

Part IV

The Aestheticization of Everyday Life

Aestheticization Takes Command

It is only after you have come to know the surface of things... that you can venture to seek what is underneath. But the surface of things is inexhaustible.

Italo Calvino, *Mr. Palomar*

According to Virginia Postrel, author of *The Substance of Style*, we live in 'a new age of aesthetics' – an age in which 'design is everywhere, and everywhere is now designed' (Postrel 2003: 24). Who has not noticed the growing emphasis on the 'sense appeal' of commodities, stores and human bodies? Attractive design is no longer a luxury: 'We, [as] customers, demand it' (Postrel 2003: 5).

What is driving this 'aestheticization of everyday life'? To gain a purchase on this process we need to trace the history of the concept of aesthetics. Derived from the Greek *aisthesis*, meaning sensation, the term was coined by the philosopher Alexander Baumgarten in the eighteenth-century.

For Baumgarten aesthetics had to do with the perfection of perception and only secondarily with the 'perception of perfection,' or beauty. His new 'science of sense cognition' was to occupy an intermediary rung, as a 'science of the lower cognitive power' (sense perception) in contradistinction to 'the higher cognitive power' (reason). By limiting aesthetics to the perception of the 'unity-in-multiplicity of sensible qualities' Baumgarten hoped to insulate it from being reduced to 'arid' intellectual knowledge. He believed that the intellect was 'the poorer' for the fact that it traffics exclusively in 'distinct ideas,' as opposed to the 'confused and indistinct ideas' generated by the senses. For Baumgarten, therefore, the disposition to sense acutely meant attending to the nature of sensory experience in itself, rather than trying to rationalize perception (Gregor 1983: 364–65).

Baumgarten's new 'science' was quickly appropriated and just as quickly subverted by his contemporaries. They replaced his emphasis on the sensuous

disposition of the artist with a taxonomy of 'the five arts' (architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry). The scope and criteria of the various arts were delimited in terms of the dualism of vision (epitomized by painting) and hearing (epitomized by either music or poetry). The 'dark' or 'lower' senses of smell, taste and touch were deemed too base to hold any significance for the fine arts. Theater and dance were also excluded on account of their hybrid character, since they played to both vision and hearing at once (see Rée 2000).

Baumgarten's worst fears concerning the rationalization of perception were realized in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant attempted to transcend the dualism of vision and hearing and replace it with a fundamental division between the 'arts of space' (for example, painting) and the 'arts of time' (for example, music), accessible to 'outer intuition' and 'inner intuition' respectively (Rée 2000: 58–60). It could be said that Kant rarefied aesthetics by divorcing it from perception and substituting intuition. After Kant, aesthetic judgment would be properly neutral, passionless and disinterested (see Eagleton 1990; Turner 1994). This definition of aesthetics guaranteed the autonomy of the enclave now known as 'art' but at the expense of sensory plenitude.

The first chapter in this section helps us to recuperate a sense of the aesthetic as Baumgarten imagined it – that is, of aesthetics as 'the perfection of sense perception as such.' In 'A Tonic of Wildness,' Victor Carl Friesen explores Henry David Thoreau's (1817–62) sensuous appreciation of the natural world. Friesen approaches Thoreau as a naturalist rather than a literary figure. This is an important move for it means that, instead of deflecting our attention to the intertextuality of Thoreau's position in Western or American literature (for example, Caws), Friesen is able to focus on the intersensuality of Thoreau's relationship with his surroundings. Furthermore, whereas Thoreau has often been portrayed as 'a stoic and an ascetic' (Friesen 1984: xiii), he was, in fact, avid for sensory pleasure (though of such a 'simple' kind that it seemed like asceticism to jaded urbanites).

Thoreau's rather idiosyncratic aesthetics was not purely the fruit of his appreciation of nature, as he was influenced by the aesthetic theories of his day.¹ Furthermore, while Thoreau sought to immerse himself in nature he was still near enough to civilization for the encroachments of modern technology – telegraph wires and railways – to form part of his landscape. Friesen astutely points out, however, that Thoreau strove to subject these external theories and elements to his own empathetic 'sensuous approach to nature,' which demanded 'that all senses must ever perceive in a fresh manner' and that even technology be 'naturalized.'

Thoreau used his botanical strolls through the New England woods to, in his terms, 'feed his senses with the best that the land affords' and achieve a state in which his 'body [was] all sentient.' For Thoreau, 'the best that the land affords' did not mean rich or exotic fare, but such 'every-day phenomena'

as leaves and berries, winds and waters, intensely appreciated and ‘digested.’ Thoreau thus achieved a state of heightened aesthetic awareness of the everyday. Contemporary aesthetic theory, however, has passed over Thoreau in favor of another nineteenth-century poet-stroller, Baudelaire, apotheosized by Benjamin (1973). Baudelaire’s relative popularity in this regard is due to his role as an observer of modern urban life, or as a ‘botanist of the pavement’ (Clarke 2003). While Thoreau has more to say about the life of the woods than the dynamics of the street, however, his emphasis on sensory refreshment though immersion in nature can help to correct an overly artful – and, as it were, urbane – understanding of aesthetic expression and judgment.

The second chapter, by curator and critic Jim Drobnick, delves further into the excluded matter of (post-Kantian) aesthetic theory – in this case, the world of smell. Drobnick documents how ‘museum atmospheres’ have changed in recent years, from being ideally anosmic or smell-less ‘white cubes’ to being pervaded by ‘wafting perceptions.’ Indeed, scent has become ‘one of *the* most fashionable additions to the museum’s repertoire of effects,’ especially in postmodern, entertainment-oriented display venues. This reodorization of public spaces is complemented by what Drobnick calls the ‘olfactory turn’ in contemporary art, which has resulted in recent generations of artists producing ever more ‘volatile artworks.’ Drobnick classifies these artworks into olfactory types, employing such criteria as ‘olfactocentrism’ and ‘dialectical odors.’ His essay hence takes us beyond ‘the aesthetic gaze’ in a singularly pungent fashion.

The Drobnick chapter brings us to the subject of ‘the aestheticization of everyday life’ as theorized by sociologist Mike Featherstone in a seminal chapter of *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. ‘If we examine definitions of postmodernism,’ Featherstone (1991: 65) writes, ‘we find an emphasis upon the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life, the collapse of the distinction between high art and mass/popular culture, a general stylistic promiscuity and mixing of codes.’ Featherstone proceeds to disclose ‘the *genealogy of postmodernité*’ (or what Postrel calls ‘the aesthetic age’) and bring out its linkages with modernity. In one of its senses ‘the aestheticization of everyday life can refer to the project of turning life into a work of art’ (Featherstone 1991: 66). Featherstone cites the example of the artistic countercultures that sprang up in mid- to late-nineteenth century European urban centers, such as Berlin and Paris – the preserve of Baudelaire and company. In its most salient sense for us now, however, ‘the aestheticization of everyday life refers to the rapid flow of signs and images which saturates the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society’ (Featherstone 1991: 67). As Postrel (2003: 4) suggests, ‘Aesthetics has become too important to be left in the hands of the aesthetes,’ whence the growth of the so-called culture industries, ‘with painting moving into advertising, architecture into technical engineering, [and] handicrafts and sculpture into the industrial arts, to produce a mass culture’ (Featherstone 1991: 73). The

burgeoning importance and salience of 'design' spells both an extension of art into the everyday, and the end of art's autonomy, or perhaps even 'the end of art' and 'the end of reality' at once (following Baudrillard 1983), as images and reproductions proliferate endlessly, and 'culture' is everywhere and nowhere.

Featherstone might have added 'mixing of the senses' to his definitions of postmodernism. This is the message of Drobnick's chapter and also the theme of the following chapter, 'HYPERESTHESIA.' In this chapter I analyse the role played by the senses in the transition from the ascetic discipline of Calvinism to the aesthetic hedonism of Calvin Klein. My essay points to the instrumentalization of the senses as the driving force behind the transformation of industrial capitalism into the consumer capitalism of today. But the 'sensual logic' of 'late' capitalism is shown to be far more pervasive and invasive than many contemporary cultural critics (such as Jameson, Baudrillard) would think. Its 'logic' is not confined to the projection of dream worlds of consumer gratification (and ever receding prospects of satisfaction); rather it massages *all* the senses (including some you never even thought you possessed).² At the same time, the hyperestheticization of everyday life in the interests of moving merchandise is shown to come at a price – to capitalism itself.

The following chapter, by postmodern writer Italo Calvino, takes us on a 'true journey' to Mexico in the company of a tourist couple. Bent on 'ingesting' the local culture, the couple end up using Mexican cuisine as a medium for the metaphorical cannibalization of each other. This exquisitely flavored short story offers a literary evocation of 'the perfection of gustation.' In this story, as in the other two tales of hearing and smell that accompany it in 'Under the Jaguar Sun,' Calvino is concerned to enucleate the 'way of thinking' embedded in a given 'way of sensing.' He also demonstrates how everyday sensory experiences may be transfigured by extraordinary revelations.

The next chapter, by one of the foremost theorists of postmodernism, Steven Connor (1989), presents an exegesis of philosopher Michel Serres' *Les cinq sens* (soon to appear in English translation). As noted in the Introduction, *Les cinq sens* 'cries out against the Empire of Signs,' or what could be called the linguistic domination of perception. It does so by an imaginative exploration of the ways in which the senses mingle with, and entwine, each other and the world – that is, by plumbing the 'interficiality' (Cavell 2002) of our everyday experience of reality. While Serres may have succeeded in deranging conventional anatomies of the senses with his celebration of 'the ceaseless unravelling and reknitting of the body,'³ Connor nevertheless finds a disturbing lacuna in Serres' philosophy of sensory emancipation. According to Connor, Serres fails to come to grips with suffering, degradation, and death – or, in a word, entropy. This is a theme to which we shall return in the last part of this volume.

Studies of aestheticization customarily concentrate on that which appeals, to the exclusion of that which offends.⁴ But every aesthetic judgement has an underside, and it is this which confronts us in William Ian Miller's social critique of the judgment of distaste in 'Darwin's Disgust.' There is something delightfully postmodern about the very notion of an 'anatomy of disgust' (Miller 1987) as opposed, for example, to the more serious (high modernist) notion of an 'anatomy of criticism' (Frye 1957). However, Miller does not just play with disgust. Miller exposes how in the case of disgust, we are 'in the grip of a sensation' that is both socially produced and fraught with social and moral consequences. Disgust polices. It undermines intimacy and precludes identification with others, thereby forcefully structuring our capacity for sociality.

Miller's constructionist and relational approach to the subject of 'disesthesia' explodes many of the essentialist notions we take for granted. He argues that disgust (despite its etymology) is not primarily about taste. It is more about touch and smell, and the divisions of inner and outer, self and other. In this regard, 'Darwin's Disgust' is particularly illuminating in its assessment of the sensory and social bases of the Freudian myth which holds that the rise of civilization produces a diminution in importance of olfactory stimuli. With respect to our topic of 'the aestheticization of everyday life' Miller's essay reminds us that we need not be pleased with everything we perceive. We may also, at times, be disgusted.

Notes

1. Thus, for example, Friesen documents Thoreau's indebtedness to the English landscape painter and writer Gilpin.

2. Put another way, 'late' capitalism is much more, than a 'civilization of the image,' and it cannot be theorized adequately without account being taken of its increasingly multisensory materiality. The difficulty here stems from the sensory bias intrinsic to the very notion of 'theorization': theory comes from the Greek *theorèin* meaning 'to gaze upon.' It is high time for all of the senses (not solely vision) to become 'directly in their practice theoreticians' (the young Marx cited and discussed in Howes 2003: 238n3, 239n6).

3. It is particularly instructive to read Serres' undoing of sensory boundaries in light of Carla Mazzio's account in Chapter 5 of early modern attempts to divide and hierarchize the sensorium.

4. For example, Stallybrass and White (1986) bring out how the exclusion of the grotesqueness of peasant sensibilities (as expressed in Carnival) helped to shore up bourgeois identity, but also (precisely on account of its exclusion) became an object or site of (sublimated) desire. To explore the modulation of desire is not the same as dealing squarely with the materiality of disgust as Miller does.

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A Tonic of Wildness

Sensuousness in Henry David Thoreau

Victor Carl Friesen

When I see the sulphur lichens on the rails . . . , I feel like studying them again as a relisher or tonic, to make life go down and digest well, as we use pepper and vinegar and salads.

Henry David Thoreau

The railway was often admired in the nineteenth-century for its thrilling speed. It took the great American naturalist Henry David Thoreau, to find 'a relisher and tonic' in the humble lichens growing on the rails. Thoreau's life as a woodsman, in fact, is permeated by his desire to drink in and drench himself with the refreshing vitality of the natural world. In the fulfillment of this desire all sensory phenomena may act as food and drink for a parched spirit. Thoreau (1906, VIII: 496) writes that: 'A man should feed his senses with the best that the land affords.' The best, however, does not mean luxurious fare, but 'what his senses hourly perceive,' in the 'every-day phenomena' of a life in tune with nature. From these he derives his 'satisfaction' (Thoreau 1906, XIV: 204). The acuity of Thoreau's senses as they perceive such phenomena and his pervasive use of each sense shows just how satisfactory such a life can be.

This sensory acuity is manifest in Thoreau's description of the subtle blending of waning sunlight and evening moonlight as the latter, 'shedding the softest imaginable light,' gains prominence with the end of day. 'What an immeasurable interval there is,' he writes, 'between the first tinge of moonlight which we detect, lighting with mysterious, silvery, poetic light the western slopes, like a paler grass, and the last wave of sunlight on the eastern slopes! It is wonderful how our senses ever span so vast an interval,

how from being aware of one we become aware of the other' (Thoreau 1906, VIII: 284).

This last sentence hints at three factors which inform Thoreau's sensory awareness. First, we might ordinarily assume that the phenomenon of changing light is strictly a matter of vision. Thoreau, however, speaks of 'senses' spanning the interval and elsewhere tells how the non-visual senses 'serve, and escort, and defend [sight]' (Thoreau 1958: 165). Here he detects the changes in light not only through the eye but through the ear as well, for 'already the crickets chirp to the moon a different strain' (Thoreau 1906, VIII: 284). Secondly, his perception throughout the 'interval' seems attentive and continuous. He disciplines himself to sense all that he can. 'Objects are concealed from our view,' he writes elsewhere, 'not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray... as because there is no intention of the mind and eye toward them' (Thoreau, XVII: 285). Thirdly, he says that awareness of one phenomenon prompts his awareness of another. He may mean that one phenomenon accentuates the other by contrast – however slight the difference may be in this instance of sunlight and moonlight. Or he may mean that his being aware of the first phenomenon causes him to anticipate the second. He is ready to perceive it. Both effects are important to his sensuous approach to nature.

Many times Thoreau refers to the acuteness of his senses in terms of his anticipation and/or training. Consider his visual sense first. While in the Maine woods, he notes that the river he is on is an inclined plane, for he observes the waterline against the shores. His companion does not perceive the slope, we are told, not having Thoreau's experience as a surveyor. The very last entry in the *Journal*, made when Thoreau was already dying of tuberculosis, continues in a similar vein. He notices furrows made by the rain, 'all... perfectly distinct to an observant eye, and yet could easily pass unnoticed by most' (Thoreau 1906, XX: 346). But he also has eyesight acute in itself. In the Maine woods he sees a dragonfly half a mile distant; at Walden Pond he sees a water bug dimple the surface a quarter mile away. Sensitive to color, he can detect sassafras from as great a distance as half a mile because of its peculiar orange-scarlet tint. And one winter day, in mid-afternoon, he discerns a star in the skies overhead. Truly he has said that his eyes are flocks, roaming about the far mountains and sky and feeding on them.

Thoreau's sense of hearing is no less acute than his sense of sight – and for similar reasons. He has trained his ears both to distinguish slight sounds – he hears not only the cluck after a whippoorwill's note, but as well a fly-like buzzing – and to be anticipatory of them. Thus he has no need to go to the world of fine arts for music but can hear music in the simplest sounds, from the humming of telegraph wires to the clicking of oarlocks. Even the silence of night is to him audible and 'something positive.' 'It is musical and thrills me,' he writes (Thoreau 1906, X: 471–2). (There is a suggestion here too of hearing celestial sounds; see further Friesen 1984: chapter 7.)

The acuity of Thoreau's other senses is also noteworthy. His sense of smell, by his own account, is a much perfected sense, akin to that of an animal. When, for instance, he lands on an island in the Sudbury River, he notices at once the scent of wilted leaves. That he chooses to record this one sensation shows how significant it must be to him. Similarly he *smells* the first appearance of muskrats in the spring and, on another occasion, detects a fox's scent from a trail that must have been at least 12 hours old.

While Thoreau (1906, II: 241) calls the sense of taste 'commonly gross,' it is central to his appreciation of nature. On his walks Thoreau is constantly nibbling from the plants about him and making comparisons. The sensitivity of his palate to the gustatory nuances of the forest is maintained by his customary diet of simple foods, which keep his taste unjaded. The sense of touch, in turn, is continually stimulated by Thoreau's interaction with the natural environment of woods, waters, and winds. When climbing a hill, he detects the different temperatures of the air strata he passes through, and on a hill itself he suggests that he feels even the 'atoms' (Thoreau 1906, VII: 13) of wind, that is, its minute constituents, touching his cheek. He writes elsewhere: 'My body is all sentient. As I go here or there, I am tickled by this or that I come in contact with, as if I touched the wires of a battery. I can generally recall – have fresh in my mind – several scratches last received. These I constantly recall to mind, reimpress, and harp upon' (Thoreau 1906, XIV: 44).

If his body is all sentient, Thoreau does attach some superiority to one of the senses – the sense of sight. He holds it foremost because with it he can detect color and form. It is color that stains the windows in the cathedral of his world (Thoreau 1906, IX: 442). He finds it the 'more glorious' to live in his native Concord because one of its birds, the common blue jay, is 'so splendidly painted' (Thoreau 1906, XVII: 319). His heart leaps up at the sight of a rainbow; he devotes a separate essay to the beauty of trees in autumn. In the *Journal* he is enchanted by the colors of the wood duck: 'What an ornament to a river to see that glowing gem floating in contact with the water! As if the hummingbird should recline its ruby throat and its breast on the water. Like dipping a glowing coal in water! It so affected me' (Thoreau 1906, XIV: 17). It is the contrast here which enhances the picture for him.

Thoreau's response to warm colors, such as red, is somewhat different from his response to cool tints, such as blue. The associations he makes with each of them go beyond the actual functioning of his sense of sight to tell us something that he considers important – the effect of this one sense on his total being. While his associations are for the most part conventional, they are nonetheless highly personal because of his emotional involvement. Warm colors for him are summery and speak of the earth, and he appropriately reacts warmly to them, whereas cool colors tend to be wintry and associated with things of the heavens, something to be reflective about.

Of the warm colors, red is Thoreau's favorite: he loves to see any redness in vegetation (Thoreau 1906, VIII: 489). It is the color of colors, he says in 'Autumnal Tints,' and speaks to our blood. Red foliage, he writes, shows nature as being 'full of blood and heat and luxuriance' (Thoreau 1906, VIII: 490). While Thoreau delights in the feast for the eyes provided by reds, oranges and yellows, he realizes that they cannot be the staple of his diet. Thus he writes of yet another warm color, but one sober in its aspect: 'Brown is the color for me, the color of our coats and our daily lives, the color of the poor man's loaf. The bright tints are pies and cakes, good only for October feasts' (Thoreau 1906, XVIII: 97–8).

Thoreau is also rapturous at times about cool blues and azures, but these tints, found predominantly in the sky above and in the waters which reflect it, are often wedded to meditation. These colors suggest a limitless space to Thoreau and serve as a stimulus for far-reaching thoughts. For example, the sight of his 'elysian blue' shadow on snow causes Thoreau to reflect about the nature of his own being: 'I am turned into a tall blue Prussian from my cap to my boots, such as no mortal dye can produce, with an amethystine hatchet in my hand. I am in raptures at my own shadow. What if the substance were of as ethereal a nature?' (Thoreau 1906, XIV: 115).

In recording the colors of his world, Thoreau notices what would be commonly overlooked by others. He sees the gem-like play of colors of fungi on a stump and notices too the iridescence left on a patch of water by a decaying sucker. To him the iridescence is like the 'fragments of a most wonderfully painted mirror' (Thoreau 1906, XIV: 343) and he leans over the edge of his boat, admiring it as much as he would a sunset sky or rainbow. Often he goes out of his way – indeed such going becomes his way of life – to notice particular colors in nature. He walks an extra half-mile to examine the changing colors of a tree; he wades through cold water in order to gaze at cranberries. But he seems to go out of his way most frequently in winter when the landscape is less vivid than in other seasons. One day, with a temperature of six below zero, finds him pacing up and down a road, waiting until the light is right: he wants to observe the pinkish cast on a snowy hill at sunset. After the moment has passed, he discerns as well a delicate violet tinge on the hill (Thoreau 1906, XVII: 395–6). Another evening he notices the rose color of the snow and '*at the same time*' (he italicizes this last phrase) notices a greenish hue in nearby ice, having, as he says, been looking out for such coincidence (Thoreau 1906, XIX: 61).

Thoreau's eye is as sensitive to forms and outlines in nature as to colors. He detects the earth's muscles in leafless tree limbs (Thoreau 1906, XVII: 260) and in firm, curving beaches (Thoreau 1906, XVIII: 75), while flowing waters and swaying foliage are the wrists and temple of the earth (Thoreau 1906, XIX: 138). He can feel their pulse with his eye. 'A man has not seen a thing who has not felt it,' he says (Thoreau 1906: 160). Seeing for him becomes something which is not distinct from either outward (tactile) feeling or from

inward feelings. Both kinds of feeling are evident when he devotes three pages of 'Autumnal Tints' to the form of an oak leaf. 'What a wild and pleasing outline, a combination of graceful curves and angles!' (Thoreau 1906, V: 279) he exclaims over it. He first treats the leaf anatomically, referring to its broad sinuses or long lobes. But his enthusiasm over its form prompts him to find another descriptive image, this one geographical. The leaf is an island or a pond with rounded bays and pointed capes, and he becomes a mariner at sight of it. It is like a miniature Walden Pond, whose scalloped shoreline he also loves to follow with his eye (Thoreau 1906, II: 206).

When leaves are more distant, that is, still on a tree above him, Thoreau is pleased to see their shapes enhanced because of the bright sky behind them. The leaves then 'grasp... skyey influences' (Thoreau 1906, V: 278) or stamp their meaning 'in a thousand hieroglyphics on the heavens' (Thoreau 1906, I: 166). The outline of them gains in richness for him as the number of interstices increases through which the light straggles. More border is thus provided along which his eye can travel with what amounts really to a caress. Pines, he can say, make a 'graceful fringe to the earth' (Thoreau 1906, I: 167), while elsewhere he notes that his eyes 'nibble the piny sierra which makes the horizon's edge, as a hungry man nibbles a cracker' (Thoreau 1906, XVII: 450).

The features of a natural scene often seem to Thoreau like the components of a picture, and this awareness in turn affects how he will continue to see the scene. The atmosphere and trees present not a kind of screen to gaze at but the glass and frame of a painting. In *A Week* he says at one place that the 'air was so elastic and crystalline – that it had the same effect on the landscape that a glass has on – a picture, to give it an ideal remoteness and perfection' (Thoreau 1906, I: 45). And in 'Autumnal Tints' he refers to the sunset painted daily behind a frame of elms, making a picture worthier than any found in a gallery.

An eighteenth-century landscape painter and writer, William Gilpin, whose works on Picturesque beauty Thoreau read, probably caused Thoreau to look for certain beauties in nature that he might not otherwise have noticed so soon (for a discussion of Gilpin's ideas on the Picturesque see Barbier 1963: 98–147). Thoreau, wishing to make his visual sense serve him to the fullest, was only too willing to learn from other observers. Thus he writes to a friend that Gilpin's books have been his thunder lately. After reading the artist's *Remarks on Forest Scenery* (1791) he writes in his *Journal*, 'The mist to-day makes those near distances which Gilpin tells of' (Thoreau 1906, IX: 444), or 'Thinking of the value of the gull to the scenery of our river in spring... , [I find that] Gilpin says something to the purpose' (Thoreau 1906, IX: 416). It is as if Thoreau were looking at the landscape afresh, through the eyes of a painter. In another journal entry Thoreau's description of an autumn scene (Thoreau 1906, XX: 89) is reminiscent of a Gilpin painting: a shining stream framed by shrubbery, the horizon blurred by smoke, clouds billowing

upwards, man and his works seeming insignificant against a panorama of nature. All this is seen by him in a downward perspective from a railroad causeway.

It should not be thought that Thoreau is here permeated by aesthetic ideas of the late eighteenth-century. For one thing, he, as sensuous man, generally wants to be central (and significant) in the richly satisfying world about him. He is unlike, then, another British artist of the period, Richard Wilson, whose style is similar to Gilpin's in depicting grand scenery, or the nature poet James Thomson, whose *The Seasons* (1730), portrays man as inconsequential before the forces of nature. If anything, Thoreau is akin to Jane Austen, who in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), dramatizes the pros and cons of Picturesque ideas and clearly speaks for the gentle and the familiar in landscape rather than the 'sublime.' According to Edmund Burke's *The Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756), the sublime features of nature, those of great magnitude, produce sensations of pain and terror. Influential artists like Gilpin were preoccupied in experiencing such scenes and having viewers experience them in their paintings. But Thoreau's one excursion into sublime scenery, up Mount Katahdin, makes him prefer his own native Concord, although he does not regret the climb (see further Frisen 1984: Chapter 3).

For another thing, Thoreau is not concerned primarily with a romantically Picturesque view but with a view of as much nature, in all its variety, as possible. At Walden he stands on tiptoe when looking at his horizons. Gilpin looks at nature with only the eye of an artist, and Thoreau criticizes him for doing so. Nature is more than near distances and side screens and backdrops to Thoreau. It is a living thing, like himself, which he wants to respond to with his whole being, not just with the sense of sight but with the other senses as well.

If Thoreau does not already see acutely enough, the hearing of a cricket, he tells us, whets his eyes. Sound to him can be as exhilarating as color and form. It is 'coincident with an ecstasy' (Thoreau, 1906, XII: 39), and he devotes a whole chapter to it in *Walden*. Thoreau himself is musical. He plays the flute and sometimes sings as he walks outdoors. He says in another context that which is still applicable here: 'Man's progress through nature should have an accompaniment of music. It relieves the scenery, which is seen through a subtler element, like a very clear morning air in autumn. Music wafts me through the clear, sultry valleys' (Thoreau 1906, VII: 316).

The dominant sound described in Chapter IV of *Walden* is that of the locomotive. It seems 'natural' in that its whistle sounds like the scream of a hawk. Yet the whistle's regularity – the farmers set their clocks by it – gives it away. The train is not natural, and Thoreau distrusts it. Its time is unlike the perfect time of the music box, the regular measure of which tells of 'its harmony with itself' (Thoreau 1906, VII: 316). The locomotive lacks this lofty harmony. Its sound does not come from God, and only its smoke *goes* to heaven – the cars are going to Boston. Thoreau therefore changes his image

from that of a hawk to that of a horse, the usual iron horse in this case. The horse, we know, has been trained to harness in order to perform hard, routine work. Thoreau admires the purposefulness of his horse-locomotive, but he is ambivalent about the sounds it emits. Its 'snort like thunder' and its 'blowing off the superfluous energy' (Thoreau 1906, II: 129, 130) seem heroic, while its 'freight' of sounds – bleating of calves and hustling of oxen – give one the sensation of a pastoral valley going by. But he knows that this machine is whirling away the once prevalent pastoral life, and he does not want his ears spoiled by its hissing. Better to 'thrust an avenging lance between the ribs of the bloated pest' (Thoreau 1906, II: 214), he says later in *Walden*.

Alongside the railroad running past Walden Pond is the telegraph line. From this invention of man Thoreau hears sounds with which he is in sympathy, for nature plays the tune. The wires humming in the wind are his aeolian harp. 'Thus I make my own use of the telegraph,' he says, 'without consulting the directors' (Thoreau 1906, VIII: 498). He listens directly to the humming of the wires, analysing the sound, noting that the loudest volume occurs near a post, where the wires are tautest. Or he applies his ear to the post itself and hears the hum 'within the entrails of the wood' (Thoreau 1906, IX: 11). Then it seems as if every pore of the wood is seasoned with music. He compares the sound to that of an organ in a cathedral. As with sight, the auditory sensation is also something he can feel, but here he need not speak metaphorically. The ground at his feet does vibrate: the latent music of the earth, he says, has found vent in the telegraph harp.

Thoreau is often intoxicated with purely natural sounds, such as bird songs. He makes special trips to various parts of Concord township to hear them – for example, the singing of warblers in Holden Swamp. But it is the strain of the wood thrush that prompts this outburst: 'I would be drunk, drunk, drunk, dead drunk to this world for it forever' (Thoreau 1906, XII: 39). It is, he says, a fountain of youth to all his senses and his favorite among bird songs. This accolade is noteworthy when we realize that the journal entries for most Aprils tend to be largely a record of his listening to the many spring birds.

As with his sense of sight, Thoreau in his hearing responds eagerly to 'coarser' stimuli. A rooster's crowing, he thinks, is 'the most remarkable of any bird's.' He imagines hearing this bird in its wild state, its call 'clear and shrill for miles over the resounding earth, drowning the feebler notes of other birds, – think of it!' (Thoreau 1906, II: 141). The cawing of a crow to him is 'delicious' (Thoreau 1906, XIII: 112), while the calling of a loon is so thrilling that he could lie awake for hours listening to it when camping in the Maine Woods. He thinks that the call of this loon is superior to one heard back in Concord because here the call's wildness is enhanced by the surrounding scenery.

How Thoreau's other senses are fed, we see, affects his auditory response, for he is not only hearing the bird's voice but sensing the 'voice' of nature as well. Thus when he hears the doleful notes of owls in his own native

Concord, he thinks the sound 'admirably suited to swamps and twilight woods' (Thoreau 1906, II: 139), for it expresses the meaning of nature then and there. He loves to hear their wailing. Nature itself is but a musical instrument, and the birds and other creatures only touch the stops. Its sounds are the language spoken without metaphor (Thoreau 1906, II: 123), a language which speaks directly to his sense of hearing. The sounds are pleasing in themselves, but because of their involvement with the whole of nature, they also have pleasing associations. A nuthatch's nasal call becomes 'the handle by which [his] thoughts [take] firmly hold on spring' (Thoreau 1906, XVIII: 15), for instance.

Other pleasing sounds to Thoreau come from animals other than birds and even from inanimate nature. He is refreshed by the barking of a dog at night (he likes to bathe his being in those waves of sound), and by the trump of bullfrogs, which he celebrates in *Walden* (only here it is the frogs amidst their Stygian chorus who appear to be the ones intoxicated). Insects, too, come in for their round of praise. A mosquito's hum affects him like a trumpet; it speaks of the world's vigor and fertility. The creaking of crickets particularly pleases him because he refers to it continually. He describes it as the most earthy, the most eternal, 'the very foundation of all sound' (Thoreau 1906, VIII: 306) – reminding him once more that heaven is here on earth. All the earth is vibrant with music, and Thoreau has shown us indeed his 'appetite for sound' (Thoreau 1906, XVI: 227).

Thoreau holds that the sense of smell is the most reliable of the senses. And there are odors enough in nature to remind him of everything even if he had no other senses. In spring all nature is a bouquet held to his nose, in fall a spray of fragrant dried herbs. He smells what he calls the 'general fragrance of the year' (Thoreau 1906, XIII: 361) and is almost afraid that he will trace the fragrance to one plant. Occasionally when he perceives a singular scent that he cannot identify, he walks about smelling each likely plant in an effort to find the source of the fragrance, while at the same time not neglecting the aroma of 'old acquaintances' (Thoreau 1906, XV: 5) which grow rankly nearby. Such a process leads him to the giant hyssop while in Minnesota. In Concord the process does fail once, with regard to a sweet new fragrance from a flooded grassland, but his satisfaction in trying to trace it to the wild grape, the eupatorium, and even the fresh grass is worthwhile in itself.

Thoreau is always on the trail of some scent, as his frequent hikes to Wheeler Meadow attest, and remembering all these fragrances is a balm to his mind. Whether he detects 'earthiness' (Thoreau 1906, X: 40) or a 'certain volatile and ethereal quality' (Thoreau 1906, V: 295), he feels refreshed and expanded. The scents that might be termed ethereal are those like the fragrance emitted by the wild apple blossom. Thoreau esteems this flower for its copious scent and notes that the resulting apples are 'worth more to scent your handkerchief with than any perfume which they sell in the shops' (Thoreau 1906, V: 295). He perceives that another fruit, the

wild grape, perfumes a river for a mile of its length, and he takes home bunches to scent his room. But it is the more pungent odors of nature that most intoxicate him. ('Intoxicate' is one of Thoreau's favorite words when he is describing how natural phenomena affect his senses.) The fragrance of evergreen woods he finds 'bracing' (Thoreau 1906, III: 17), and making up his bed while camping in Maine he spreads spruce boughs particularly thick about the shoulders the better to smell the scent. Another evergreen, a club moss, becomes his smelling bottle. He is constantly bruising plants to gratify his sense of smell: hickory buds for their spicy fragrance; sassafras for its odor of lemon; black-cherry leaves for their rummy scent; pennyroyal for its medicinal aroma. This last plant he stuffs into his pockets to scent him thoroughly.

Even the vile odor of skunk cabbage invigorates Thoreau: 'It is a reminiscence of immortality borne on the gale' (Thoreau 1906, VIII: 5). This belief, we find, is echoed in his eulogy to the dicksonia fern:

To my senses [it] has the most wild and primitive fragrance, quite unalloyed and untamable, such as no human institutions give out, – the early morning fragrance of the world, antediluvian, strength and hope imparting. They who scent it can never faint. It is ever a new and untried field where it grows, and only when we think original thoughts can we perceive it. (Thoreau 1906, XVIII: 349–50).

His response here is similar to what his ear tells him about the telegraph harp or what his eye says concerning the color red. All speak to the primal man, to his blood and nerves, because what they say antedates time. These sensations were already present when the world was a continuous morning and man was youthful and heroic. So, Thoreau believes, man can be again – in this case, if he smell the fern. His sense of smell will have proved 'oracular' (Thoreau 1906, X: 40), and the world will be new to him.

If Thoreau smells every plant that he picks, he also tastes every berry that he passes by. While Thoreau notes sensations of taste less often than those of the other senses, his occasional walking companion, Ellery Channing (1873), still concluded that Thoreau had an edible religion. What Channing probably had in mind was Thoreau's *devotion* to sampling through taste almost everything that grows, his *reverence* of this activity. When Thoreau is in the Maine woods, for example, he finds that the stem of a round-leaved orchis tastes like a cucumber. One gets the impression that he has already tasted the other parts of the plant as well. While there too he engages in digging up lily roots (which means a great deal of slow, grubbing work amidst hordes of mosquitoes) and reports that the roots raw taste like green corn. The white froth oozing from pitch pines, on the other hand, has no taste at all, he says. On another occasion he taps an oak in late October to see why this particular tree gets its autumn colors so late. He finds it full of sap and

immediately tastes it: 'It has a pleasantly astringent, acorn-like taste, this strong oak-wine' (Thoreau 1906, V: 282).

But Channing's statement is true in another way. Tasting (and eating and drinking) to Thoreau is religious if rightly conducted. By distinguishing the true savor of food and not being grossly concerned with the metabolic needs of the body (certainly Thoreau's position as he samples nature's variety), he is 'relate[d] ... to Nature, ma[d]e ... her guest and entitle[d] ... to her regard and protection' (Thoreau 1906, XI: 331). Nature takes on divinity, and eating becomes 'a sacrament, a method of communion, and ecstatic exercise' (Thoreau 1906, VII: 372). For this reason he can, as he says in *Walden*, be inspired through the palate. His edible religion transmutes what might ordinarily be sensuality into an inspiriting sensuousness. He writes in the *Journal*: 'After I had been eating ... simple, wholesome, ambrosial fruits on [a] hillside, I found my senses whetted, I was young again, and whether I stood or sat I was not the same creature' (Thoreau 1906, X: 219).

Most of what Thoreau drinks and eats may be termed simple and often ambrosial. For a drink, we discover in *Walden*, he prefers not a cup of coffee, which would dash the hopes of a morning, but rather water. Even of water that has not yet settled, the kind he is offered at John Field's shanty, he drinks a hearty draught, while 'excluding the motes with a skillfully directed undercurrent' (Thoreau 1906, II: 299). In *A Week* he tells of lying down flat in order to drink 'pure, cold springlike water' from horses' hoofprints (Thoreau 1906, I: 194). Again, as with his other senses, natural associations enhance his sensuous response. A more ambrosial drink for him is offered him while in the Maine woods, a 'beer' made from the sap of evergreens::

It was as if we sucked at the very teats of Nature's pine-clad bosom in these parts, – the sap of all Millinocket botany commingled, – the topmost, most fantastic, and spiciest sprays of the primitive wood, and whatever invigorating and stringent gum or essence it afforded steeped and dissolved in it, – a lumberer's drink, which would acclimate and naturalize a man at once, – which would make him see green, and, if he slept, dream that he heard the wind sigh among the pines. (Thoreau 1906, III: 30)

Here indeed is the tonic of wildness, spoken about in *Walden*.

With regard to food, Thoreau may be tempted to eat a wild animal (a woodchuck in *Walden*), but when he tries such tonic of wildness (some squirrels in *A Week*), he abandons it in disgust. He generally has a repugnance to the eating of meat because of what he calls its 'uncleanness' (Thoreau 1906, II: 237). Here it is not so much the actual taste he dislikes – when some strips of moose meat are wound on a stick and roasted over an open fire in the Maine woods, he pronounces the food 'very good' (Thoreau 1906, III: 317) – but the accompaniments of preparation, the skinning of the animal and cutting up of the meat. The soil and grease and gore are simply

offensive to him. But there is another reason why he finds flesh distasteful. When he speaks of the 'small red bodies' of the squirrels (Thoreau 1906, I: 237) and of the 'naked red carcass' of a moose (Thoreau 1906, III: 128), he is sensing that these animals, stripped of their outward guise of fur, are fellow creatures to him. As the human race improves, he says in *Walden*, it will stop eating animals as surely as savage tribes in their improvement leave off cannibalism.

Thoreau's greatest taste, then, is for vegetable food. He can get his tonic of wildness by eating wild fruit, the food he writes most about. Although he finds chokecherries to be scarcely edible, he enjoys the acrid-sweet savor of acorns and tastes sand cherries 'out of compliment to nature' (Thoreau 1906, II: 126). The acidic flavor of cranberries he terms a sauce to life that no wealth can buy. It is 'refreshing, cheering, encouraging' and sets one 'on edge for this world's experiences' (Thoreau 1906, X: 36). His favorite among the wild fruits seems to be the wild apple, to which he devotes a separate essay, 'Wild Apples.' It is an 'ovation' (Thoreau 1906, XIII: 526) to taste one. He prefers to eat it out of doors, for not only does its savor seem to be increased then but the other senses are fed too: '[It] must be eaten in the fields, when your system is all aglow with exercise, when the frosty weather nips your fingers, the wind rattles the bare boughs or rustles the few remaining leaves, and the jay is heard screaming around. . . . Some of these apples might be labeled, "To be eaten in the wind"' (Thoreau 1906, V: 312).

The wind to Thoreau is a velvet cushion he likes to lean against. His sense of touch, thermal or tactile sensations, can never be sated. If the frosty weather bites one cheek, he turns the other; when the sun shines upon him, he 'bathes' (Thoreau, XI: 38) in its warm presence. He prefers the warmth coming directly from the sun and not by way of radiation from the earth because it is direct contact for which he wishes. At night he wades through lakes of cold air that collect in a low pasture as one might wade in a lake of water. Wading through real water, he finds it 'delicious' to 'let [his] legs drink [the] air' (Thoreau 1906, XVI: 349). He responds joyously to the touch of water as well, complaining only that he cannot seem to get wet through as he wishes. To him bathing means sensuous luxury: 'To feel the wind blow on your body, the water flow on you and lave you, is a rare physical enjoyment' (Thoreau X: 207). The effect is heightened because he feels in touch with the rest of nature too: a muskrat uses the same 'tub,' and a leaping fish dimples the surface of his bath water.

Another satisfaction that stems from bathing is the sensation that must follow: Thoreau rejoices to be wet so that he might be dried. Thus when he comes to a river while out hiking, he walks through, is dried by the sun and wind on the other side, and continues on. He says he would like to take endwise the rivers in his walks. That way, apparently, he would prolong the sensation of being wet and his anticipation of becoming dry. 'Pray what were rivers made for?' (Thoreau 1906, X: 202) he asks with regard to bathing.

But he does find another use which gratifies his sense of touch – boating. He describes the sensation in his *Journal*: ‘The waves seem to leap and roll like porpoises, . . . and I feel an agreeable sense that I am swiftly gliding over and through them. It is pleasant, exhilarating, to feel the boat tossed up a little by them from time to time. Perhaps a wine-drinker would say it was like the effect of wine’ (Thoreau 1906, XIV, 317). In *A Week* he says that undulation is the most ideal motion – yet another phenomenon to become intoxicated about.

On land, the kinesthetic element of Thoreau’s sense of touch is emphasized. Not only does he perceive a kind of muscular movement in the earth, but he seems to participate in it. When he describes the earth in March as a great leopard lying out at length, ‘drying her lichen and moss spotted skin in the sun’ (Thoreau 1906, XVIII: 97), he suggests his own sensuous ease with the returning warm days. He does in fact describe this ‘skin’ as a fur rug spread to be reclined on. He could stroke this mossy sward, he says; ‘it is so fair’ (Thoreau 1906, XVIII: 97). There are other times when he *has* to stroke the sward, as it were, in order to find his way back to his hut at night. Then his feet feel the faint track he can not see while his hands feel the pine trees. This activity he describes as ‘pleasant’ (Thoreau, II: 187).

With regard to the vegetation covering the earth, Thoreau, in gratifying his sense of touch, actively seeks out sensuous experiences. His position now is somewhat different from being more-or-less passive when the wind blows at him or water washes over him. Direct contact means the constant handling of the plants he sees, smells, or tastes. He picks up acorns because they feel so glossy and plump. With wet and freezing fingers he feels amid the snow for the green radical leaves of the shepherd’s purse. Or he writes his name in the hoary bloom covering thimbleberry shoots. Such bloom, he observes elsewhere, like our finest qualities, can be preserved only with delicate handling.

Thoreau realizes that a sensuous approach to nature demands that all senses must ever perceive in a fresh manner. With regard to sight, he knows that the time of day and the season of the year in which he looks at a particular phenomenon affect his perception of it. By letting an interval pass before confronting again this same phenomenon, he perceives some slight change in it. He becomes intimately acquainted with it, discerns its uniqueness. Thus he examines some aspect of nature in fair weather and foul – or better yet, as he says in *The Maine Woods*, is there while the change in weather occurs. The terrestrial browns, he finds, become ‘*glowing*’ (Thoreau 1906, XVIII: 45) when it rains. He observes phenomena too under various conditions of light, noting the change in appearance. When he sees the grayish andromeda against the sun, for example, he discovers the shrub to be the ‘ripest, red imbrowned color’ and makes this note in his *Journal*: ‘Let me look again at a different hour of the day, and see if it is really so’ (Thoreau 1906, IX: 431). The seasonal changes are more striking, and even

though expected, can still be truly an eyeopener: he writes that Flint's Pond in winter, once it is covered with snow, is so wide and strange that he can think of nothing but Baffin's Bay.

A change in vantage point is another way of gaining a fresh perception. By elevating his view, Thoreau, in 'Autumnal Tints,' finds that the forest becomes a garden. When he notices that the Concord River appears dark looking upstream and silvery bright looking downstream, he writes another memorandum to himself: '*Mem.* Try this experiment again; i.e., look not toward nor from the sun but athwart this line' (Thoreau 1906, IX: 394–5). And at Walden he inverts his head and notices that the surface of the pond resembles the finest thread of gossamer. (Emerson previously wrote of this kind of experiment in the 'Idealism' section of his essay on *Nature* 1903, I: 4). Often his changes in perspective border on the infinitesimal. He says: 'It is only necessary to behold thus the least fact or phenomenon, however familiar, from a point a hair's breadth aside from our habitual path or routine, to be overcome, enchanted by its beauty' (Thoreau 1906, XIV: 44). By turning his head 'slightly' (Thoreau 1906, V: 262), he sees the foliage of a maple appear to be flurries of snow, stratified by a driving wind.

Thoreau may also look narrowly through his eyelashes to see the landscape as an Impressionist painter might, or he may look above the object in question and see, as he says, with the under part of his eye. With this latter technique a stubble field in the light of a setting winter sun appears brighter than usual. He thus gains a fresh impression with what he elsewhere calls a sauntering of the eye rather than by a looking directly at an object. Similarly, a reflection in the water presents him with a new picture because he seems to see from all those many points on the surface of the water from which objects are reflected. A certain oak, for instance, looks greenish-yellow standing before some woods. Its reflection, however, is black and is seen not against woods but a clear whitish sky. The water permits him to see the tree from below and at the same time alters the coloring. He tells us in another instance that he gains 'myriad eyes' (Thoreau 1906, VIII: 253), while the contrast of the actual scene with its 'rhyme' (Thoreau 1906, IX: 403) in the water enhances both scenes for him.

Echoes are to the ear what reflections are to the eye and assist the sense of hearing to perceive in a fresh manner as well. An echo presents Thoreau with a new sound since the original sound has been transcribed through 'woodland lungs' (Thoreau 1906, VIII: 81). Again he notes the contrast, this time between the original sound and the accompanying echoes. At a lake in the Maine woods he notices that the echoes of a loon's laugh one morning are actually louder than the bird's call. The bird, he discovers, happens to be in an opposite bay under a mountain, and the sounds reflect like light from a concave mirror. Thoreau's position makes him the focus. Other contrasts in sound leading to a new perception can be obtained deliberately. For example, he submerges his head under water and then raises it to hear again the same

sounds of nature but as if for the first time. Sometimes, he gains a fresh impression when he is not listening for any sound at all but has it break into his thoughts. This method may be termed a sauntering of his ear. As with sight, a fuller perception of a phenomenon occurs when he is outdoors to hear it at different times of day, at different times of year. At night, sounds seem amplified, because winds are usually calm; and in winter, sounds become clear and bell-like, having 'fewer impediments [in the landscape] to make them faint and ragged' (Thoreau 1906, V: 166).

As with sight and sound, so it is with Thoreau's other senses in trying to perceive in a fresh manner; he smells plants before and after a rain and in various stages of growth; he tastes wild apples in autumn and in winter after they have been frozen; he gauges the sun's warmth on his back during a winter walk and during a summer stroll. Each contrast amounts to a new sensation. He is always experimenting with his reception of sense data and thereby gratifying more richly each of his five senses.

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