labor (and thus knowledge) for Thoreau.

[134]*MW*, 121, 229.

[135]*Journal*, 8: 278. I was alerted to this passage in Jonik, "The Maze of Phenomena," 155; see similarly Tauber, *Moral Agency of Knowing*, 144–5, on dead fish.

[136]*Walden*, 37.

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deliberation of creative use, no connection to "inward" necessity. Granted, Thoreau knew that even his own non-commodified labor of cabin building was inadequate to truly knowing the pine. He admitted: it was the "poet"—the ideal undivided laborer—"who makes the truest use of the pine," by letting its "living spirit" be.[137] The poet retained the pine's inward superfluity *as such*, rather than attempting to mimic it via cabin building.

Logging aside, commodification's impact on epistemological and material labor was most evident to Thoreau in the two interchangeable labors that exemplified his attempt to transcend the mental/physical labor division: writing and farming. Consider Thoreau's critiques of the contemporary literary market—the "modern cheap and fertile press" making books by "machines," for "machines."[138] His critiques indicated not his hypocritical, begrudging participation in this market, but his self-conscious commentary on a commodification process that he, an aspiring professional writer, felt firsthand.[139] From his college writings, Thoreau marked books as substanceless commodities, misleading in appearance, approaching fetish. As he wrote (of all places) in his first published book, "All that are printed," in fact, "are not books," but "appendages" sold "under a thousand disguises." Thoreau saw through them: "in a little while their covers fall off," revealing themselves not as books, but as "inventions in this shape," fungible objects of abstract value. Surreally, "a reader finds himself reading a horse-rake, or spinning-jenny, or wooden nutmeg, or oak-leaf cigar, or steam-power press, or kitchen range."[140]

If reading materials capitulated to market superficiality, then reading warped too. Most people could not read poetry, but could only "cipher" in order to "not be cheated in trade." Writing materials were appropriately predetermined: "I cannot easily buy a blank book … they are commonly ruled for dollars and cents."[141] Paper was "cheap, and authors need not now erase one book before they write another"—contrast these profligate authors with poet–farmers who, "clearing" their fields, were "erasing what they had already written for want of parchment."[142]

Per Thoreau's writing–farming interchange, market-oriented writers and farmers were kindred. The former "would fain write for fame merely, as others actually raise crops of grain to be distilled into brandy."[143] Such a farmer, distinct from his poetic alter ego, was but an "operative," fallen from the "man who independently plucked fruits when he was hungry" (as apparent to Thoreau in his market-oriented

[137] *MW*, 229, 121–2.

[138] *Walden*, 81, 84–5. On the boom of cheap literature contemporary to Thoreau's time, see Robert A. Gross, "Much Instruction from Little Reading: Books and Libraries in Thoreau's Concord," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 97/1 (1987), 129–88, at 169–70; Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, 97–103, 497–506; Neufeldt, *The Economist*, 134–5; Teichgraeber, *Sublime Thoughts/Penny Wisdom*, 155–74.

[139] For the former understanding of Thoreau as a professional writer see Dowling, "Commercial Method," 85–93; Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, 36, 45–51. Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace*, 4, 254–85, suggests Thoreau's begrudging participation, but also indicates his persistent participation in the literary market as what led to him to become critical of it.

[140] *Week*, 96–7; cf. Henry David Thoreau, "Foreign Influence on American Literature" (1836), in *EEM*, 38–41, at 39.

[141] *Walden*, 84; Thoreau, "Life without Principle," 349.

[142] *Week*, 97, 8.

[143] Ibid., 97.

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Concord farming community, increasingly reliant on hired laborers selling their labor power to others out of necessity).[144]

Literal fruits of divided labor showed commodification's dangers. At a "Horticultural Exhibition" of contemporary scientific agricultural reform—a movement prevalent in Concord, and, given Thoreau's familiarity with it, a frequent target of his criticism—any fruits were "destined" to an "ignoble end."[145] When a farmer carted apples to market, their "celestial qualities" sublimated and "only" their physical forms arrived: as with any commodity, substance disappeared and varnish remained. Just as commodified books "are not books," these apples "are not apples," but mere widgets of value.[146] Farmers' trees grew "no fruits; but dollars"; cranberries were measured by "the bushel and dollar only."[147] So "imperative is the law of demand and supply" that the "the market of Montreal" received New York-grown apples "weeks" before they were ripe in New York.[148] Monetary abstraction and commodification generated absurdity. Knowing became difficult when objects were empty.

Hope in the huckleberry

Illustrative as apples and cranberries were, they could not fully exemplify Thoreau's critique of commodification. Being human-grown, they were partly fallen objects *before* being sold. The highest crime of commodification, then, was the commodification of the highest objects: those of Nature's labors. Thoreau grieved the market's destruction of the pine. So too with the wild huckleberry, which he knew to be "most marketable."[149] Expectedly, commodified huckleberries lacked substance: a "huckleberry never reaches Boston"; the "essential part of the fruit is lost" in the "market cart."[150] He reaffirmed in his huckleberry essay that "only the husks" of berries could be found "in large markets."[151] Huckleberries were "enslaved" by "pecuniary interest"—their objectification was most abject.[152]

[144] *Walden*, 30, 52. On the increasingly market-oriented farming in nineteenth-century Concord and the subsequent change in agricultural labor relationships see Robert A. Gross, *The Transcendentalists and Their World* (New York, 2021), 554–60; Gross, "Culture and Cultivation: Agriculture and Society in Thoreau's Concord," *Journal of American History* 69/1 (1982), 42–61, at 42–3, 51–5.

[145] Thoreau, "Autumnal Tints," 368. For more examples of Thoreau's criticism or mocking of agricultural reform see "Walking," 248; Thoreau, "Life without Principle," 354; Thoreau, "The Succession of Forest Trees," 429; *MW*, 155; *Walden*, 26, 127, 131–4, 158, 237. Cf. Robert A. Gross, "The Great Bean Field Hoax: Thoreau and the Agricultural Reformers," *Virginia Quarterly Review* 61/3 (1985), 483–97; Gross, *The Transcendentalists and Their World*, 165–77; Gross, "Culture and Cultivation," 55; Walls, *Seeing New Worlds*, 199–205. On popular scientific agricultural reform in the antebellum North see Ariel Ron, *Grassroots Leviathan: Agricultural Reform and the Rural North in the Slaveholding Republic* (Baltimore, 2020), 27–70.

[146] Thoreau, "Wild Apples," 447–8. See also Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal*, 135–7; Mariotti, "Thoreau, Adorno, and the Critical Potential of Particularity," 410–13.

[147] *Walden*, 158, 192.

[148] Henry David Thoreau, "A Yankee in Canada" (1866), in *CEP*, 256–323, at 266.

[149] Thoreau, "Huckleberries," 471, cf. 486; *MW*, 154.

[150] *Walden*, 140.

[151] Thoreau, "Huckleberries," 493. For similar language of the market's preference for "husks" or "shells" see also ibid., 469; and Thoreau, "Life without Principle," 364.

[152] Thoreau, "Huckleberries," 494.

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To "make berries private property" reflected the tendency of the "division of labor … to make all things venal."[153] At this point in the essay Thoreau pivoted to the huckleberry professor. As the paragon of all divisions, the professor would produce a book on huckleberries that would "have none of the spirit of the huckleberry in it."[154] The book would mirror the huckleberry-as-commodity, lacking huckleberry essence; furthermore, if also on the market (as Thoreau had made clear in his fanciful critique of contemporary printing) it would *not be a book*, either. As in the parallel between pine killed for sale and turtle killed for science, self-negating forms of knowing Nature's labor bred self-negating forms of human labor.

But in the professor parable, this parallel lived in a single object, the professor's book, which contained qualities of both commodified huckleberries and commodified books: we thus return to Thoreau's equivalence of writing and planting, writing and Nature. Epistemological limits wrought by divided labor led the professor to *read* Nature poorly. If the only huckleberries he encountered were commodified (they were gathered, recall, not by the professor, but by a "professional huckleberry picker" on hired-out land), he lacked contact with real huckleberries to begin with. His substanceless book reflected this absence.

Yet Thoreau's unifying philosophy of labor provided a solution: as noted, he suggested that the philosopher should spend time both in the library and in the huckleberry field, implying that the professor *himself* ought to gather the huckleberries he wishes to study, rather than hiring someone to do so. To go out into the field to pick huckleberries was no light task for Thoreau. As Shannon L. Mariotti has argued, huckleberrying was a means by which Thoreau thought we might counter the logic of abstract exchange—of market-induced, surreal fungibility—that emptied huckleberries (or apples or pine logs) of their essence, impoverishing and alienating our experience of material labor, and preventing us from truly *knowing* the object at hand. Huckleberrying was instead a process of epistemological cultivation, allowing us to strengthen our critical faculties against the stultifying imperatives of capitalist abstraction by engaging with the particularities of each huckleberry picked. And, within Thoreau's project of synthesis, the knowledge gained from huckleberrying was inextricable from its physicality. Per Mariotti, "the changes in how we think and perceive seem to come from how we move our bodies."[155]

The professor's apparent theory of knowledge—which led him to think he could write a substantive book on huckleberries without so physically engaging the topic at hand—was a product of the complementarity of capitalist abstraction and the division of labor. A *passive*, presumed fungibility of huckleberries permitted the professor's delegation of responsibility to the professional huckleberry gatherer; by cautioning the professor to engage in the labor of gathering, Thoreau hinted toward the *active*, laborious aspect of his epistemology. True knowledge required a committed, ethical preparation to see Nature's in-depth beauty—the "intention

[153]Ibid., 493.

[154]Ibid., 494.

[155]Mariotti, *Thoreau's Democratic Withdrawal*, 117–44, quoted at 135; "Thoreau, Adorno, and the Critical Potential of Particularity," 404–18.

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of the eye," which (*pace* Emerson) required material immersion in particularity. The professor's perception could be cultivated through huckleberrying for him to see the error of his previous, passive (mis)perception, not only to write a better book based on intimate knowledge of huckleberries, but also to counter the socially and personally damaging consequences of objects' abstraction.[156]

Thoreau's ideal poet–laborer—recall, a person who could "distinguish his proper object" beyond a "superficial view"; whose "poetic faculty" found a reflection in the common man's toil; whose work bound subject and object, mental and physical, exemplifying undivided self-sufficiency—provided a model of labor, both epistemological and material, to which the professor could aspire. Years before conjuring the professor and his failed glossing of the huckleberry, Thoreau penned an alternative parable of the poet reading Nature's objects: "The lichen on the rocks is a rude and simple shield which beginning and imperfect Nature suspended there. Still hangs her wrinkled trophy. And here too the poet's eye may still detect the brazen nails which fastened Time's inscriptions, and if he has the gift, decipher them by this clue."[157] The poet interfaced with Nature directly, producing no disembodied data, and read her not as symbol, but as self-sufficient artwork. Here Nature was an inscription—allusive of Homer's palimpsestic shield of Achilles—that preempted poetry. Any following poetry would be close mimesis of Nature, unlike the professor's book. The poet could teach the professor that better human labor blossomed from Nature, *even if never equal to it*. As Thoreau hoped: the professor's book "should be the ultimate fruit of the huckleberry field," a final human extension of the undivided, concrete, and substantive natural labor that had formed the beautiful, particular huckleberry.[158]

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[156]See Kateb, "Thoreau's *Journal*," 156–64, on the ethical aspects of Thoreau's "preparation" of the eye.
[157]*Week*, 250.
[158]Thoreau, "Huckleberries," 494.

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