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541910 Marketing Research and Public Opinion Polling**People:** THOREAU, Henry David, 1817-1862**Abstract:** Looks at Henry David Thoreau's views on sexuality and gender identity as seen from the entries he made in a journal he kept while living in Walden. Challenge to the notion that sexual desire derives from the mere fact of gender difference; Longing for self-transcendence through the love of another man; Thoreau as a representation of self-reflexive desire.**Full Text Word Count:** 9653**ISSN:** 0275-1607**Accession Number:** 9706260118**Database:** Academic Search Premier**THOREAU'S BOTTOM**

We only see our anus in the mirror of narcissism, face to face, or rather back to front, with our own clean, private little person. -- Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*

How can that depth be fathomed where a man may see himself reflected? --Henry Thoreau, *Journal*

While living at Walden Thoreau wrote in his journal, "What the difference is between man and woman--that they should be so attracted to one another I never saw adequately stated." Adequately for what, he does not say. Does Thoreau simply mean that no one has ever paid enough tribute to the appealing mysteries of gender difference? He certainly recognized this rather pious construction, at least when he later extracted the sentence for an essay on love, which he gave to a friend as a wedding present (along with an essay on chastity which he seems to have thought equally appropriate to the occasion). In the context of the journal, however, Thoreau seems to have a very different emphasis in mind. "I love men with the same distinction that I love woman," he goes on to say, in a sentence dropped from the essay version, "--as if my friend were of some third sex."

The journal version challenges what the essay version pretends to celebrate: the notion that sexual desire derives from the mere fact of gender difference. Thoreau suggests that he has never seen an account of gender difference adequate to make what is now called heterosexuality its normative consequence ("that they should be so attracted to each other"). The emphasis is on the nice question of what makes a difference or

distinction sufficient to allow "love": "I love men with the same distinction that I love woman." Not quite with the same distinction, we might notice, since "woman" remains an abstract category here, given in the singular while "men" are plural. Thoreau's inconsistency on this point shows that "woman" is a kind of Other for him. But the same sentence shows that the othering of "woman" is not the only way that people can become erotic objects to him. Gender difference and erotic difference are, so to speak, different differences.

No doubt this way of putting it seems very abstract. But one of the remarkable things about the journal entry is that Thoreau seems to register the most abstract and formal oppositions--self/other. same/different--as immediate problems in his erotic life. He worries about their implications in the privacy of his journal, and considers himself bound to confront their discrepancy with other desires for which he has no dignifying language. In this language of self and other, sameness and difference, alternatives are difficult for Thoreau to conceive. Where gender difference and erotic difference are assumed to be equivalent, erotic relations among men would seem to be a sexuality of sameness. Any taxonomy of sex based on these terms will militate against him; so Thoreau asserts that men are others to him in a different way, distinct enough from self and sameness to be a "third sex." Unlike the third-sex theorists of the later nineteenth century, Thoreau does not think of himself as an exceptional or deviant case, but like them he is confronted with an intimate and apparently insuperable problem in the available logic for conceiving his desires.

Just as remarkably, when Thoreau senses that the judgment of what counts as same or as different also has the force of a judgment on the legitimacy of his desire, he would appear to anticipate matters by half a century. Most recent work on the history of sexuality has looked to the late nineteenth century as the period in which sexuality was recodified in Western culture. In the wake of sexology, "heterosexual" and "homosexual" then entered currency as ways of organizing sexual desire around difference and sameness. and as ways of classifying personal natures as normal or deviant That Thoreau struggles against such classifications long before sexology gave them their modern language suggests that such historians may have given too much credit to the power of merely lexical changes. The genealogy of the modern vocabulary of hetero/homo sexuality can be seen already in Thoreau's framing of the problem. What he struggles to prevent--the collapse of desire into the same/different-self/other language of gender difference--is exactly what has come to govern the discourse of sexuality.

It has always fallen to the "homosexual" to thematize the incoherence in this modern language of sexuality. The difficulty in doing so is great, since that incoherence--more precisely, as I will argue, a contradiction between liberal individualism and normative gender difference--has been presented to the homosexual not as a social contradiction, but as his or her private pathology. Compare the following example, closer to our own time:

Jim sat on the moss-covered bank while Bob undressed, throwing his clothes into a nearby tree. ... [Bob] stretched happily, flexing his long muscles and admiring himself in the green smooth water. Though slim, he was strongly built and Jim admired him without envy. When Bob talked of someone who had a good build, he invariably sounded envious; yet when Jim looked at Bob's body, he felt as if he were looking at an ideal brother, a twin, and he was content. ... Naked, he joined Bob at the water's edge. ... Then, suddenly, he was falling and there was a rush of water in his ears. Bob had pushed him in.

This brief but central episode in Gore Vidal's 1948 *The City and the Pillar* assumes the now-familiar oppositions of self and other, same and different. Self-transcendence is an erotic problem for Jim and Bob, and the scene leads them to an intimate climax in which each remedies the deficiencies of self in the other: "Now they were complete, each became the other, as their bodies collided with a primal violence, like to like."

Though only obliquely described, the climax also becomes recognizable as sodomy, to use the term that the novel's title both does and does not offer for it. In one way Vidal is being quite frank: the boys fuck. But it is never simple to say what this means, and the scene contains as many tensions as the title, ambiguously asking: which of these males desires what; whether the masculinity that makes them desirable to each other can consist with that desire whether and how it would be possible to have self-knowledge, much less mutual knowledge, about those desires; whether the boys' desires for themselves and each other can enter practice without risk and violence. The narrative subtext seems to be insisting on one of these questions especially, since Vidal's construction of the scene so resembles that of Narcissus admiring himself in the pond's reflection. Are the boys' desires a form of mutuality or are they the kind of self-reflective desire we call narcissism?

The climactic sentence insists that they are drawn to each other as "like to like." At the beginning of the passage, while Bob admires himself in the water's reflection with the self-absorption of Narcissus, the narrator seems to disapprove. Bob appreciates other men only with the self-reference of envy. But the description of Jim also refers to Narcissus: he desires Bob as an ideal double; he joins Bob looking into the reflective surface; and when Bob pushes him in the water Jim takes the place of Bob's reflective image. In that position he is for the first time witnessed by Bob with desire. The boys come to desire each other in different ways, but both do so by standing in for the other's self-image. The elaborate reimagination of the Narcissus story seems to be designed to suggest that both boys are acting out narcissistic desire. Mutuality or narcissism? -- the question, false though it may be, is further realized for the reader in point of view, as the narration takes on the highly confined, unself-knowing perspective of Jim as a kind of dramatic constraint.

By making such questions urgent and, at the same time, seemingly undecidable, the text places itself squarely in the modern discourse of homosexuality. *The City and the Pillar* is a homosexual novel, of the no-fats-or-femmes variety. It presents us not so much with the sodomite, nor the fairy, nor the gay man, but the homosexual per se, framing Jim's erotics as a sexuality of sameness. Jim desires Bob as "an ideal brother, a twin," and throughout the novel he will recall this imaginary moment as the standard against which to judge all of his sexual opportunities. From the moment that desire appears between the two characters, it is "homo" desire, a desire for the identical, a desire that always comes prepackaged with its derivation from narcissism.

One result is surprising: Jim's self-understanding must be a trifle too familiar to this bestselling book's mass audience. It is in fact difficult to distinguish from a heterosexual relation to normative masculinity. It appears, in the passage I have quoted, as an echo of Bob's self-admiration, a self-admiration which, after all, proves to be perfectly normal and evidently justifiable. Jim's desire also appears as the longing for his own self-ideals, in themselves only commendable for a modern boy. The book's point of view is that of someone who aspires to possess the ideal of youthful masculinity and who feels alienated from that ideal's intimate self-presence. Given the cultural power of that ideal, how could any reader altogether avoid having this point of view, if only momentarily?

To an audience that understands itself as heterosexual, especially but not only male, the novel exerts two contradictory pulls: one toward seeing Jim's desire as a form of everybody's experience of normative gender ideals, and one toward seeing Jim as, unbeknownst to himself, a homosexual. Bob and Jim admire the same ideal in themselves, and both admire its realization in Bob, making Jim's desire for Bob the narcissistic reflection in Jim of a narcissistic reflection in Bob. In the terms set up by the text, that is both its pathos and its pathology.

The very same scene, however, dramatizes the difference between Jim's desire and the pathologizing terms that make it intelligible. From the standpoint of etiology the boys' narcissistic and homoerotic desires are

parallel, and in the rhetoric of psychoanalysis the difference is negligible: insofar as Jim considers Bob to be an ideal twin, he really admires an ideal version of himself. But what is this "really"? The moment when Jim breaks the reflective plane of the water's surface is the beginning of sex rather than the fatal consummation of Narcissus's plunge into the pond. The drama of the scene renders a more than technical distinction between Bob's narcissistic desire and Jim's homosexual desire, and thus on a parallel and equally necessary reading they are explicitly contrasted.

The difference between Bob's desire and Jim's will also be the source of Jim's oppressive consciousness throughout the rest of the novel. Ultimately it motivates considerable violence between the two men, since Bob's self-admiration--far from being identical to Jim's desire--proves to be merely a dimension of his normalized and heterosexual self, realized by means of homophobia. The novel suggests that the two characters have taken different routes to their encounter: Bob through a self-admiration that remains heterosexual only insofar as it is envious, protected by a privilege of misrecognition; Jim through a desire that remains homosexual insofar as it appears to derive from a wished-for self-admiration but which is realized as an erotic other-admiration nevertheless. The entire novel unfolds within the disastrous incoherence of a pathologizing discourse that can explain neither the other-directed desire of the homosexual nor the self-directed desire of the heterosexual.

Thoreau inhabited the same dilemma, even though the discourse was not yet fully codified for him. When he says "I love men with the same distinction that I love woman--as if my friend were of some third sex," he takes for granted a self/other opposition as the point to be gained, stressing the difference between himself and the other man in order to make the seemingly obvious point that he and the other man are not the same--as though it were a point in danger of being forgotten.

And it was. At the time of Thoreau's writing, romantic eros was already being presented in a way that would rationalize it as an erotics of the Other, a necessary response to the deficiencies of the self. In *Philosophy of Right*, for example, Hegel declared that "love" could be defined as the experience of a problem: "The first moment in love is that I do not wish to be a self-subsistent and independent person and that, if I were, then I would feel defective and incomplete. The second moment is that I find myself in another person that I count for something in the other, while the other in turn comes to count for something in me. Love, therefore, is the most tremendous contradiction."

The contradiction, for Hegel, is that we both do and do not want to be independent persons. A really self-subsistent person would be defective because we have no position from which to imagine and appreciate our independence except the standpoint of another. In requiring that standpoint we compromise our self-subsistent unity, which we nevertheless seek to confirm through the other's eyes; you cannot be a self and have it too. The contradiction between these wishes appears in the realm of feeling, including the erotic, though Hegel has the manners to use the label "love." Love both propounds and resolves the contradictions of individual selfhood.

As an erotics of self and other, love in Hegel's sense might therefore be seen as adapting liberal individualism to a systematically gender-divided society. Unlike a complacently patriarchal erotics of unequal relations, Hegel's love treats people as individuals on a footing of reciprocity, while making a sharp distinction of otherness between them. To call it "heterosexuality" is therefore only partly anachronistic. In Hegel, sexuality has become hetero, though individuals have not yet come to distinguish themselves by having it, since there seems to be no other kind to have.

But Hegel can only make extant sexual relations fit this pattern by presupposing that the difference between self and other is a gender difference. His definition derives the experience of love from the dilemmas of an abstract self, not a gendered one. If the other is required only as another individual, the gender of the other should (in theory) be arbitrary. But he assumes that the outcome of a self/other erotics will be a male-female coupling. And he can only assume that outcome: in the very act of justifying official sexuality by appealing to a self/other opposition, Hegel has actually deprived it of any normatively gendered logic. His definition orients the discourse of sexuality to the self/other erotics of liberal individualism; but it also unwittingly shows why liberal individualism and systematic gender difference have always been in deep contradiction. The discourse of heterosexuality has never been able to resolve that contradiction--only to keep it from view.

Hegel's description of love has one great virtue for constructing a genealogy, of heterosexuality, since it was intended to be historically specific. He explicitly suggests that love as he defines it is one of the cultural forms of modernity. In the experience of love, as in the doctrine of Romanticism and the institutions of civil society, we act upon the "subjective principle of the modern world"--the basic postulate of "the right of the subject's particularity, his right to be satisfied, or in other words the right of subjective freedom." Without this socially sanctioned primacy of the self, the tension he describes would not be felt very acutely. Both sides of the contradiction experienced as "love" imply that an individual's whole-being is at stake in the question of his or her independence vis-a-vis the other.

Hegel's love therefore presupposes and extends a practice of imagining oneself as detached and autonomous, as for example in possessive individualism. To possess rights of property in oneself, as liberalism demands, is both to objectify a self and to transcend that object as its possessor; the possessive individual thus becomes the site of a contradiction. The same problem is further aggravated in other contexts of modernity and consumer capitalism where we trade on abstracted and ideal images of ourselves and our autonomy. Indeed, dominant culture in countless ways demands that we think of ourselves not as having a certain status or a certain body or a certain locale but simply as selves. There is a kind of capital to be made in doing so--or at least in seeming to do so, since finally it is neither possible nor desirable to be the selves we have.

In the second paragraph of *Walden*, Henry Thoreau describes a self/other dilemma as the horizon of knowledge, not only for him but for all persons, everywhere and throughout time: "In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well. Unfortunately, I am confined to this theme by the narrowness of my experience." What Thoreau describes here is a condition special to post-Enlightenment society: the domination of everyday life by a self/other problem. He assumes opposition between self and other that is not so much moral (don't be selfish) or religious (mortify the self) as phenomenological: "self" now stands for all he knows, perceives, and feels. Himself is both an object of knowledge and a limitation on knowledge, his "theme" and his "experience" of that theme. The irony in Thoreau's last sentence suggests that his experience therefore might be considered inexperience, since it is not experience of anything other than his experience. The other has become an inaccessible horizon because self includes all means of access to it. "History is the record of my experience," he writes in his journal. "I can read only my own story, never a syllable of another man's." No wonder he also thinks "It is a mangle world we live in--With this incessant dream of friendship and love where is any?"

Hegel saw no difficulty in answering that question: in the family. The very necessity of the family derives, in his view, from the contradictory nature of love. In the family founded on love the individual attains self-consciousness "not as an independent person but as a member." The wish not to be an independent person

and the wish to find one's independence confirmed in the eyes of another are both fulfilled. The family and, on a higher level, the national state become necessary to the degree that individuals cannot resolve in themselves the contradictions of self/other relations, which for Hegel are the distinctive problem of modern society. He lays great stress on the internal contradictions of this subjective principle because he wants to argue that the institutions of the family and the state are its historically necessary resolution. He does not see his passion for these institutions as a sign of stress in his own conceptualization of sexuality; he sees them as natural necessity. Existing relations between men and women—including the male-headed household, the objectification of women in normative femininity, and the generational narrativity of reproduction—have come to be understood as providing the self-transcendence of the modern (male) subject. Marriage itself becomes, in Hegel's phrase, "a contract to transcend the standpoint of contract." And insofar as the difference between the genders is thought to guarantee the mutual difference of self and other in love, that transcendence has been thought to have begun from the moment that the erotics of self/other relations were assumed to be heterosexual.

Hegel thus forms a telling contrast to Thoreau, the unparented bachelor of Walden, self-disaffiliated citizen of "Civil Disobedience," and champion spokesmodel for the liberal individual. Thoreau virtually embodies the principle of "voluntary association" that places the individual self at the source of civil society: "Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined." More than anyone else before or since, he gives voice to the subjective principle of modern society. Like Hegel, he believes that this principle results in an intensely felt contradiction between the need to count for another and the desire to be an independent individual. Like Hegel, he finds the contradiction most fully realized in erotic relations. But unlike Hegel, Thoreau rejects the claims of the heterosexual family and the national state as resolving the crises of the individual. He commits himself fully to the subjective and erotic contradictions of modernity that Hegel seeks to sublimate, even to the point of rejecting the claims of that other great engine of modern self-transcendence, objective science. "There is no such thing as pure objective observation," he writes in a journal devoted almost entirely to natural observation. "Your observation, to be interesting, i.e., to be significant, must be subjective."

With this unflagging emphasis on the subjective principle of modernity, Thoreau encourages his readers to think of themselves as having selves in such an encompassing way that their very experience of the world becomes part of the selves proper to themselves. He thus calls his readers to undergo a crisis to which heterosexual romance was already being offered as the natural solution. But he does not offer that solution. Erotic desire promises the self-transcendence of subjective experience, but Thoreau does not find the promise fulfilled, either in official sexuality or in other existing social relations. "Intercourse with men!" he exclaims in another journal entry. "How little it amounts to! How rarely we love them!" Loving men and being loved by them -- and Thoreau means "men"-- define the telos of personhood and social interaction, but remain unrealized possibilities.

Throughout his life, while developing an extreme version of liberal individualism in his published writings, Thoreau repeatedly expressed a longing for self-transcendence through the love of another man. Yet the available language of sexuality allowed him neither to legitimate that longing nor even to describe it except as an abstract longing, disjunct from practice and from the body. He frequently gave vent in the journal to a sense of frustration at the articulate or anticipatory nature of his desire, which projected an imaginable resolution. "How happens it that I find myself making such an enormous demand on men and so constantly disappointed? ... Is not my silent expectation an invitation, an offer, an opportunity offered? ... And how far from love still are even pretty intimate friends!" Or again, "What if we feel a yearning to which no breast answers? I walk alone. My heart is full. Feelings impede the current of my thoughts. I knock on the earth for my friend. I expect to meet

him at every turn; but no friend appears, and perhaps none is dreaming of me." Thoreau does not simply confess to loneliness here. He asserts that he feels, as Hegel puts it, defective and incomplete without the other. Just as he thinks of the journal itself as a means to self-recognition through a reflexive attention to the world, so also the other man is both an object and someone who can recognize him: "perhaps none is dreaming of me."

But Thoreau wants something more than to be recognized. He wants to be dreamed about. So it would be a mistake to sanitize such passages by thinking that they refer only to homosocial friendship. They are couched in a mundane vocabulary, but Thoreau uses "friend" and "lover" interchangeably, usually referring to someone who is only imagined, anticipated, or abstracted from various men about him. And other men become erotic objects to him easily enough. Like Vidal's Jim, he witnesses the self-admiration of normative masculinity with an intimate pleasure. Some of his earliest journal entries speak of "young buds of manhood in the streets." "this succulent [sic] and rank-growing slip of manhood," "some rare specimen of manhood," or "a handsome younger man --a sailor like Greek like man." These phrases to a scandalous degree turn males into objects. At the same time, they describe objects that Thoreau himself would not scorn to become. In most of the entries the males he admires are already idealized; he admires them as embodiments of "manhood." Even when he hides behind some willow trees at the swimming hole in order to watch boys swim carefully describing their skin for his journal, he adds that their nakedness foreshadows "man in nature" "They are both objects and versions of self-ideals.

One might even say that they are objects because they are self-ideals. If our culture always offers us ideal images for ourselves--the way Jim apprehends Bob's masculinity, for example--how can it prevent us from taking them for what they also are: images of others? What is nominally a gap between ideal and actual is experienced as a gap between other and self, and that gap then can neither be reduced to nor separated from a self-relation. It has entered the contradictory realm of "love." The friend or lover Thoreau desires will be "as much better than my-self as my aspiration is beyond my attainment." Thus while the male friend embodies Thoreau's self-ideals, he is by that very fact distinguished as other. And it is the recognition of the other's otherness, his right to subjectivity, that makes Thoreau's relation to him more than appreciative or envious, since the other man provides recognition of Thoreau's ideal self as well: "Thou hast loved me," he exclaims in the privacy of his journal, "for what I was not--but for what I aspired to be." In these moments of desire, a self/other opposition becomes an unstable antinomy. By dint of his very insistence on the integration and autonomy of "self," Thoreau divides himself from an ideal self. Self is an object to itself, even another self, rather than an experiential unity. "May I be to myself as one is to me whom I love," he says, "a dear and cherished object."

These passages make it easy to see why Perry Miller considered Thoreau narcissistic. But this desirous self-division, far from being what separates Thoreau from the official sexuality of liberal culture, is what he shares with it. As a relation to others it is neither more nor less simple, neither more nor less contradictory than the structure of heterosexual romance. Ideally, according to the logic of official liberal sexuality, erotic life is a relation in which a single self desires an object which is other to it. Self and its object-other encounter each other as distinct integers, and the binarism of gender ensures that they stay that way. But that is only the official narrative. As was already clear to Hegel--not to mention latter-day Hegelians such as Lacan--the longing for the self-object is a driving motivation in heterosexual romance at the very moment where self and other are nominally opposed.

Heterosexual romance relies on a misrecognition to cover over this reflexive self-division: it interprets gender difference as a sign of the irreducible phenomenological difference between persons. Women and men at

present can be counted on to have different histories, different relations to power, different rights of access to their own bodies, even different rights of access to thinking of themselves as selves or as objects. In the legitimating structure of heterosexuality these systematic inequalities and relations of power are interpreted as mere difference, reassuring individuals that in desiring the other they are not desiring themselves. Though he was anything but critical about the power relations of gender, Thoreau did not adopt the protective misrecognitions that constitute heterosexuality. As a result, the self-erotics of the liberal individual was left visible--both for us and for himself.

Without those misrecognitions, however, he can only stress what appear to him to be paradoxes, since the prevailing discourse of gender and sexuality persistently implies that relations among men must be redundant, a relation of sameness. He speaks of two men as being "so one and single" that they think common thoughts "as one mind," while going on to say that "they will at the same time be so two and double, that each will be to the other as admirable and as inaccessible as a star." The buried image of the mirror becomes virtually explicit when he concludes the same passage, "So only shall we see the light of our own countenances." In 1840 he wrote. "I would live henceforth with some gentle soul such a life as may be conceived--double for variety, single for harmony." A year later he speaks of the male lover/friends as "not two united, but rather one divided"; a year later still they are "those twain who feel their interests to be one. ... All beauty--all music--all delight springs from apparent dualism--but real unity. I see his nature groping yonder so like mine--Does there go one whom I know then I go there." These entries obsessively circle around self and other as structuring terms, but only to disavow their coherent opposition. They stress the sameness of the other, and therefore operate both within and against the language of liberal erotics.

As Thoreau treats the terms, other is as much self as self is other: "I only know myself as a human entity, the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections, and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me which, as it were is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it, and that is no more I than it is you." This passage, later copied into *Walden*, has the tone of a lament, but the internal division it describes could also be thought of as critical self-consciousness. Such self-dividing criticism is normative for modernity, and Thoreau preached its necessity as much as anyone: his two major works are, after all, a journal and a kind of autobiography. When he says his critical self is "no more I than it is you," he is speaking to himself. He makes an odd spokesman for modernity, then, because he only imagines self-consciousness as being anything other than painful division when it is mediated through another--even if the other is nature. The mediating relation that results, however, is understood as mirroring rather than as mediating.

Mirror imagery fascinates Thoreau because he never fails to notice that in desiring another he also desires an ideal relation to himself. But he also never tires of explaining to himself, as though anticipating an emergent language of pathology, that in a relation with another he desires both otherness and self. "When I meet a person unlike me, I find myself wholly in the unlikeness. In what I am unlike others, in that I am." Thoreau emphasizes "wholly" because it is a typically paradoxical pun: as the other's other he finds himself whole, where as an unrelated whole he felt defective and incomplete. "We do not want the double of ourselves--but the complement rather. ... After the longest earthly period he will still be in apogee to me." Or again, "It is not a chamber of mirrors which reflect me. When I reflect, I find that there is other than me."

Thoreau represents a self-reflexive desire so consistently that he seems to think it accounts for every instinctual throb in Concord. That is not what I am proposing. We might think of Thoreau's scene of reflective desire as an organizing problematic through which the dispersed erotics of the body come to be centralized as



a sexuality of self/other relations. Not all erotic desires must have their source in self/other relations in order for them to be understood as though they do. Thoreau had, for example, an intense erotic investment in hearing that does not require him to thematize any particular relation to others or to a self. "Transport, rapture, ravishment, ecstasy. These are the words I want. This is the effect of music." Often sound represents an occasion for self-dissolution. "I would be drunk, drunk, drunk, dead drunk to this world with it forever. ... The contact of sound . . . is coincident with an ecstasy." Like many other intense pleasures that Thoreau describes, his ecstasy over musical sounds reminds us that an increasingly official liberal sexuality, with its self/other logic of "love," does not exhaust the possibilities of the erotic. Yet Thoreau's pleasure in hearing may be an exception that proves the rule, showing how an apparently unrelated pleasure can get incorporated in the self/other structure of liberal erotics: he finds dozens of occasions, not only in the journal but in *Walden* and *A Week*, to frame the erotics of sound as self-reflective. No sound excites him so much as an echo. "All melody is a sweet echo" he claims. "I should think that savages would have made a god of echo."

Thoreau knew that the Greeks, if not exactly the "savages," had a mythology of Echo. While surveying in 1853, he found an echo that especially thrilled him, and in a long journal entry described it as the most memorable event of the day: "After so many days of comparatively insignificant drudgery with stupid companions, this leisure, this sportiveness, this generosity in nature, sympathizing with the better part of me; somebody I could talk with,—one degree, at least, better than talking with one's self. Ah! Simon Brown's premises harbor a hired man and a hired maid he wots not of." The hired maid in the last sentence is of course Echo. But who is the hired man that Echo speaks to: Thoreau himself, or Narcissus? Thoreau seems to have no shame about identifying with Narcissus. "There needs some actual doubleness like this in nature," he writes in the same entry. "Under such favorable auspices I could converse with myself, could reflect."

With the pun on "reflect" Thoreau links pleasure in contemplating his image to the reflective self-consciousness of the modern individual. It may be his favorite pun. "Our minds should echo at least as many times as a Mammoth Cave to every musical sound" he writes elsewhere. "It should awaken reflections in us." Even more than echoes, reflective surfaces of water occasion the same pun. While watching reflections, he says, "My thoughts are driven inward, even as clouds and trees are reflected in the still, smooth water." He even goes so far as to say that the pun describes a causal link: "Most men, as farmers, hunters, fishers, etc., walk along a river's bank, or paddle along its stream, without seeing the reflections. Their minds are not abstracted from the surface, from surfaces generally. It is only a reflecting mind that sees reflections." These passages introduce the themes Thoreau is famous for: pleasure in self-contemplation and nature, scorn for the unreflective self of custom and tradition. In a strikingly literal way they interpret the normative self-consciousness of modernity and liberalism as the erotic scene of Narcissus. "What signifies the beauty of nature when men are base? We walk to lakes to see our serenity reflected in them."

As Thoreau explains things, we (we men, he means) walk to see other men for the same reason. He makes the connection himself when he anthropomorphizes the surface, speaking of "this faint reflection this dim watery eye," or writing that "the reflection has the force of a great silent companion." Though his trancelike pleasure in echoes or reflections may be in some ways different from his erotic attachments to other men, Thoreau often links them as ways of imaging an ideal self and its ambiguous relation to the other. Because of that connection, journal passages about reflections take on the charge of erotic ecstasy, and on the topic of natural reflections Thoreau carries out his most extended meditations on sexuality.

The lakes and rivers acquire a glassy stillness, reflecting the skies, the reflex of the day. I too am at the top of my condition for perceiving beauty. ... The attractive point is that line where the water meets the land, not distinct, but known to exist. The willows are not the less interesting because of their nakedness below. ... The

water, indeed, reflects heaven because my mind does. ... With what sober joy I stand to let the water drip from me and feel my fresh vigor, who have been bathing in the same tub which the muskrat uses! ... Think of a mirror on so large a scale! . . . if [only] men were social in a high and rare sense.

Thoreau represents himself as both ecstatic and self-conscious. He stands naked and dripping in the August evening in order to feel not just his skin or the air but his "fresh vigor." He sees in the reflective water not just images of nature, but images of his own reflective mind. All of nature becomes a mirror. The reflections of nature enable him to imagine an unalienated self-contemplation, which he also imagines when he speaks of men being social in a high and rare sense. High and rare indeed. Thoreau was so heavily invested in the erotic idealizations of reflective surfaces that once when a breeze disturbed the water the effect was ruined for him, he claimed, "as if some water nymph had written 'slut' with her finger there."

"Slut"? Why would a slight imperfection in a reflective surface-suggest to him a cheap feminine sexual abandon? He makes the same association elsewhere. "Reflection enchants us, just as an echo does," he says in one sentence before going on in the next to say: "I must make my life more moral, more pure and innocent . . . I must not live loosely, but more and more continently." Reflection seems to be a kind of continence; it confirms the self's boundaries under an ascetic inspection. Perhaps because the mirroring of the other has been construed as the means of perceiving the self's autonomy and integrity, any loss of that mirroring would threaten a capitulation to the other, a sacrifice of the boundedness of the self. And that sacrifice could easily be understood as the body's surrender. Indeed, insofar as Thoreau wants an ideal image of self, his actual body becomes a problem. "The whole duty of man may be expressed in one line--Make to yourself a perfect body." But the body does not cooperate with its perfection. Its materiality, its actualness, is the concrete resistance to his ideal self-recognition and therefore becomes the site of his disintegration as "self." "I must confess there is nothing so strange to me as my own body--I love any other piece of nature, almost, better."

Reflections always "enchant," "charm," and "attract" Thoreau, but they also bring up powerful anxieties. In order to eroticize men who represent an ideal masculinity, Thoreau has to acknowledge his alienation from that ideal, the desperation of the actual body brought face to face with its perfection. Like Vidal's Jim he momentarily finds himself in what is thought of as a "feminized" relation to the other man, though unlike the later Vidal Thoreau never carries this "feminization" through to an identification with women. "I seek a man who will appeal to me when I am in fault -- We will treat as gods settling the affairs of men. -- In his intercourse I shall be always a god today, who was a man yesterday. He will never confound me with my guilt--but let me be immaculate, and hold up my skirts."

What is beneath his skirts? A body that has become, for the moment at least, neither himself nor the phenomenological world of the self but an object for the eyes of another. The other's desire allows the self-apprehension of his own concrete finitude. Allowing himself to be objectified in this way, he attains a self-recognition that is more than a recognition of "self" -- it is a recognition of the body. For although Thoreau often speaks abstractly about his "value," his "regard" or "respect" for himself, his "fault" or "guilt," all of his images for a whole self are founded on the image of a whole body. "In the presence of my friend I am ashamed of my fingers and toes. I have no feature so fair as my love for him. There is a more than maiden modesty between us. I find myself more simple and sincere than in my most private moment to myself. I am literally true with a witness." In saying this Thoreau implies not only that he depends on erotic relations with another to complete his self-consciousness, but that the other must be a witness to his body, his nakedness, with his skirts held up.

But only a witness. Sexuality itself, practiced through the material body, would seem to violate the immaculacy Thoreau admires in himself. In Perry Miller's words, his desire for other men seems to be "a hunger which

dreads satisfaction." But what exactly would satisfaction be? Thoreau may represent his desired relation to the other man in part as a "homo" relation, but he cannot imagine a sexual practice appropriate to this desire. The practices of sex among men were, we might remember, still codified in languages very different from that of a liberal self/other antinomy. Thoreau could be expected to know the classical discourse of erotic pedagogy or the Christian discourse of sodomy, but neither of those discourses describes relations of sameness and mutuality. They both describe significantly unequal relations between essentially dissimilar men. By the time of Vidal's *City and the Pillar* a discourse of sexuality on the model of ideal self-other relations was already in place, even in the standard language of soft-porn romance; but for Thoreau any representation of the corporeal practices of "homo" sexuality--an erotics of sameness and difference among men--had to be imagined by displacement.

In Thoreau we find that displaced sexual imagination just where we might expect to find it: immediately below the surface. "Cheering, that water with its reflections. ... It is an azure spot, an elysian feature, in your cold companion, making the imagined concealed depths seem deeper and rarer." As usual, he equates the pond with a man, speculating on the mysterious allure of his "concealed depths." For every passage about the attraction of seeing himself reflected in the water's surface, there is another passage about the lure of penetrating that surface to the bottom beneath it. He goes to the river for "its dark water resting on invisible mud, and for its reflections," and his ardent desire to see himself reflected only intensifies the desire to fathom that invisible bottom. "How can that depth be fathomed where a man may see himself reflected?" It is not simply a rhetorical question. While the reflective surface represents self-integration in the other's desire, fathoming becomes a metaphor for contact with the other. Thoreau suggests that these are incompatible, that only the reflection of the surface makes the depth interesting, making it at the same time "imagined," "concealed," "invisible." These contradictory wishes dominate one of Walden's most celebrated passages.

As I was desirous to recover the long lost bottom of Walden Pond, I surveyed it carefully. ... There have been many stories told about the bottom, or rather no bottom, of this pond. which certainly had no foundation for themselves. It is remarkable how long men will believe in the bottomlessness of a pond without taking the trouble to sound it. I can assure my reader, that Walden has a reasonably tight bottom at a not unreasonable, though at an unusual, depth. I fathomed it easily. ... This is a remarkable depth for so small an area; yet not an inch of it can be spared by the imagination. ... I am thankful that this pond was made deep and pure for a symbol. While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be bottomless.

The passage is celebrated in part for its inconsistency. Thoreau mocks the idea of bottomlessness by means of the simple empiricism of sounding. But he then reverses himself to assert the necessity of imagining that the pond is bottomless. Fathom, he instructs us, and don't fathom. "The shallowest water is unfathomed," he wrote while still at the pond; "wherever a boat can float--there is more than Atlantic depth."

The entire reflective/penetrative thematic of bottoms (or no bottoms) ostensibly serves as a metaphor for the imagined and the real, self and other. But it also carries the displaced interest in the bottoms or no bottoms of other men. In Walden, there is one other thing that Thoreau wants to "sound" besides the pond: Alek Therien, the Homeric woodchopper to whom he translates a passage about Achilles and Patroclus from the *Iliad*. "I loved to sound him," Thoreau says. While at Walden, moreover, he wrote in his journal about sounding another man in general: "You only to know how his shores trend & the character of the adjacent country to know his depth and concealed bottom." About the other man's concealed bottom Thoreau, like Canon Chasuble, speaks metaphorically.

When he transcribed the same passage into *Walden*, he inserted it just after the passage about sounding *Walden's* concealed bottom. He made the metaphor of the other man's body explicit, and again with a reference to Achilles:

What I have observed of the pond is no less true in ethics ... we need only to know how [a man's] shores trend and his adjacent country or circumstances, to infer his depth and concealed bottom. If he is surrounded by mountainous circumstances, an Achillean shore, whose peaks overshadow and are reflected in his bosom, they suggest a corresponding depth in him. ... In our bodies, a bold projecting brow falls off to and indicates a corresponding depth of thought. Also there is a bar across the entrance of our every cove, or particular inclination: each is our harbor for a season, in which we are detained and partially landlocked.

All the language of character depth remains linked, even on the literal phrenological level, to the "depth" of the body. And the body's depth refers not simply to its visible measurements, but its interior, perhaps even its barred coves. In the journal version significantly, it is "his" cove--not "ours"--that is barred. Compare *A Week's* use of the same navigational metaphor to describe the longing for another man: "But who would not sail through mutiny and storm, even over Atlantic waves, to reach the fabulous shores of some continent man?" In an earlier journal entry he complains that the friend "sails all lonely" on the water, "But never does he fairly come to anchor in my harbor."

In the fall of 1846, while writing the first draft of *Walden* Thoreau made a journal record of a boat trip with a "young and ingenuous" waterman named Tom Fowler, who appears, shirtless, as a minor character in "Ktaadn." Thoreau is charmed by Fowler, who has "that indolent but mild and mellow expression of those who had had much intercourse with rude nature--The noble frankness [sic] of a forest child--The lake How deep is it!" Thoreau makes the transition exactly, as I have reproduced it, without so much as a period between the description of Tom and the inquiry into the depth of the lake. What the reader soon discovers, however, is that the journal account has already turned into a record of an exchange with Tom. "The lake How deep is it!" is, in other words, the first line of a dialogue; it is a question that Thoreau has posed to him. "I should like to see the bottom of this lake," says Henry. "You have curious notions," says Tom. Both the exchange and its setting seem to have made an impression: "Tom and I lolling in the bow," he muses "discoursed philosophy across this fair lake." At the end of the anecdote, he unexpectedly copies some lines from Thomas Heywood:

I for my part  
(think others what they please) accept that heart,  
Which courts my love in most familiar phrase;  
And that it takes not from my pains or praise,  
If any one to me so bluntly come:  
I hold he loves me best that calls me Tom.

The entry is an exception to Thoreau's habit of referring to other men only as "my friend": through Heywood's verse, he bluntly calls the waterman Tom. He also interprets his doing so as an already accepted gesture of courtship, a proof that Tom merely waits for one who will "bluntly come." Though ventriloquized and oblique, it is a rare moment of wishful frankness. But it remains wishful, apparently followed up only by the experiment of sounding the pond once back at *Walden*.

Despite the displacement of topic, much of the language about sounding ponds is frankly penetrative. *Walden Pond* offers a good foundation though you must "build on piles of your own driving." Earlier in the chapter that describes sounding the pond, Thoreau describes the appeal of one of the "wild men" ice-fishing there: "you look into his pail with wonder as into a summer pond. ... His life itself passes deeper in Nature than the studies of the naturalist penetrate; himself a subject for the naturalist." Here again penetration is a metaphor for knowledge--both knowledge of nature and knowledge of the fisherman--as it is when he laments in "Where I

Lived and What I Lived For" that "our vision does not penetrate the surface of things." In that chapter as well, the metaphor is extended into a famous passage about mucky bottoms where once again one of the subtexts is the bottom of a man:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin, having a point d'appui. ...

This "hard bottom," like the "reasonably tight bottom" of Walden, Pond, is also Alek Therich's. Thoreau tells us that he once asked Therich whether he was satisfied with himself. In the journal version he explains, "I was trying to get a point d'appui within him." In transcribing the same anecdote into Walden, he simply shifted the phrase from Therien's insides to the hard bottom of reality. In Walden he concludes the passage by saying that, like the ice-fishing wild men, Therien is one of those "who take their own view always, or do not pretend to see at all; who are as bottomless even as Walden Pond was thought to be, though they may be dark and muddy."

The bottoms of such men, then, may not be so hard and tight after all. In the "Conclusion" to Walden, yet another anecdote about bottoms suggests that they may all be mucky: "There is a solid bottom every where. We read that the traveller asked the boy if the swamp before him had a hard bottom. The boy replied that it had But presently, the traveller's horse sank in up to the girths, and he observed to the boy, 'I thought you said that this bog had a hard bottom.' 'So it has,' answered the latter, 'but you have not got half way to it yet.'" As Walter Michaels has pointed out, the story tends to undercut its ostensible moral--that there is a solid bottom everywhere. It also tends to resonate with all the other passages in which the attempt to fathom the other in reality brings one into contact with mud, slush, slime, swamp rot, and muck. When Clematis Pond began to dry up in July of 1852, Thoreau described the "bottom, now for the most part exposed," as "virgin mud, soft and moist ... an invigorating sight." Whatever else it is about, all this talk of bottoms and their virginity is also about an "invigorating" anality. In their muckiness as in their penetrability the bottoms of these passages derive their interest in part by standing in for the anus. The notion of having contact with other men--of penetrating and fathoming them, of harboring in their barred coves and sounding their depths, of driving piles in their foundations and finding a point d'appui within them--has been imagined by means of a fantasy investment in the anus as an organ of privacy.

Anality also supplies Thoreau's metaphors for self-dissolution, as in the famous passage about the "fecal" and "excrementitious" and bank whose "exhilarating" ooze prompts him to ask: "What is man but a mass of thawing clay?" But here, in the context of the reflective ponds and privative and penetrative relations with other men, it is the anus of the other that does or does not lie open to him, that does or does not enforce the other's privacy. The anus becomes the scene of a fantasy language that makes it a barrier as well as a threshold.

A number of related but different pressures come to bear on the fantasy-bottom. Because of the way self has been phenomeno-logically broadened, the possibility of shared subjectivity seems doubtful. The anus of the other can therefore represent a barrier against that possibility, an organ that regulates the other's integrity. Meanwhile, because self is construed as a possession, a necessarily private right, such a barrier seems to its possessors more desirable than ever. It becomes not just another of the body's functions but an example and metaphor of self-possession. But insofar as self must be recognized to be valued, the privacy of that barrier seems inhibiting, and the desire for shared subjectivity invites its transgression. In a not merely metaphoric sense, the anus is a key scene for these competing wishes because the body is the site and image for the

self's integration and its boundary problems. Under such conditions, the organ that makes the body "continent," to use one of Thoreau's favorite words, becomes the site of the warring imperatives of self and other. It acquires a new fantasy investment, a new organization. Sodomy would never be the same.

Once, after reading the Persian poet Sadi, Thoreau launched upon a rapture about his own self-transcendence and Sadi's bowels, showing exactly, what dilemmas are invested in the continence of another man's body' "Sadi entertained once identically the same thought that I do, and thereafter I can find no essential difference between Sadi and myself. ... Sadi possessed no greater privacy or individuality than is thrown open to me. ... If Sadi were to come back to claim a personal identity with the historical Sadi, he would find there were too many of us; he could not get a skin that would contain us all. ... By sympathy with Sadi I have embowelled him."

Thoreau goes beyond saying that he has understood Sadi. He takes up a question of "privacy" and "individuality," imagined in the language of invaded bodies. Sympathy with another man commonly suggests to him the archaic metaphor of bowels as the seat of compassion. Often he repudiates the "bowels" of other men as showing a kind of softness -- a "slimy benignity," as he puts it in one especially lurid journal entry. But he does not always recoil from those bowels. In this case the idea of being in Sadi's bowels represents the transcendence of the phenomenological limitations of self. But it also allows him to continue thinking of self as continent, since it is now contained by Sadi's body, even if it will rupture his skin. Like the metaphors of reflection and sounding, the emboweling of Sadi is a fantasy of the mutual continence and penetration of self and other. It seeks both to confirm and to erase a boundary between self and other. More importantly, it links these paradigmatically liberal problems of self-possession and mutuality to an imaginary experience of the body. Though not itself manifestly erotic, therefore, the emboweling of Sadi offers a glimpse into the fantasy life of liberal discourse.

We commonly forget--perhaps because we ourselves remain under the reign of liberalism and its abstracted individual--that political systems are always inhabited by the body. But without a linkage with private desires and self-imaginings they could find no place in the lives of individual subjects. It is especially important to remember this in the historical present, as so many voices merely celebrate the post-cold war global triumph of liberalism. From Thoreau's day to the present liberalism has lacked control over its own fantasy life, which it cannot finally subordinate to extant social relations and structures of sexuality. Between its moments of incoherence it produces a desire to have done with itself, a longing for relations no longer governed by oppositions either of same and different or self and other, a longing for a self-experience no longer abstracted from the gendered body.

The contradictions between individualism and the gender system may not soon go away, but perhaps--as Thoreau only dimly struggled to imagine--they can at least be disarticulated from the misrecognitions that protect them. Those misrecognitions are more shrilly asserted now than ever. As liberal individualism comes to dominate more and more contexts, we hear only a more and more strident demand for the very institutions that Thoreau struggled to reject, the very institutions that Hegel thought would be called into necessity by the autonomous individual's erotic contradictions: heterosexuality, the family, and the national state. Because these are false resolutions to problems generated by liberal culture itself, sustaining them will require more and more of the repressive force that is being summoned already to back them up.

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By MICHAEL WARNER

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