



Thoreau's *Axe*

DISTRACTION AND DISCIPLINE
IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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Dear All:

Caleb has provided us with this short excerpt from the introduction of his new book. It sets up the questions of "discipline" that are at issue in his study, and (*while it is not required!*) can serve as a jumping-off point for our First Friday discussion on 7 April 2023.

Thank you, Caleb!

-DGB

PS: start here below, and read to bottom of p. 11.

To the distracted, attention makes alluring promises. It opens a way to fuller, more satisfying experience, or it brings people into deeper contact with the ones they love. In the midst of hustling and noise, disciplines of attention offer peace of mind. At the same time, though, they call for certain sacrifices. Some kinds of pleasure and freedom will have to be surrendered on the way to attention's more enduring ones. Distraction is a kind of suffering, but suffering has also been inflicted in attention's name. This give-and-take, the interplay of rehabilitation and submission, was already happening along the shores of ponds in nineteenth-century Massachusetts.

Out in the woods, Thoreau set up his little house and devoted his time to the work of self-recovery. In "Life without Principle," he explained his therapeutic regimen for people who had let their minds become distracted: "If we have thus desecrated ourselves—and

who has not?—the remedy will be by wariness and devotion to reconsecrate ourselves, and make once more a fane of the mind.” With the archaic word *fane*—from Latin by way of Late Middle English, meaning a sacred place, a temple—Thoreau reached back through the ages, trying to recover some ancient, less degraded state. He continued: “We should treat our minds, that is, ourselves, as innocent and ingenuous children, whose guardians we are, and be careful what objects and what subjects we thrust on their attention.” Treating his own mind like a child, Thoreau aspired to a second innocence. His program was a discipline of “wariness and devotion.”¹³

Thoreau took an interest in the tradition of spiritual exercises, developed over many centuries by mystics and philosophers. Spiritual exercises are practices designed to detach people’s minds from the passions and dramas of everyday social life so they can focus on higher, more enduring realities. Some of these practices, like solitary meditation, are perfectly tranquil. Others involve repressing the appetites and mortifying the flesh. In the opening pages of *Walden*, there are references to elaborate rituals of self-torment: ascetics “sitting exposed to four fires and looking in the face of the sun” or “dwelling, chained for life, at the foot of a tree.”¹⁴ Closer to home, for Thoreau, was New England’s deep history of Christian devotional practices. Even the Puritans, remembered for their frigidness, had recorded weird, ecstatic ravishments by their God.

Thoreau was not the kind of hairshirted monk who would reject the pleasures of the senses or cut up his natural body. He meant to situate himself in the physical world and intensify his own experience. He wished to feel more wakeful, more alive. But he did try to adapt old-fashioned spiritual exercises to his nineteenth-century circumstances. When Thoreau went walking in the woods, he practiced what he called “the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen.” When he studied the literary classics, he put himself through “a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this

object.” He worked on reconditioning his distracted mind with disciplines of attention.¹⁵

At Walden, Thoreau felt he had discovered just the right place to get himself together. It was a quiet situation:

The scenery of Walden is on a humble scale, and, though very beautiful, does not approach to grandeur, nor can it much concern one who has not long frequented it or lived by its shore; yet this pond is so remarkable for its depth and purity as to merit a particular description. It is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods . . .¹⁶

Thoreau’s technical training as a land surveyor helped him here, but he also needed to unlearn his habitual ways of seeing. Being humble itself, Walden required humility from its observer. For Thoreau, writing a careful description was a way to show the fruit of his self-discipline. He had turned himself into the kind of person who could appreciate simple, rather than spectacular scenery.¹⁷

Sometimes, though, the history of attention’s disciplines is less free-spirited, less sweet. It is not only a history of people’s efforts to save themselves from mind-corroding economic circumstances by reawakening their own powers. It is also a history of captivity and psychic manipulation. Take a look, for instance, at this other description of a rural New England scene, composed (like much of *Walden*) in the 1840s:

The pond is of clear, pure water, about thirty feet in depth, and covering one hundred and seventy-eight acres of land. The ground rises, by a gentle acclivity, from the shore of the pond, to a height which overlooks this beautiful sheet of water, and an extent of country beyond, embracing, in part, the village of Westborough, and gives a very pleasing prospect. There are no manufacturing villages in the vicinity, and the farm-houses are

not more numerous than in most of the agricultural towns in the State, in proportion to the area. The situation, therefore, is sufficiently retired.

This passage celebrating pure water and gentle beauty, out in the country, far from modern noise, appears in an 1847 Massachusetts state legislature committee report, proposing the site for what would become America's first state-run juvenile reformatory.¹⁸

Drawing up the plans for its youth prison, the state chose a rustic, rural setting, distant from the temptations of urban consumption and the noise of factories. The planning committee noted, approvingly, that there was no industrial infrastructure in sight. The water was clear and clean, the views agreeable. It was almost as if the surveyors had stepped back in time. This, they determined, was the ideal setting for a new kind of incarceration.

Animating the committee's pastoral vision, there was a distinctly modern theory of delinquency and rehabilitation. The theory held that new manufacturing systems, along with the poisonous attractions of the marketplace, were corrupting vulnerable minds. Among the reformers who took an interest in such problems, the effect was called "hardening" (as in "hardened criminal"), or "blackening." Poorly supervised children, in particular, were said to suffer from bad influences, which coarsened their minds.¹⁹

Though juvenile delinquents were damaged, however, they were not incorrigible. Reformers saw their hardening as an effect of their experiences and circumstances, not some innate moral weakness or biological deficiency. What history had done to these victims of neglect could be undone by discipline. As the reformatory's founders put it, "It is proposed, by the discipline which awaits them here, to quicken the torpid action of conscience, by calling into play the moral sentiments which have been suffered to lie dormant."²⁰ Delinquents appeared, to their keepers, to be "torpid" animals, their moral sentiments in hibernation, like Thoreau's snake. To correct their ways, the state would begin by removing them to a purer atmosphere.