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Of Muskrats and Men in WALDEN: Beyond the Consolation of Bravery

Because the following essay addresses questions raised in the "Notes and Queries" section of a recent issue of the Thoreau Society Bulletin, I begin by quoting the relevant portion of the query:

Professor Kuochien Liang of the National Taiwan Normal University, who is working on a new translation of Walden into Chinese, asks about the meaning of the sentence early in the first chapter which reads, "From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats." Why did Thoreau pick minks and muskrats? Are they notably brave? Or are they timid and Thoreau is being sarcastic?...¹

In a journal passage probably written during the spring or summer of 1845, Thoreau explicitly states the sort of bravery for which he thought muskrats notable.² Thoreau reports in this passage that he is glad to have George Melvin, the Concord trapper, confirm the story heard about minks and such animals gnawing off their limbs to be free of man's traps. Melvin tells Thoreau:

"Oh, the muskrats are the greatest fellows to gnaw their legs off. Why, I caught one once that had just gnawed his third leg off, this being the third time he had been trapped; and he lay dead by the trap, for he could n't run on one leg." [J, 1, p. 481]

Thoreau continues:

Such tragedies are enacted even in this sphere and along our peaceful streams, and dignify at least the hunter's trade. Only courage does anywhere prolong life, whether in man or beast....

These would be times that tried men's souls if men had

1. The Thoreau Society Bulletin, 170 (Winter 1985), p. 7.

2. I date this passage following the Princeton edition, JOURNAL Volume 2: 1842-1848 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984), p. 127. In this edition, "the strong will and the endeavor," which is quoted below in my text, is enclosed by quotation marks. The source cited in the annotations is Longfellow's poem "Seaweed," published in January of 1845. Since this is the latter of only two volumes of the Princeton edition of the journals currently available, for convenience I shall cite in this article the Dover edition, THE JOURNAL OF HENRY D. THOREAU, eds. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen New York Dover, 1962).

souls to be tried; aye, and the souls of brutes, for they must have souls as well as teeth. Even the water rats lead sleepless nights and live Achillean lives. There are the strong will and the endeavor. Man, even the hunter, naturally has sympathy with every brave effort, even in his game, to maintain the life it enjoys. The hunter regards with awe his game, and it becomes at last his medicine. [J, 1, pp. 481-82]

In the bravery of muskrats Thoreau found life lived literally near the bone. The tragedy of the scene apparently affected Thoreau deeply, for he was moved to write about it again on February 5, 1854:

Shall we not have sympathy with the muskrat which gnaws its third leg off, not as pitying its sufferings, but through our kindred mortality, appreciating its majestic pains and its heroic virtue? Are we not made its brothers by fate? For whom are psalms sung and mass said, if not for worthies as these? When I hear the church organ peal, or feel the trembling tones of the bass viol, I see in imagination the musquash gnawing off his leg, I offer up a note that his affliction may be sanctified to each and all of us. Prayer and praise fitly follow such exploits. I look round for majestic pains and pleasures. They have our sympathy, both in their joys and their pains. When I think of the tragedies which are constantly permitted in the course of all animal life, they make the plaintive strain of the universal harp which elevates us above the trivial. When I think of the muskrat gnawing off his leg it is as the plectrum on the harp or the bow upon the viol, drawing forth a majestic strain or psalm, which immeasurably dignifies our common fate. Even as the worthies of mankind are said to recommend human life having lived it, so I could not spare the example of the muskrat. [J, VI, pp. 98-99]

It is the muskrat's unwillingness to resign itself to a seemingly hopeless situation that chiefly impresses and inspires Thoreau. Though minks and water rats would gnaw off one, even two limbs, the muskrat would gnaw off three. In this brave effort Thoreau saw a creature affirming the value of its life, whatever the cost.

Possessing this bit of information, however, is no assurance that one has grasped the meaning of Thoreau's allusion to the bravery of minks and muskrats early in WALDEN, for the admiration and solemnity which characterize the journal passages seep through one's fingers as soon as one turns to the allusion in context:

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.³

According to J. Lyndon Shanley, this now short paragraph underwent substantial revision between the time of its original conception for inclusion in *A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS* and the final form quoted above.⁴ Although I do not wish to give a detailed account of the paragraph's metamorphosis here – desirable as that might be – two things are worth mentioning. First, the revised version Thoreau inserted in the fourth draft of *WALDEN* was more than twice the paragraph's present length, including as it did a tale about an organ-grinder who had traveled 250 desperate miles in search of work. Second, in the fourth draft of *WALDEN*, the first three sentences here quoted were the last sentences of the paragraph. Shanley asserts that Thoreau "sacrificed a vivid satiric anecdote because it was somewhat irrelevant and broke into his argument; he also completely reordered his argument to strengthen its force."⁵

Thoreau's reordering of the paragraph no doubt strengthens the force of the larger argument that is *WALDEN*, but it does so not by reordering an argument – for the paragraph is clearly not an argument – but by simplifying a much needed transition. Moreover, there are clues in the text of *WALDEN* which indicate that the tale itself was not irrelevant. In the paragraph immediately preceding the one quoted above, Thoreau writes: "What a man thinks of himself, that it is which determines, or rather indicates his fate" (*W*, p. 7). The tale of the organ-grinder illustrates this point, for Thoreau writes of him: "He thought that nobody wished to employ him, because he was conscious that he was unworthy to be employed, and did not respect himself."⁶ But the tale is relevant in an even more obvious way, for it comes as yet another example in the wake of examples of desperate men – men who have abandoned all hope, a fate which Thoreau considered "the greatest misfortune that can befall us."⁷

In incorporating the tale into the text of *WALDEN*, Thoreau inserted with it an inductively-drawn conclusion for the material which preceded it: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." If Thoreau felt that he had not provided sufficient evidence to make so bold a statement in *A WEEK*, he had no cause for concern in *WALDEN*. Moreover, what originally had been stated as a lesson drawn from the organ-grinder's life, with a bit of revision, comes to foreshadow Thoreau's approach to the problem of defining wisdom: It is by pointing out what wisdom is not that Thoreau gives us an idea of what it is in the paragraphs that immediately succeed this one. Here, Thoreau writes, "It is a characteristic of wisdom not to do *desperate* things [emphasis added]."⁸ Thus, what Thoreau initially added to the fourth draft was the material needed for a bracing transition between his observations on the way men squandered their time and the way he believed they might redeem their lives.

3. *WALDEN*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971). p. 8. Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.

4. J. Lyndon Shanley, *THE MAKING OF WALDEN* (1957; rpt. Chicago: U of Chicago P 1973). pp. 52–54. Early versions of the paragraph under discussion are also printed in Ronald Earl Clapper's dissertation *THE DEVELOPMENT OF WALDEN: A GENETIC TEXT* (Los Angeles: U of California, 1967), p. 59; and in Philip Van Doren Stern's *THE ANNOTATED WALDEN* (NY: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1970), pp. 150–51. Clapper prints the version incorporated into the fourth draft of *WALDEN*. My guess is that Stern prints the original version.

5. Shanley, p. 52.

6. Clapper, p. 59, and Stern, p. 151.

7. Shanley, p. 53.

8. In earlier versions, the sentence read: "It is the sum of all wisdom not to do desperate things." See Clapper, p. 59; Shanley, p. 54; Stern, p. 151.

Bearing this in mind, the final revisions may be viewed within the narrow limits of the paragraph itself, for once Thoreau took the last three sentences of his fourth draft as his starting point to conclude the foregoing argument, he did not need an illustration of yet another desperate creature. It was already there. To be compelled to gnaw off their own limbs, as minks and muskrats were, is surely a *desperate* thing. Having presented his readers with this vivid image first, Thoreau did not want for an illustration.

The result of these revisions –whatever his reasons may have been for making them– is that the lesson Thoreau drew from the now excised tale, namely, how uncharacteristic of wisdom desperation is and how undesirable for man, becomes the final strike in a flurry of blows. The tenuous connection, that is, the repetition of the single word *desperate*, between the bravery of minks and muskrats and this decisive stroke is clinched by the paragraph's compactness.

What Thoreau has only teasingly suggested by the allusion to the bravery of minks and muskrats early in the chapter "Economy" he subsequently develops metaphorically. In "Economy," he refers to personal inheritance and property first as fetters and baggage, then as traps, until at length the denotative though less familiar meaning of the word traps –personal belongings, in context– acquires the connotations of its more banal homonym.⁹ That Thoreau intended this transfer of meaning is suggested in the section on shelter in "Economy":

The farmer is endeavoring to solve the problem of a livelihood by a formula more complicated than the problem itself. To get his shoestrings he speculates in herds of cattle. With consummate skill he has set his trap with a hair spring to catch comfort and independence, and then, as he turned away, got his own leg into it. [W, p. 33]

But this meaning is even clearer in the section on furniture in "Economy," where the following passage, like the "mass of men" paragraph, was inserted in the fourth draft¹⁰:

It is the same as if all these traps were buckled to a man's belt, and he could not move over the rough country where our lines are cast without dragging them, dragging his trap. He was a lucky fox that left his tail in the trap. The muskrat will gnaw his third leg off to be free. No wonder man has lost his elasticity.... If I have got to drag my trap, I will take care that it be a light one and do not nip me in a vital part. But perchance it would be wisest never to put one's paw into it. [W, pp. 66-67]

Implicit in the comparison between muskrat and man is the observation that although both muskrat and man are driven by desire, at least the muskrat is not snared by his own traps. What is more significant, however, is the way Thoreau ends this paragraph, for he returns to his point that desperation, or rather being caught in a desperate situation, is a sign of ignorance. This restatement of what for Thoreau is a very

9. One is tempted to say that Thoreau was reviving a dead metaphor, but etymology will not bear this out.

10. Clapper, p. 137.

important point is similar to: "But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things." Having been driven to despair by his traps, man, like the muskrat, cannot regain his freedom without personal sacrifice of some kind.

If in the death of the muskrat which gnaws off its third leg Thoreau found the noble example of a creature that had suffered greatly for the sake of maintaining the life it enjoyed, in the death of muskrats at the hands of hunters Thoreau found less particularized evidence of "life [prevailing] in spite of all accidents" (J, XI, p. 423). For however many muskrats were killed in early spring, Thoreau would always see in winter their new cabins along the river. On October 15, 1859, he writes:

For thirty years I have annually observed, about this time or earlier, the freshly erected winter lodges of the musquash along the riverside, reminding us that, if we have no gypsies, we have a more indigenous race of furry, quadrupedal men maintaining their ground in our midst still. [J, XII, p. 389]

In his journal passages, Thoreau's empathy for the brave muskrat which gnaws off its third leg links him with the Preacher in *ECCLESIASTES*, who said, "for one who is counted among the living there is still hope: remember, a live dog is better than a dead lion."¹¹ But unlike the Preacher, Thoreau's response to the realization that death unites muskrats and men by a common fate is sympathy. Recorded in Thoreau's account of the "unipedal" muskrat's bravery is also its intrinsic ignorance of the cost. But this degree of ignorance Thoreau did not deem excusable in men. Thoreau envisions not only mankind prevailing in spite of all accidents, but Individual men maintaining their Integrity, that is, their wholeness, as far as is in their power, by being less victimized by time and chance. It is, in short, the quality of an individual's living experience that concerns Thoreau. In *WALDEN*, he wishes "to show at what a sacrifice this advantage [the survival of the race] is at present obtained, and to suggest that we may possibly so live as to secure all the advantage without suffering any of the disadvantages (W. p. 32) because, adverting again to *ECCLESIASTES*, "there is nothing good for man except to be happy and live the best life he can while he is alive" (*ECCL.* 3:12, emphases added). Through vigilance and right desire, Thoreau implies, a man might saunter on his own narrow path and, in doing so, avoid many a trap – and much sorrow. By alluding to the bravery of minks, but especially muskrats, Thoreau suggests that for a man not bravery alone but bravery tempered by wisdom prolongs life.

11. *ECCL.* 9:4 (New English Bible). Thoreau, incidentally, uses "a live dog is better than a dead lion" in the final chapter of *WALDEN*.