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Born too far into life:
The metaphor of the bee in Walden

by

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METAPHOR IN WALDEN

In The Banquet Dante Alighieri described the "senses" in which a text might be expounded and understood. The immediate and common sense was the literal; the remaining senses were the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogic, or spiritual. A text could be meaningful on all four levels, but the highest and ultimately most valued sense was the spiritual. For Dante the world itself was symbolic, pointing to a greater truth beyond it.

From the beginning Thoreau's Walden has presented disturbing inconsistencies and ambiguities for those who would read it in the literal sense only. As if anticipating such attempts, Thoreau complains in his "Conclusion":

Why look downward to our dullest perception always, and praise that as common sense: The commonest sense is the sense of men asleep, which they express by snoring. Sometimes we are inclined to class those who are once-and-a-half witted with the half-witted, because we appreciate only a third part of their wit. Some would find fault with the morning-red, if they ever got up early enough. "They pretend," as I hear, "that the verses of Kabir have four different senses: illusion, spirit, intellect, and the exoteric doctrine of the Vedas"; but in this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation. (564)

Like Dante, Thoreau believed in a truth beyond this natural world. Yet he would not discount the importance of the literal in this metaphoric equation; Thoreau sought firm grounding for the spirit in the "facts" of nature. "It is well to have some water in your neighborhood, to give buoyancy to and float the earth. One value even of the smallest well is, that when you look into it you see that earth is not continent but insular. This is as important as that it keeps butter cool" (340). The metaphor was part of nature's utility.

For Thoreau, words were like the "facts" of nature, their truth lay beyond their common sense.

The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly translated; its literal monument alone remains. The words which express our faith and piety are not definite; yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior natures. (563)

Put simply, words as "literal monuments" had the same metaphoric association to the "volatile truth" beyond them that natural facts had to the spiritual ideas and relationships they represented.

Thoreau scrutinized and chose his words with the same careful attention he gave to his observations of Walden's ice and the thawing railroad embankment. And he was convinced

that men understood the "facts" of the words they spoke as little as they understood the nature of their world. They did not know what it meant to be "awake," to be "social," or to live in "community." Thoreau proposed to correct these mistakes that men "labor under" (261). His project in writing Walden was to examine the words and the natural facts behind them, to show how far from their original truth--how misconceived--men's lives were, and to reestablish these facts, of nature and language, as the foundation on which to build meaningful lives. This is one of the "necessaries of life," as Thoreau says in "Economy": "When one man has reduced a fact of the imagination to be a fact to his understanding, I foresee that all men will at length establish their lives on that basis" (267).

Walden is full of serious, often dark, intelligence about the condition of Thoreau's neighbors. It is also witty, rich with puns and metaphors that allude to and illustrate its more serious purpose of redirecting the readers' attention to the necessary facts. These puns and metaphors often run the length of the text, or they may be introduced briefly in one chapter, resurface unexpectedly in another, and appear significantly transformed in the conclusion. For instance, the idea of "waking" appears in the epigraph of many editions of the book and is restated in "Where I Lived and What I Lived For": "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to

brag as lustily as Chanticleer in the morning standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up" (337). What it might mean to be "awake" is explained at length a few pages later:

The morning, which is the most memorable season of the day, is the awakening hour. Then there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers all the rest of the day and night. Little is to be expected of that day, if it can be called a day, to which we are not awakened by our Genius, . . . to a better life than we fell asleep from; . . . Poetry and art, and the fairest and most memorable of the actions of men, date from such an hour. . . . The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life. To be awake is to be alive. I have never yet met a man who was quite awake. How could I have looked him the face? (343)

But Thoreau had met many whom he thought were asleep, like the men who labored on the railroads. He illustrates his point with a pun:

Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; . . . I am glad to know that it takes a gang of men for every five miles to keep the sleepers down and level in their beds as it is, for this is a sign that they may sometime get up again. (346)

This same metaphor, of being "awake," appears again in the "Conclusion," linked with the idea of the truth of our words: "I desire to speak somewhere without bounds: like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression" (563).

Many such puns are interwoven through Thoreau's text--"I too had woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture" (274). They interrelate in complex ways, often illustrating the etymological facts--the coincidence of concepts--of our words and language. There are puns on "culture" and "agriculture":

We have adopted Christianity merely as an improved method of agri-culture. (292)
 . . . the country has not yet adapted to human culture, and we are still forced to cut our spiritual bread far thinner than our forefathers did their wheaten. (294)

on "building" and "dwelling":

It would be worthwhile to build still more deliberately than I did, considering, for instance, what foundation a door, a window, a cellar, a garret, have in the nature of man, . . . (300)

on "business" and "building":

I have thought that Walden Pond would be a good place for business, not solely on account of the railroad and the ice trade; it offers advantages which it may not be good policy to divulge; it is a good post and a good foundation. (276)

and on "means":

I determined to go into business at once, and not wait to acquire the usual capital, using such slender means as I had already got. (275)

One young man of my acquaintance, who has inherited some acres, told me he should live as I did, if only he had the means. (325)

As many of them do, this pun on "means" and "meaning" (the writer's "means") reappears transformed in Walden's "Conclusion," where it is manifest as Thoreau's goal "to lay the foundation of a true expression" (563). In The Senses of Walden Stanley Cavell explores the layers of meaning--the "senses"--in Thoreau's text. He interprets the pun on "means"--"the necessities of life are the means of life, the way it is lived" (71)--and says that in Walden Thoreau's strategy to achieve true expression has been an attempted "redemption" of men's language and lives:

. . . to win back possession of our words. This requires replacing them into a reconceived human existence. That it requires a literary redemption of language altogether has been a theme of my remarks from the beginning; and I have hoped to show that it simultaneously requires a redemption of the lives we live by them, religiously or politically conceived, inner or outer. Our words have for us the meaning we give them. As our lives stand, the meaning we give them is rebuked by the meaning they have in our language--the meaning, say, that writers live on, . . . (91)

Cavell's understanding of Thoreau's goals in re-examining, reconceiving, and redeeming the words on which our lives stand led me to an understanding of one particular pun--the unstated pun on "colony"--that Thoreau uses in Walden. Through his several allusions to swarming bees Thoreau suggests that there is something fateful about the etymological connection between the establishment of an insect colony and a human one. Fate, Thoreau says, is something we construct and then follow as if we had no choice (he explains this idea in the example of the railroad in "Sounds"). If we liken ourselves to the social insects, and take the industrious bee as a metaphor for a virtuous life, then we have constructed a limiting fate for ourselves. The "fact" of the bee's life, Thoreau meant to remind us, is that she lives and must always live on the single, limited, unimaginative level of instinct. Her sense is always "common." Her life is strictly "literal."

This strictly limited sense is in no way adequate for human existence, though it is the one that men generally seem to prefer. Following his complaint about how men persist in leveling downward to their dullest perception and praising this as common sense, Thoreau says,

I do not suppose that I have attained to obscurity, but I should be proud if no more fatal fault were found with my pages on this score than was found with the Walden ice.

Southern customers objected to its blue color, which is the evidence of its purity, as if it were muddy, and preferred the Cambridge ice, which is white, but tastes of weeds. The purity men love is like the mists which envelop the earth, and not like the azure ether beyond.
(564)

The allusions to bees in Walden are "obscure" in the sense that only the few may be "awake" to them. As Cavell says "those who think themselves familiars will think they have already heard what the writer is saying" (91). Like Walden's other puns and metaphors, the references to colonies and the social insects examine and redefine familiarly accepted concepts. They are interconnected with other puns and metaphors, on economy, and housekeeping, and society, for instance. They appear briefly within the text and reappear, transformed, in the conclusion. Interesting details in and of themselves, they have a larger significance as they illustrate the senses--the interpretations--of his writing that Thoreau admits to:

You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly tell all that I know about it, and never paint "No Admittance" on my gate.
(272)

My admittance to this particular secret depended initially on the insights in The Senses of Walden. However, while critical attention has been devoted to Thoreau's language theories, especially his use of tropes and metaphors, none has explored the metaphor of the bee and its significance in the establishment of the new colonies.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE BEES

Bees work for all, watch for all, fight for all;
 they are styled profitable, laborious, busy, loyal,
 swift, nimble, bold, valiant, cunning, quick of smell,
 chaste, neat, brown, and chilly.

Sir John More (Milton, 122)

Which is all very well for bees, Thoreau would say, but
 what of men?¹

Throughout folklore and literature bees have been looked
 on as models of industry and virtue. But for Thoreau, "The
 greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my
 soul to be bad" (266). What is virtuous among the social
 insects Thoreau does not believe to be so among men. We may
 be "profitable, laborious, busy": we may "work. . . watch. . .
 fight." "Still we live meanly, like ants; . . . and our best
 virtue has for its occasion a superfluous and evitable
 wretchedness" (344). In Walden Thoreau aims to demonstrate
 the meanness of our lives, in the hope that it may be improved
 upon. To this end, the writer/hero will practice all the
 secrets of his trade. He will cultivate his "tropes and
 expression," and become a "parable maker" (411). Among his
 tropes and parables will be analogies between the lives of
 social insects, including bees, and those of his human

neighbors. Represented in a new light--some of it shed by 19th Century scientific insights into insect behavior--these familiar analogies take on special meaning in Walden.

It is in "The Bean-Field," as Thoreau describes the "sights and sounds" that came to him as he hoed, that the first important allusion to bees is made:

On gala days the town fires its great guns, which echo like popguns to these woods, and some waifs of martial music occasionally penetrate thus far. To me, away there in my bean field at the other end of the town, the big guns sounded as if a puff ball had burst; and when there was a military turnout of which I was ignorant, I have sometimes had a vague sense all the day of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon, as if some eruption would break out there soon, either scarlatina or canker-rash, until at length some more favorable puff of wind, making haste over the fields and up the Wayland road, brought me information of the "trainers." It seemed by the distant hum as if somebody's bees had swarmed, and that the neighbors, according to Virgil's advice, by a faint tintinnabulum upon the most sonorous of their domestic utensils, were endeavoring to call them down into the hive again. And when the sound died quite away, and the hum had ceased, and the most favorable breezes told no tale, I knew that they had got the last drone of them all safely into the Middlesex hive, and that now their minds were bent on the honey with which it was smeared.

I felt proud to know that the liberties of Massachusetts and of our fatherland were in such safe keeping. (410)

"Virgil's advice" is, of course, on the proper method to call swarming bees down into a hive, and comes from the fourth Georgic:

tinnitusque cie et matris quate cymbala circum
 make clanging noises and shake Cybele's cymbals
 around (Wilkinson 263)

Thoreau's passage can be read on a number of levels. The "literal or historical sense" (16), as Stanley Cavell suggests in The Senses of Walden, would be to take it that Thoreau simply means he hears the militia and thinks it sounds like the clatter that the villagers would make beating spoons and brass keys against cooking pots and warming pans, which was the traditional way of trying to frighten swarming bees into a new hive. Though interesting, this brief reference seems insignificant on this literal or historical level. But Thoreau has instructed us in his chapter on "Reading":

The heroic books, even if printed in the character of our mother tongue, will always be in a language dead to degenerate times; and we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have.
 (353)

Cavell takes this reference to "heroic books" as the writer of Walden "claiming an epic ambition" (13). The allusion to Virgil would seem to verify such an ambition. Moreover, "According to the assumption that the chapter on reading is meant as a description of the book before us, the one the writer in it went into the woods to write, it is explicitly said to be a scripture," (14) and "readable on various distinct levels" (15). To affirm that Thoreau intends us to read his scripture on more than one level, Cavell quotes from the book's "Conclusion":

"They pretend," as I hear, "that the verses of Kabir have four different senses; illusion, spirit, intellect, and the exoteric doctrine of the Vedas"; but in this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation. (564)

Taking Thoreau's advice, again from "Reading," that "Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written," (353) and looking more closely at the passage about the bees, the reference to Virgil becomes significant in a number of ways.

First of all, Virgil's advice, which is "as old as the myth of the Curetes, who thus collected hived the bees that fed the infant Zeus" (Wilkinson 263), is ineffective, as Thoreau would have known. In 1831, Jerome V. C. Smith, M. D.,

wrote An Essay on the Practicability of Cultivating the Honey Bee, in Maritime Towns and Cities, as a Source of Domestic Economy and Profit. Smith states:

The vulgar notion that it is necessary to ring bells, rattle tin pans, or blow horns, is based on the supposition that the bee has an ear organized like a man's, and that through this highly developed sense, its mind--its reasoning powers are to be operated upon through the influence of fear! If they could recognize the hoarse vibrations of many domestic utensils brought into requisition at some country farmhouses, in swarming time, there is no doubt they would be frightened! Nothing can be more absurd than this procedure, which does no more towards housing the bee, than it does toward staying the tides. (29-30)²

Thoreau would be as derisive of this "vulgar notion" as Dr. Smith, for it would represent to him the inadequate methods he criticizes the Irishman John Field for using in "Baker Farm"--"thinking to live by some derivative old country mode in this primitive new country" (456). This is one of the reasons, Cavell would say, that the writer of Walden believes that "America's revolution never happened." That "it was not a war of independence that was won, because we are not free; nor was even secession the outcome, because we have not departed from the conditions England lives under, either in our literature or in our political and economic lives" (7). This point, that no revolution has occurred because we

continue to live meanly, is one that later passages about bees will reinforce.

Secondly, it is significant that "tintinnabulum" was not exactly Virgil's advice; he said "tinnitusque," "make clanging noises." "Tintinnabulum," however, refers to the ringing of bells. It is perhaps the closest a Latin word can come to a Latinate one without being an actual translation. It is also a nice pun, since "domestic utensils" is a reference to cooking pots that would certainly have been made of tin. But the ringing of bells has more to do with the metaphoric level on which the bees are made analogous to the "trainers." Taken with "guns," "military," and "Middlesex," and, in the next paragraph, "the liberties of Massachusetts and of our fatherland," the reference is clearly to the American Revolution, or more specifically, to the fact that it is over. Thoreau does not use the word "soldier," but "drone":

The drone is a gross stingless bee,
that spendeth his time in idleness, . . .
Sir John More (Milton 79)

The drone is an imperfect bee, but
very like the workers, only that he is
larger bodied, lying always idle in the
hive, not labouring himself, but lubberlike
feeding on the provender of his fellows.
Barnabe Googe (Milton 80)

On this mundane level, the analogy indicates the soldiers are now idle and "stingless," for their "great guns" now "echo

like popguns" and merely "sound as if a puff ball had burst." The "trainers," every "last drone," are now useless and a drain on society.

There is a third significance in Thoreau's reference to Virgil. As Gary B. Miles interprets them, the Georgics share a concern about "The labor required to secure a livelihood from the natural environment" (226). In this we see a connection to Thoreau. Miles says of Virgil in Georgic 4:

Exploiting still further the suggestive comparison of human and animal existence that characterized the exposition of Georgic 3, he finds in bees animals that seem to exemplify a desirable alternative to the disorder of Roman society. To take bees as an example is the more promising because their own struggle for survival seems to epitomize much of what we have learned about the human condition. Moreover, because of their complex social organization, bees alone of the animal world seem to provide a suitable model for the highly developed society of contemporary Rome. But just as previous visions of rustic life offered only imperfect and partial insights into the human condition, so too the example of the bees proves to be inadequate. (227)³

Thoreau's oblique reference to the Georgics is the first hint we have of a challenge to the simplistic use of bees as a model for human behavior. Like Virgil, Thoreau is looking for insight into the human condition, and he also finds the example of the bees inadequate.

Thoreau's rejection of the "virtuous-bee" paradigm is made more strongly in a brief but significant passage from

"Brute Neighbors." It is spoken by the Hermit, who, in an ironic moment, reflects on his neighbors' industrious habits:

Was that a farmer's noon horn which sounded from beyond the woods just now? The hands are coming in to boiled salt beef and cider and Indian Bread. Why will men worry themselves so? He that does not eat need not work. I wonder how much they have reaped. Who would live there where a body can never think for the barking of Bose? And O, the housekeeping! to keep bright the devil's doorknobs, and scour his tubs this bright day! Better not keep a house. Say, some hollow tree; and then for morning calls and dinner-parties! Only a woodpecker tapping. Oh, they swarm; the sun is too warm there; they are born too far into life for me. (469)

Following so closely a reference to "housekeeping," the line "they are born too far into life for me" takes on subtle significance and indicates to some extent the level on which we are to "read" Thoreau's metaphor. The bee is not simply born "far into life," emerging from her brood cell a fully formed adult;⁴ she is, in fact, born into "housekeeping," her first task in life being to clean the cells from which she has just emerged in preparation for their next occupants. The insignificance of the individual worker bee is emphasized by this telling detail. Indeed, the single bee is meaningless, and not even viable. Among social insects the viable "individual" is the colony, and in order to reproduce, the colony must swarm, creating a new, second colony, exactly like the first.

Thoreau's knowledge of honey bees is obviously quite extensive, and with the reference to swarming in the "Brute Neighbors" passage it seems evident that he is using the bee analogy on the very sophisticated level that this knowledge will allow. Here, as elsewhere in Walden, Thoreau presents scientific fact, not folk wisdom or the "common" knowledge, but his interest is still clearly in its value as metaphor. The "brutes" he is really referring to are his human neighbors, who, like the bees, have swarmed. As the bee colony reproduces another identical to the original, so the human colony is too like its parent for Thoreau. The analogy, then, works on both the individual level, and the collective. As the worker bee emerges from her cell with her behavior circumscribed (i.e., with it limited by what we now know to be her genetic inheritance), so John Field's child is seen on her father's knee, "wrinkled, sibyl-like," born already far into her father's ways, and he "a poor man, born to be poor, with his inherited Irish poverty or poor life, his Adam's grandmother and boggy ways" (456). Likewise, the bee colony reproduces--makes a replica of itself, with social structures and behavior patterns established. And so it is with "John" and "Jonathan," the American colonies transplanting English "economic and social arrangements," (310) culture and mores. They, too, are born "too far into life," for, to recall

Cavell, "we (sic) have not departed from the conditions England lives under" (7).

So it becomes evident that there is more to Thoreau's use of the bee metaphor than there first appeared to be ("As if nature could support but one order of understanding" [563]).

Much significance can and has been drawn from the lives of honey bees and held up as exemplary to humans--much of what Thoreau's "neighbors call good." It is easy to see, for instance, how the economy of the bee could provide the perfect paradigm for that of a human colony in terms of independence and self-sufficiency. Bees provide everything for the maintenance and continuation of the colony--shelter, food, protection, even "government"--with substances produced in their own bodies--wax, propolis, honey, venom, royal jelly. Their society is truly democratic, the workers replacing the queen as they see fit. The queen, as much as the individual worker bee, spends a life in service to the colony, is hard working and selfless--is, indeed, all of the things Sir John More would praise in bees, and most of Thoreau's neighbors would praise in humans. In each case, Thoreau has an objection.

In the case of self-sufficiency, Thoreau is for men living simpler lives and being sufficient in themselves rather than in their communities or colonies. The point is made in "Economy":

Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged? But alas! . . . I never in all my walks came across a man engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building his house. We belong to the community. 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 to end? and what object does it finally serve? No doubt another may also think for me. (301)

This was, of course, the shape of Thoreau's experiment at Walden. Later in "Economy" he judges the success of his enterprise, tallying expenses and income, and "All things considered, that is, considering the importance of a man's soul and of today," (309). "I desire to speak impartially on this point, and as one not interested in the success or failure of the present economical and social arrangements. I was more independent than any farmer in Concord, . . ." (310).

Just as the bee colony is an undesirable model for the human community, so also is the individual bee an impertinent (i.e., non-pertinent) model for the individual human. As if countering the example of the "industrious bee," Thoreau says:

Some are "industrious," and appear to love labor for its own sake, or perhaps because it keeps them out of worse mischief; to such I have at present nothing to say. Those who would not know what to do with more leisure

than they now enjoy, I might advise to work twice as hard as they do--work till they pay for themselves, and get their free papers. (324)

There are numerous examples in Walden of Thoreau objecting to this "business": "Why should we live with such hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. . . . As for work, we haven't any of any consequence. We have the Saint Vitus' dance, and cannot possibly keep our heads still" (346). And again, from "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For": "I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than necessary. My head is hands and feet" (351).⁵ In answer to the example of the "selfless bee," sacrificing her life to defend the colony--an example some would use to illustrate patriotism--Thoreau might say that this is indeed self-less, in fact, mindless, operating on the level of the "mother tongue" and instinct, rather than intellect:

Yet some can be patriotic who have no self-respect, and sacrifice the greater to the less. They love the soil which makes their graves, but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay. Patriotism is a maggot in their heads. (560)

This same point is made again later in "Brute Neighbors" in the mock-heroic Battle of the Ants. The passage recalls the fourth Georgic, and Virgil's mock-heroic Battle of the Bees. Moreover, the overt equation of the ant-warriors to the

Concord militia links it to the previous reference to swarming bees and the "trainers" in "The Bean-Field." New insight can be gained by reflecting on that former passage in light of what "Brute Neighbors" has to say about ants.⁶

Like the "Bean-Field" passage, this one is extremely ironic, with allusions not just to the Battle of Concord, but also to Achilles, Troy, and the Napoleonic Wars, and, in an intriguing paragraph that mentions entomologist Francois Huber, to popes and monarchs from European history. The reference to Huber is particularly enlightening. One of the things he had discovered about ants was that they communicate "through the medium of their antennae; he had also proved very satisfactorily, that these organs serve the same purpose in bees" (Smith 64). But Thoreau's reference is very specifically to what Huber "appears to have witnessed" (477), and this would seem to refer to a discovery he had made regarding a battle--or, more precisely, an apparent "massacre"--among bees, when he and his assistant witnessed the expulsion of drones from observation hives:

"Huber asserts, that being desirous of witnessing the scene of carnage, he placed six hives on a glass table, and placed himself and assistant beneath it. On the 4th of July, the working bees actually massacred the males in the whole six hives, at the same hour and with the same peculiarities. The glass table was covered with bees full of animation, which flew on the drones, seized them by the antennae, the wings and limbs, and after having dragged them about, they killed the unfortunate

victims by repeated stings directed between the rings of the belly. The moment that their formidable weapon touched them, was the last of their existence; they stretched themselves out and expired."

J[ames]. T[hacher]. (Smith 92)⁷

So Thoreau's speculation on the fate of the ant-warrior he observes as "being without feelers," and whether he will spend "the remainder of his days in some Hotel des Invalides" (477), is purely rhetorical--he knows the fate of both the wounded ant and the idle drone. He is making a comment, rather, on the fate of the wounded or idled soldier, who has let himself be used by society (as the Irishmen were used by the railroads) and cast off afterwards as useless. This is a significant reversal of the hackneyed use of the drone metaphor, and adds to the impact of the irony in the lines in the Battle of the Ants:

There was not a hireling there. I have no doubt that it was a principle they fought for, as much as our ancestors, and not to avoid a three-penny tax on their tea; (476)

As the passage from James Thacher shows, it was not unusual to equate fighting ants and swarming bees to embattled armies:

. . . when they were minded to swarm within three days, they made a great noise and a

stirring to and fro inside the hive in the evening, like soldiers do at an alarm within a castle. Hyll (Milton 90)

or even to colonization:

If a person go near the hives that are ready to send out swarms . . . The whole society is in agitation on the occasion, and the tumult does not cease till the new colony has gone forth. (Milton 17)

They may be heard generally in the evening in fine weather, and sometimes for several days together; being probably expressive of the princesses' being ready, and desirous of enjoying empires of their own. (Keys 89)

Whatever makes Thoreau's passage so remarkable, it is not the simple mechanism of an analogy--however poetically he uses it. It goes beyond the delicious irony of his prose. It has more to do with the subtlety and depth of his commentary on human nature. An illustration of this can be found in the "Bean-Field" if that passage is re-examined in light of another discovery Huber had made about bees:

Bees receive some kinds of intelligence through the medium of certain sounds, as has been stated in another place. The antennae, in addition to the uses already ascribed to them, may serve to inform the bees of the state of the atmosphere, and enable them to discern the approach of a change in the weather. (Smith 64)

Smith quotes an "expert" on what beekeepers know they can expect when foraging bees refuse to leave their own dooryard:

"'That bees,' says Dr. Evans, 'can foresee bad weather, is a fact beyond denial; though we know not through the medium of what sense . . . We are often surprised to find, even with a promising appearance of the sky'. . . 'although no indication of wet should be discernible, clouds will soon rise and rain come on'" (65).

Compare this to the language in "The Bean-Field" about "a vague sense all the day of some sort of itching and disease in the horizon," and "some more favorable puff of wind . . . brought me information," or "told no tale." And in the next paragraph:

. . . these martial strains seemed as far away as Palestine, and reminded me of a march of crusaders in the horizon, with a slight tantivy and tremulous motion of the elm-tree tops which overhang the village. This was one of the great days; though the sky had from my clearing only the same everlastingly great look that it wears daily, and I saw no difference in it. (410)

The implication that Thoreau is "sensing" the militaristic or patriotic "atmosphere" is linked to his brute nature--"I could spit a Mexican with a good relish" (410). (Elsewhere he has said he "could sometimes eat a rat with a good relish" (463).) These "Bean-Field" references to the crusades, the American Revolution, and the Mexican War, when combined with the "Brute Neighbors" allusions to mythic,

religious, and political wars of the past, are evidence that Thoreau equates man's periodic and seemingly perpetual invasions and wars with the seasonal swarming of bees. He implies that militarism is as much a part of man's instinctive, brutish nature as swarming is a part of the bees'--and historically as little understood: "ontologically the state of society is nevertheless war--the condition which Hobbes claimed to be the state of nature" (Cavell 106). (Because it is instinctive, inexplicable and seemingly perpetual [as incurable as "scarlatina or canker-rash"], then how much more significant is the rehiving of the swarm, or the resettling of the military after an excursion; and how much more revealing is it that "domestic utensils" are employed in bending their minds to the honey [money] with which the new hive [colony] is smeared.) Of course, Thoreau does not think of this as patriotism, but "American militarism's . . . corrupted idea of patriotism" (Cavell 23). It shows what becomes of men who follow only their brute natures; they live the mean lives of social insects, ruled by instinct and the "mother tongue" (354), their virtue is not virtue at all, but "wretchedness."

The passages about bees, like many other metaphors and analogies Thoreau has used throughout Walden, seem small and circumstantial (even repetitive), but their meaning expands as they reflect each other--like Walden Pond and the sky--and

reverberates in the complex final chapter. The references to bees in the "Conclusion" are, in fact, not references to bees at all, but to the language of the earlier passages:

I live in the angle of a leaden wall, into whose composition was poured a little alloy of bell metal. Often, in the repose of midday, there reaches my ears a confused tintinnabulum from without. It is the noise of my contemporaries. My neighbors tell me of their adventures with famous gentlemen and ladies, what notabilities they met at dinnertable: but I am no more interested in such things than in the contents of the Daily Times. The interest and the conversation are about costume and manners chiefly; but a goose is a goose still, dress it as you will. (568)

I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, and obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board . . . There was a man in my neighborhood who lived in a hollow tree. His manners were truly regal. I should have done better had I called on him. (569)

The words recall the passages from "The Bean-Field" and the Hermit's meditation in "Brute Neighbors": "tintinnabulum" (410), "hollow tree," "and then for morning calls and dinner-parties!" (469), but they no longer refer to the social insects, but to the society of men and women. These dissipated, mannered lives are as unexamined and convention-ridden as the poor Irishman's, as brute and useless as the soldiers'. These are the "bogs and quicksands of society" (569). But Thoreau reassures us, "There is solid

bottom everywhere." And that "solid foundation" from which to "commence to spring an arch" (568) is Nature. Rather than the "inhospitable board" of human society, better to call on "a man . . . who lived in a hollow tree"; he, at least, has "regal" manners, and "sincerity and truth."

The insect Thoreau tells us about in his concluding pages is not a social one, but the solitary "strong and beautiful bug" that "has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society," and now must gnaw its way out before the very eyes and ears of "the astonished family of man as they [sit] around the festive board" (572). Metamorphosis, then, is a solitary thing, not helped, but hindered by "the well-seasoned tomb" of the established, orderly surface of our lives in society. Thoreau offers, by his removal to Walden, a new, distant view--a new perspective from which to re-view our lives:

As I stand over the insect crawling amid the pine needles on the forest floor, and endeavoring to conceal itself from my sight, and ask myself why it will cherish those humble thoughts, and hide its head from me who might, perhaps, be its benefactor, and impart to its race some cheering information, I am reminded of the greater Benefactor and Intelligence that stands over me the human insect. (571)

The significance of this metaphor is consistent with that of Thoreau's concluding one: "Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a

morning-star." It is the same metaphor used in his epigraph, and the message is urged throughout Walden: There are levels of understanding we are not awake to.

We make what we will of our words, commonly understanding them on the most literal and utilitarian level only, or misconstruing their meaning as we do the metaphors of natural fact. With our limited words we construct our limited fate, then submit to it as if it were unalterable. But change is possible. It requires an examination and revision of the meaning of our lives in the most immediate sense: "However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names" (566). And change depends on a renewed understanding of our words in the literal sense:

There are such words as joy and sorrow, but they are only the burden of a psalm, sung with a nasal twang, while we believe in the ordinary and mean. We think that we can change our clothes only. . . . We do not believe that a tide rises and falls behind every man which can float the British Empire like a chip, if he should ever harbor it in his mind. (571)

For most, harboring such an idea could be a "fact of the imagination" only. Reducing it to a "fact to [our] understanding"--knowing it, is knowing that our lives are what we make of them. It is the beginning, the awakening to--or, if you will, the foundation for--realizing them in their highest, spiritual sense.

NOTES

¹ Thoreau would say "men," a convention I will adopt in this paper, justified, I hope, by the overwhelmingly female example of the bees.

² This essay was first delivered as an Athenaeum lecture on the "economy of the Honey Bee" . . . before the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Port of Boston, 1830. Whether or not Thoreau was familiar with it in either lecture or essay form, it is an example of the sort of information available to him, and there is a curious similarity between Smith's passage and Thoreau's.

³ I find a further significance in this reference to Virgil based on Douglas Myers' "The Bean-Field and the Method of Nature" (TJQ, 4:1-9, Ap. 72). Myers, like Cavell, takes the bean field as a metaphor for the writer's craft. Thoreau clearly states that "some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day" (411). And earlier in the chapter he has said that "labor of the hands [which writing most definitely is] . . . is perhaps never the worst form of idleness. It has a constant and imperishable moral, and to the scholar it yields a classic result" (406). Myers postulates that "In 'Reading' we have been advised that 'the adventurous student will always

study classics in whatever language they may be written.' And, simply put, the language of the bean-field, expressed by the yellow soil, is translated by the plastic artist into a mythology of nature" (4). Myers says Thoreau doubted his ability to create such a mythology: "an extinct nation had anciently dwelt here" and had "to some extent exhausted the soil for this very crop" (405-06). Myers takes the extinct nation to be "the indigenous Indian population of eastern Mass. And Thoreau may mean, simply, that they had worn out the soil for beans. But Thoreau probably means to imply that the vitality of these aboriginal men, living in an ineffable intimacy with nature, eludes his efforts at artistic reproduction" (5). Using the reference to the Georgics to build on Myers' interpretation, the Romans might be the "extinct nation" that "anciently dwelt here," i.e., at a point of disordered society (Miles 227), needing "to receive instruction, to assess its faithfulness to its ideal" (Cavell 13). And it is Virgil in particular who had cultivated these same tropes and parables that "to some extent exhausted the soil for this very crop." That "crop," besides being the general theme that Miles states for the fourth Georgic, could be the trope of the mock-heroic, Virgil's battle of the bees which Thoreau's battle of the ants takes so much from. Whether Thoreau doubts his ability or not, as Myers suggests, he does attempt to cultivate the same crop. His work will

serve as a "transcript," perhaps, of the "heroic literary labors of the ancients" (356), he becoming "a very agricola laboriosus" (406). His field becomes, "as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field" (407). American literature, then, was the half-cultivated field Thoreau labored in.

⁴ There are things we know (and Thoreau would have known some of them) that a brand-new bee cannot do--sting and build comb, for instance. Still, for all intents and purposes, she looks adult, and was always thought to be so, even as she pulls herself from her cell.

⁵ Another counter to the industrious bee example, pertinent to their storing up honey, perhaps, is this from "Economy":

This spending of the best part of one's life earning money in order to enjoy a questionable liberty during the least valuable part of it, reminds me of the Englishman who went to India to make a fortune first, in order that he might return to England and live the life of a poet. He should have gone up garret at once. (308)

⁶ I have not reproduced this long passage; refer to pp. 474-478, Walden.

⁷ I cannot say definitely that this is the "witnessed" battle Thoreau refers to. It is an interesting coincidence,

or "accident," that it occurred on July 4th. Cavell has suggested the significance that the date of Thoreau's taking up residence at Walden "by accident, was on Independence Day, or the 4th of July, 1845," at least in part is "to mock America's idea of what independence comes to" (7). Another interesting coincidence or "accident," of a July Independence Day, when equating colonizing with swarming in bees, is in an old English proverb, which would have been known to Thoreau (and was taught to me by my beekeeping teacher--and not so very long ago):

A swarm in May,
Is worth a load of hay.
A swarm in June,
Is worth a silver spoon.
A swarm in July,
Is not worth a fly.

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