

CHAPTER II

Print Culture

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In the essay “Books,” Ralph Waldo Emerson remarks on some of the practical and intellectual problems posed by mid-nineteenth-century print culture: given the scale of print production, how could an individual reader possibly hope to keep up with everything or even determine what is worth reading? “In 1858, the number of printed books in the Imperial Library at Paris was estimated at eight hundred thousand volumes, with an annual increase of twelve thousand volumes; so that the number of printed books extant to-day may easily exceed a million.” Emerson continues, bleakly: “It is easy to count the number of pages which a diligent man can read in a day . . . and to demonstrate, that, though he should read from dawn to dark, for sixty years, he must die in the first alcoves” of the library (*CW* 7:97).

The sort of information overload Emerson describes is not a recent symptom but is actually a feature of print culture itself. Beginning in the early modern period, as Ann Blair has argued, the scale of printing and the spread of print contributed to a “coincidence” of factors that gave rise to experiences of information overload, “including [changes in] existing tools, cultural or personal expectations, and changes in the quantity or quality of information to be absorbed or managed.”¹ Emerson offers the image of the deceased library patron who, after a life of constant reading, has made only a small dent in the mass of available print. This bleak image of the effects of information overload indexes his sense that expectations around reading, mastery, and even the use of libraries were changing rapidly with the scalar changes made possible by the steam-driven mechanization of paper mills and printing presses.

Emerson’s interest in the problems posed by the scale of print grows from the Transcendentalists’ larger concerns about the interrelation of individuals, ideas, and wider publics. What is the status of individual and independent thought in a mass mediated culture? “Self-Reliance,” after all, proceeds from Emerson’s feeling of estrangement from his own

thoughts when he encounters similar ideas in the printed work of another: “tomorrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another” (*CW* 2:27). With his birth and death nearly bookending the century, Emerson lived through the shift from mostly hand-produced print to mostly machine-produced print: a massive change in the scale, speed, and cost of producing print.²

Henry David Thoreau shared his mentor Emerson’s concerns about the practical and intellectual transformations nineteenth-century print culture introduced. In fact, these transformations shaped his life and work in several ways. As a writer, thinker, and, we should remember, pencil maker, the relationship between thought and its material instantiations, as well as between individual thinker and audience, was centrally important to him. The expansion and rapid change in both the print market and wider culture of print alarmed Thoreau, just as it alarmed his mentor Emerson. Emerson’s reaction to information overload in the period was to worry over the loss of a sense of mastery. For Thoreau, the massive expansion of print – of thoughts turned into salable goods – provided a rich site for his reflections on the relationship between ideas and things. While still a college student, for example, he began to worry that technological changes in printing had a negative relation to the advancement of thinking and art: “We do every thing by steam, because it is most expeditious, and cheapest.” “The question with us,” he continues, “is whether a book will . . . sell well, not whether it is . . . worth selling; the purchaser asks the price, looks at the binding, the paper, or the plates, without learning the contents” (*EEM* 39). Throughout his work, Thoreau consistently criticized commoditization, and the transformation of human thought and written expression into a marketable object was especially concerning to him.

At the same time, however, changes in the print market provided him with income and minor celebrity. After college, Thoreau would publish his writing in some of the day’s most notable magazines and book publishing houses. Even while still in college, in another student essay he expressed his desire to be a writer “who addresses his fellow men through the medium of the press” because of its wide reach as compared with the sermon from the pulpit or the lecturer on the lyceum circuit (*EEM* 87). Thoreau’s relationship to mid-nineteenth-century print, and the culture around it, was a constant negotiation between his desire to reach the expanding reading public and his unease with the commercialization of everyday American life. He was an observer and critic of changing material and commercial

negotiations in print culture, but also an actor in them. In order to place his work in the context of nineteenth-century American print culture, we should keep both these scenes in mind, as they were in constant negotiation in Thoreau's thinking and work. First, how did midcentury changes in authorship and the business of printing shape his work and career? And second, what did he, as a thinker who cared deeply about the meaning and interpretation of the material world, make of the relationship between ideational content and material forms in his time?

Of Pencils, Printers, and Publishers

It may seem rather strange to begin a discussion of Thoreau and print culture by talking about pencils. But that is exactly where we must start, because while "print culture" is a useful analytic frame, we should also be careful to avoid imagining a media landscape dominated exclusively by print, as if the printing press surpassed and eradicated other media. "Print culture," generally, refers to the shared cultural, social, political, and aesthetic norms that emerge around the widespread production, circulation, and consumption of printed texts and visual materials. Lisa Gitelman has recently pointed out, however, that print is curiously defined "in reflexive recourse to its own back formation."³ That is, we come to recognize print, in the words of Michael Warner, through "a negative relation" to handwriting.⁴ Is it possible to think up such a thing as a "manuscript," a text defined by its handwritten production, before the spread of printing in Europe? "Print culture" is thus both a very useful frame through which to look at techno-textual phenomena, like Emerson's trouble with the scalar expansion of print discussed above, and at the same time an analytic term that flattens out the specific and often wildly contingent histories of media and textual production. "Manuscript" and "print" would seem to be mutually exclusive textual media, but as Gitelman and others such as Peter Stallybrass have argued, print does not supersede handwriting; instead, it incites people to do more of it on blank forms and in margins.⁵ It is worth starting with this methodological problem in order to define and complicate our organizing term, print culture. Foregrounding these complex channels between textual media actually illuminates Thoreau's practice and his archive in productive ways.

After graduating from Harvard and spending a short time as a schoolteacher, Thoreau went to work with his father, John, in the family's pencil manufactory, J. Thoreau & Company. Edward Waldo Emerson, son of Ralph Waldo Emerson and a friend of Thoreau, recalled Thoreau's

involvement in the pencil manufactory. The younger Emerson credits Thoreau with creating a lead grinding process that made Thoreau's the best pencils produced in the United States: he "invented a process, very simple, but which at once put their black lead for fineness at the head of all manufactured in America."⁶ In the Harvard College library, Thoreau researched the production of high-quality German pencils, and, in order to avoid characteristically American soft, greasy leads, he determined that leads needed to be ground finer and mixed with special clay. Later, Thoreau designed a machine that would drill out the pencil while simultaneously cutting a lead to fit it.⁷ By the early 1840s, Thoreau announced that he had "succeeded in making his best pencil" and "deliberately renounced his [business] partnership, saying that he could not improve on that product, and that his life was too valuable to put what remained of it into pencils."⁸ Not long after, he was off to live on the elder Emerson's woodlot at Walden, turning his attention from pencils to print – supposedly.

Because superior pencils were costly to make and expensive to buy, the Thoreau pencil business eventually expanded into aspects of print production, too. By the late 1840s, Boston printers began using the electrotype process to create plates for frequently reprinted, high-demand print runs. Electrotyping was similar to stereotyping in that both processes created fixed plates to be used over and over to print steady sellers or high-quality engravings. Unlike stereotype, however, the electrotype process required a thin coat of graphite over its molds. When placed in an electrolytic bath, graphite becomes conductive and attracts copper ions to be deposited on the surface of the mould, creating the plate.⁹ "Knowing the Thoreau lead was the best," Boston publishers purchased it for the graphite in their electrotype, and by keeping this trade in lead secret, the Thoreaus got as much as ten dollars per pound, for as many as 600 pounds in a year.¹⁰ Henry David Thoreau maintained this trade, even after he went into the woods, and after his father died. By the mid-1850s, J. Thoreau & Company was supplying lead for electrotyping in all the major eastern printing cities, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, as well as in some cities in the Midwest. Walter Harding reports that the business was so well known that a letter addressed only to "Black Lead Works, Concord, New Hampshire" even managed to find its way to eventual delivery to Thoreau in Concord, *Massachusetts* (*Days* 262).

Tracing the material link between pencil lead and electrotype plates affords us another route through which to think the interrelations of print and handwriting. Thoreau lead went, simultaneously, into the production

of pencils and mass-produced print. Lead could be used in a pencil to mark letterforms creating archives of unique sheets, or it could be used in electrotypes to create the letter forms in copper plates that could fill a library through hundreds of thousands of impressions. Before we discuss his own writing and publication, we have to consider his place in the industrial and material production of image, text, and information in the nineteenth century.

Likewise, Thoreau's biographers and critics have taken considerable interest in how changes in the scale, genres, and economics of nineteenth-century print shaped his career as a writer and author. Thoreau kept handwritten journals and notebooks for himself that one biographer, highlighting the circuit between manuscript and print, called "the quarry and substance of his best [printed] work" (*Mind* 7). Thoreau was writing for print at a time when the outlets, publics, and rewards for that work were undergoing great change. Thoreau's career overlapped with and contributed to a period often characterized by the emergence of the "literary marketplace" and the dawn of "professional authorship."¹¹ William Charvat has shown that between 1800 and 1870 professional authorship became a discernable category of activity marked by "prolonged . . . production" of writing as a primary means of securing income, "with the hope of extended sale on an open market, like any article of commerce . . . with reference to buyers' tastes and reading habits."¹² Though Thoreau never relied on writing for magazines and newspapers for all his income, he did, after experiencing difficulty breaking into the market early in his career, eventually place articles and longer serialized pieces in some of the most well-known periodicals of the day: the *Dial*, *Graham's Magazine*, *Putnam's*, and *Atlantic Monthly*, to name only a few of the most notable. Literary historians Ronald J. Zboray and Mary S. Zboray note that by the end of his career, Thoreau "could compete for literary dollars with the most popular of authors in the increasingly lucrative marketplace for periodicals."¹³

As with periodicals, Thoreau had mixed success with book publishing. *Walden* would eventually be published by one of the most powerful of the large Boston firms, Ticknor and Fields, itself a product of the aforementioned changes in the markets for reading and writing as well as the swift scalar changes made possible by new technologies. But his earlier book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, did not attract the interest of publishers or readers. Failing to find more favorable terms, Thoreau hired James Munroe of Boston to publish *A Week* in an edition of 1,000 copies in 1849 at Thoreau's own expense. It sold so poorly that in 1853 Munroe, no longer wanting to warehouse 706 remaining copies (450 in unbound sheets and 256 bound),

returned the stock to Thoreau. In his Journal, Thoreau wrote, with equal measures of sadness and wry humor, “I have now a library of nearly 900 volumes over 700 of which I wrote myself . . . This is authorship” (*PJ* 7:123). These copies remained in Thoreau’s attic until after his death. By then, however, the market for his writing had grown. James Fields purchased the forsaken copies of *A Week* from Thoreau’s sister, Sophia. Fields then removed the Munroe title page and inserted a new one, passing these books off as an 1862 second edition from Ticknor and Fields. One of the key habits of research in book history and print culture studies is observing how the book object and its printed text complement or complicate one another. Indeed, in this case the paratext gives lie to the title page’s claims. An advertisement in the back of this “second edition” announces Munroe’s future publication of *Walden*, which had, in fact, been published by Ticknor and Fields in 1854 (“Textual Introduction,” *Wk* 519).

“That thin stratum”: Of Experience and the Materiality of Print

Setting his pen to the paper of his Journal, while also surrounded by hundreds of unsold and unread copies of *A Week*, Thoreau noted that “authorship” entails “record[ing] what thought or experience [he] may have had” while “sitting beside the inert mass of [his] works” (*PJ* 7:123). An observer of the highest order, in his writing Thoreau seems always attuned to the relation between the human body and the material world. And so, here it is significant that all those unread copies of *A Week* are figured as an “inert mass.” As a college student, Thoreau both criticized the print market’s interest in the price of paper over the merit of the ideas that could be printed on it and felt excitement over the audiences print could reach. He would continue to balance his professional involvement in printing and publishing with his criticism of markets and processes that could turn ideas, meanings, and expressions into “an inert mass.”

Earlier that same year, in a Journal entry on April 3, 1853, Thoreau figures the temporal present as a “thin stratum,” thinner even than a printed page on which news of the day will appear. The entry is exemplary of Thoreau’s ongoing criticism of print culture: print mediation alienates people from firsthand experience of the world:

The last two Tribunes I have not looked at— I have no time to read newspapers— If you chance to live & move and have your being in that thin stratum—in which the events which make the news transpire—thinner

than the paper on which it is printed—then those things will fill the world for you—but if you soar above or dive below that plain—you cannot remember nor be reminded of them. (*PJ* 6:65–66)

The sliver of time and space we call the present, like a needle constantly moving forward from the past into the future, affords the space and time of direct experience. Reading the newspaper is mistaking that competing “thin stratum” of the printed page for direct experience of the present. Later, in *Walden*, he compared newspaper-obsessed Concord villagers to etherized patients (*W* 167).

Thoreau frequently made similar criticisms of print and reading, and its clearest expression appears in the “Sounds” chapter of *Walden*. In “Sounds,” Thoreau describes a train cutting across the woods near his cabin: “The Fitchburg Railroad touches the pond about a hundred rods south of where I dwell.” In addition to moving consumer goods and commuters to and from the small towns and villages of central and western Massachusetts, the train carries bales of linen rags from Boston, past Concord, to the paper mills in Fitchburg (*W* 115–16). At the harbor in Boston, tattered sails were sold to papermakers, who broke down the cloth and recycled ragged linen into paper. Thoreau takes note of the transport of linen rags to the mills in western Massachusetts: “These rags in bales, of all hues and qualities, the lowest condition to which cotton and linen descend . . . gathered from all quarters both of fashion and poverty . . . [will go] to become paper . . . on which forsooth will be written tales of real life, high and low, founded on fact” (*W* 120). Revisiting the “thin stratum” theme, he interjects that he prefers the world to paper, finding himself “more influence[d by] those books which circulate round the world, whose sentences were first written on bark, and are now merely copied from time to time on to linen paper” (*W* 99). What is printed on the page is “mere copy” compared with the direct of experience of the “book” of the world. Thoreau then asks “why should we leave it to Harper & Brothers . . . to select our reading,” when the carloads of tattered sails offer a closer experience of the sea than do novels about life at sea (*W* 109). “This car-load of torn sails,” he argues, “is more legible and interesting now than if they should be wrought into paper and printed books. Who can write so graphically the history of the storms they have weathered as these rents have done? They are proof-sheets which need no correction” (*W* 119). Thoreau here advances an idea of reading the material world itself, directly, rather than through the mediation of print. The raggy materials that will be paper offer themselves as a perfect object lesson: why read of the sea on paper when it can be sensed firsthand in the linen sails?

In the midst of the massive expansion of print, and despite his own eventual successes as a professional author, Thoreau desires to “read” the world itself rather than a representation of it on paper. Peter Coviello writes of Thoreau’s “prodigious and articulate fluency with the world of *things*” and argues that, unlike Emerson’s turn to nature as a system or “vast unfolding metaphor,” things prompt Thoreau into “meticulous scrutiny” of “an array of small, complex, and infinitely fascinating details” that “offer the possibility of nearly limitless revelation.”¹⁴ Thoreau is absolutely serious when he says that being present to ragged tattered sails provides a better account of the sea than does a novel published on paper made out of old ragged sails. Thoreau would rather become attuned to the ragged sailcloth that might be within the pages of *Moby-Dick* than read what is printed on them. Fittingly, this argument about print and paper opens the “Sounds” chapter, and Coviello would have us note that sound, distinct from hearing or listening, has little to do with interpretation and everything to do with the firsthand experience of “flesh-vibrating modulations . . . a sensual responsiveness to the outer world that works abrupt and sweeping changes in the very organization of the corporeal self.”¹⁵ In the first paragraph of “Sounds,” Thoreau warns that “we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard” (W III).

Thoreau’s relation to print culture was complicated and at times contradictory, but from his writing life to his family business, he was shaped by it. Scholars note that he was both successful and a failure as a professional author. He published books and articles made possible by technological changes in papermaking and printing to his west on the Housatonic River, and business and market developments in publishing to his east in Boston. Some of these changes brought him a measure of money and renown, and others left him surrounded in his own home by an “inert mass” of unsold paper and print. He wanted to publish in the periodical press and with successful book publishers, and he sold graphite to printers to supply the making of plates. Yet at the same time he also argued that print offered an insufficient secondhand experience of the world of bodies and things. Nineteenth-century American print culture offered challenges and openings to Transcendentalist thinkers. Noting the ever-expanding scale of print production of print in their lifetimes, Emerson lamented that one could no longer hope to read everything printed, and Thoreau argued against reading anything except the world itself. Both continued to publish their work

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in books and periodicals. “Much is published, but little printed,” Thoreau writes in “Sounds,” leaving readers to wonder what it meant to leave an impression on the world in the middle of the nineteenth century (*W* 111).

Acknowledgment

This essay is dedicated to the Department of English at SUNY Geneseo, my alma mater and Walter Harding’s longtime home. Professor Harding died a few years before I first stepped into Welles Hall, but he was, and the college continues to be, a special example of what is possible when excellent faculty and students set to making a liberal arts education a publicly accessible good.

Notes

- 1 Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), e-book, introduction.
- 2 William S. Pretzer writes that “the most impressive technological difference between 1790 and 1840 was found in the pressroom . . . By 1840, a machine press, driven by a steam engine . . . had totally transformed presswork” and precipitated the scalar changes that disturb Emerson in “Books.” “‘Of the paper cap and inky apron’: Journeyman Printers,” in *A History of the Book in America*, volume 2: *An Extensive Republic 1790–1840*, ed. Robert H. Gross and Mary Kelley (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 163. One of Emerson’s proposals in “Books” is that readers should use reviews and digests to keep up with the pace of print. Notably, Thoreau comments, negatively, on one such digest in the “Reading” chapter of *Walden*, the book *Much Instruction from Little Reading*: “We are underbred and low-lived and illiterate” (*W* 107). As Robert A. Gross notes, “‘Little Reading’ is a puny town.” “Much Instruction from Little Reading: Books and Libraries in Thoreau’s Concord,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 97, no. 1 (1987): 132.
- 3 Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 8.
- 4 Michael Warner, *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 7.
- 5 Gitelman’s and Stallybrass’s examples are printed blanks, or forms, that create spaces inviting handwritten responses on a mass scale. See Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, 26, and Peter Stallybrass, “Printing and the Manuscript Revolution,” in *Explorations in Communication and History*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (New York: Routledge, 2008), 112.

- 6 Edward Waldo Emerson, *Henry Thoreau as Remembered by a Young Friend* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 33.
- 7 Emerson, *Henry Thoreau*, 34. See also Gretchen Oberfranc, "Object Lessons," *Thoreau Society Bulletin* no. 240 (Summer 2002): 4–5, and Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 19–21.
- 8 Emerson, *Henry Thoreau*, 36.
- 9 Michael Winship, "Manufacturing and Book Production," in *The History of the Book in America*, volume 3: *The Industrial Book 1840–1880*, ed. Scott E. Casper et al. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 46.
- 10 Emerson, *Henry Thoreau*, 35.
- 11 See Stephen Fink, *Prophet in the Marketplace: Thoreau's Development as a Professional Writer* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999).
- 12 William Charvat, *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800–1870*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 3.
- 13 Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People's History of the Mass Market Book* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 182.
- 14 Peter Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties: Sex and the Untimely in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 30.
- 15 Coviello, *Tomorrow's Parties*, 44.