

# TRANSCENDENTAL WORDPLAY

A. ROSS ECKLER

Morristown, New Jersey

The title of this book by Michael West, an English professor at the University of Pittsburgh, suggested that it might be of interest to Word Ways readers. This was confirmed by a letter from the author, who asserted that “[the book] has much to say about the historical background of many varieties of language play in which your journal specializes.” When the book received the 2001 Phi Beta Kappa book award, the publicity release noted that “West...tries to determine where and how Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Dickinson, Melville and others got their proclivity for extravagant puns, riddles, acrostics, anagrams and other forms of word play.”

Intrigued, I sent for a copy of the book, a hardcover volume for \$59.95 published by Ohio University Press in 2000. The book is a formidable read, written by a master of New England transcendentalism and its intellectual roots dating back to the Greek and Roman classics. Readers unfamiliar with this scholarship can skim the book for the linguistic promise hinted at above.

Nearly one-third of the book (four of fourteen chapters) is devoted to a minute examination of Thoreau and his work, in particular *Walden*. Thoreau plays a “spinning Rolodex of roles” in the chapter on Economy: “gadfly author, hometown lecturer, insult comedian, earnest social reformer, thermodynamic scientist, idealistic nature lover, inept town crank, businessman, fashion designer, Carlylean clothes philosopher, architect, local historian, amateur carpenter, barbecue chef, Roman baker, accountant fixated on halfpence and farthings, proto-Marxist champion of oppressed workers, gentleman farmer, cabinetmaker, theologian, antiphilanthropist, Yankee misanthrope, and Persian sage” (p 434-5). The book is, in fact, “a variety show, a kaleidoscope.” It is hard to fathom just what Thoreau truly believed.

What about Thoreau’s wordplay? According to West, it is “primarily neither evasive nor subversive...[but] elusive.” *Walden*, West asserts, “teas[es] us with obscurity while inviting us to fathom verbal and conceptual riddles. Making them obvious would leave our minds unexercised. Hence the book relies heavily on paradox and covert wordplay” (p 466). West illustrates Thoreau’s punning with an extended exegesis from the Baker Farm chapter (p 454):

John heaved [breathed/dug up] a sigh at this, and his wife stared with arms a-kimbo [regarded me with hands on hips/regarded John without sharing his labor], and both appeared to be wondering if they had capital [financial resources/heads] enough to begin such a course [of action/of studies/of navigation] with, or arithmetic [bookkeeping skill/reckoning longitude] enough to carry it through. It was sailing by dead reckoning [navigation/their dead minds] to them, and they saw not clearly how to make their port so [reach harbor/earn liquor?]; therefore I suppose they still take life bravely [bear up courageously/slaughter animals], after their fashion [in their way/in pursuit of clothing] face to face [head on/facing each other across the table/confronting the chickens’ ‘too humanized’ stare as they behead them?], giving it tooth and nail [fighting all out/tearing apart roasted chicken with fingernails and gnawing it/tooling it with sawteeth and hammered nails], not having skill to split its massive columns [military formations/pillars] with any fine entering wedge [V-shaped squadron/tool], and route it [put to flight/groove with a routing tool] in detail [squad by squad/with fine handiwork]—thinking to deal with it roughly, as one should handle a thistle [slight opposition/vegetable life (only)]. But they fight at an overwhelming disadvantage, living, John Field, alas! without arithmetic [mathematics/reckoning (hence recklessly)] and failing so [flunking/going bankrupt/declining physically].

Did Thoreau knowingly create *all* these puns? (West reminds me of the apocryphal economist who predicted twelve of the last ten recessions.)

For the present-day reader brought up on such knee-slappers as “The mother named her ranch Focus because it’s where the sons raise meat”, Thoreau’s punning is undeniably bland. His scatological punning is especially subtle. West points out that Thoreau, “doing his business” in out of the way corners of Concord farms, was less concerned to relieve parched plants (say, by toting water in his hat) than to relieve himself. And when Thoreau claimed to have “enhanced the value of the land by “squatting on it” he was not referring to squatter’s rights but squatter’s rites—those involving the self-manuring of his domain (p 446).

West takes some pride in introducing levity into a scholarly text. For example, Thoreau, watching a hawk circling in the sky above Walden Pond, found himself paying “rapt attention to a raptor...Rhapsodic identification with the hawk...breeds scientific determination to define it distinctly” (p 429). Or “Ordure undoes order” (p 468). Or “the sap that supports life also saps and destroys it” (p 462). Or “Only a Logos at loggerheads with itself...could break the emotional logjam” (p 250). Or this extended riff on Thoreau’s hide-and-seek game with a loon: “Pursued in a spirit of grotesque humor, the loon provides pretty game indeed...Attempts to mythicize the god of loons may spark the anger of a cocky trickster who can resort to fowl play...Walden’s myth-making always teeters on the verge of ironic self-transcendence, with a hero who...seems confessedly a bit loony” (p 444).

What about the other wordplay promised by the reviewer: anagrams, acrostics and riddles? West knows what an anagram is; as a youth in the 1950s he kitized anagram and Scrabble games at a Lake Michigan summer resort which his grandparents visited each year (p xvi). Nevertheless, anagrams are hard to find in *Transcendental Wordplay*—the only obvious example, *Walden’s* aliment-ailment, is instead identified as an “eye pun” (p 420). Two anagrammatic allusions in the Poe chapter are, in fact, transadditions: (1) his middle name, Allan, is “lurking anagrammatically” in Annabel Lee (p 306), and (2) “Smith’s name was vulgarly anagrammatized in Poe’s character Abel-Shittim” (p 307). Conundrums (a form of riddles) are mentioned occasionally (pp 15, 303), as are contronyms such as *fast* and *cleave* (p 357), but I failed to find any trace of an acrostic. One must remember that in the nineteenth-century wordplay (except for the pun) was far less developed than it is today—but West’s unchallenged scholarship and playful narrative remain for the reader to enjoy.