



THOREAU, ATTENTION, DISCIPLINE (with Caleb Smith – discussing *Thoreau's Axe*) 7 April 2023

Zoom ate our full chat thread! This has been reconstructed!

Henry Thoreau, *Journal* (1852)

I must walk more with free senses. It is as bad to study stars and clouds as flowers and stones. I must let my senses wander as my thoughts, my eyes see without looking. Carlyle said that how to observe was to look, but I say that it is rather to see, and the more you look the less you will observe. I have the habit of attention to such excess that my senses get no rest, but suffer from a constant strain. Be not preoccupied with looking. Go not to the object; let it come to you. When I have found myself ever looking down and confining my gaze to the flowers, I have thought it might be well to get into the habit of observing the clouds as a corrective; but no! that study would be just as bad. What I need is not to look at all, but a true sauntering of the eye.

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Breakout Room Discussions of this Passage (after Caleb's presentation)

Tory, Graham, Brad:

A session of choppy connectivity and long silences. A sauntering of the ear, collective attentiveness.

Tory: thinking about walking in the woods — the difference between choosing what we attend to v being spoken to and pulled, which is a way of getting out of objectification.
Paying attention to peripheral vision.

Graham: soft eyes, not focusing but smearing of vision. Like Hermione Spriggs's trackers, who smear their vision on the surface of thing.

Brad: I spent the day trying to navigate a thorny legal and ethical question, trying to be objective about a situation that I have a stake in, and I'm wondering how smearing of vision, sauntering of attention, might aid in navigating that.

Graham — knowing how Thoreau actually increases his drilling down in botanical attention.

Mihir, Landes, Ana, Smith:

Mihir – the “we” instead of the “I” in his experience of growing up in a place full of people.

Landes – Starts with “walk more with free senses,” then only talks about looking/seeing. How much our culture loves language. Focus on seeing as the main form of perception/interaction.

Ana – Identifies with the passage. We are so “noisy” that it becomes difficult to be available to encounter.

Smith – points out that there is an imperative, an assertiveness, in the attempt of being “free.” The will takes over as a way to control the experience of being controlled.

PCS, JF, & AL:

PCS: What if we did a “sauntering” reading? I.e. reading out of linear order?
[did so]

JF: That made clear the repetitive nature of Thoreau's writing, how it doubles back upon itself.

AL: The text doesn't feel like a thesis being offered, but rather like a thought slowly arriving. It feels private. I feel sympathy for this sensibility. It makes me think about the way that different art forms relate to that particular aspect of attention - control vs freedom? When I read, I feel more myself. I'm both in the text, and in my own thoughts. Whereas with film, it's only when the credits roll that I experience a return to myself. This makes me curious about how that changes the kinds of thoughts that are possible, as compared to the kinds of thoughts possible when watching a film.

PCS: Psyched about what form enables! It would be fun to experiment with the arrangement of blank spaces in texts and videos.

JF: A recall a moment that Dequincy recounts of waiting for the mail truck to come with news of the war. Compares Thoreau's understanding of attention to Wordsworth's beholding of the stars. I don't know how to differentiate between looking and seeing!

AL: I'm hung up on the "don't go to the object, let it come to you."

Smith finishes in full gathering with a discussion of the "palindromic" structure of the passage.