

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 18
Issue 4 *December*

Article 4

December 1982

Two Woodchucks, or Frost and Thoreau on the Art of the Burrow

Fritz Oehlschlaeger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 18, no.4, December 1982, p.214-219

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Two Woodchucks, or Frost and Thoreau on the Art of the Burrow

by FRITZ OEHLSCHLAEGER

ROBERT FROST'S admiration for *Walden* is well known, and numerous critics have suggested both general and specific parallels between the works of Thoreau and Frost.¹ But to my knowledge no critic has recognized the outrageous pun on "Thoreau" perpetrated by the jocular, anthropomorphized *persona* of Frost's "A Drumlin Woodchuck." At the end of that poem, after defending the value of a "strategic retreat" reminiscent of Thoreau's at Walden, the Frostian woodchuck attributes his survival to being "so instinctively *thorough* / About my crevice and burrow" (italics mine).² In this context so generally reminiscent of *Walden* it is impossible that Frost, nearly as arch a punster as Thoreau himself, did not intend the pun. We should remember, too, that Thoreau himself pronounced his name with the accent on the first syllable, making it nearly indistinguishable from "thorough," rather than with the accent on the second syllable as it is frequently pronounced today outside of New England. Frost as a New Englander would certainly have known that it is correctly pronounced *Thóreau*.

Frost, then, specifically identifies his speaker with Thoreau and asks us to consider the whole poem from a Thoreauvian perspective. In doing this he may well be following Thoreau's own close identification with the woodchuck in *Walden*. In "Economy" Thoreau describes building his own "crevice and burrow," the Walden house, on the site of a woodchuck's former tunnelings. Indeed Thoreau simply takes over and

1. Frost's letter of 24 June 1922 to Wade Van Dore provides one of his strongest expressions of admiration for *Walden*: "First about Thoreau: I like him as well as you do. In one book (*Walden*) he surpasses everything we have had in America." In *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrence Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 278. For treatments of the Thoreau-Frost relationship, see, for instance, Reginald Cook, "A Parallel of Parablists: Thoreau and Frost," in *The Thoreau Centennial*, ed. Walter Harding (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1964), pp. 65-79; Mario L. D'Avanzo, "Frost Gleans Thoreau," *Thoreau Journal Quarterly*, IX, No. 4 (1977), 24-26; Lyle Domina, "Thoreau and Frost: The Search for Reality," *Ball State University Forum*, XIX, No. 4 (1978), 67-72; Fred Durden, "Thoreau and Frost: Birds of a Feather," *Thoreau Journal Quarterly*, IX, No. 4 (1977), 28-32; S. P. C. Duvall, "Robert Frost's 'Directive' out of Walden," *American Literature*, XXXI (1960), 482-88; George Monteiro, "Redemption Through Nature: A Recurring Theme in Thoreau, Frost and Richard Wilbur," *American Quarterly*, XX (1968), 795-809; and Michael West, "Versifying Thoreau: Frost's 'The Quest of the Purple Fringed' and 'Fire and Ice,'" *English Language Notes*, XVI (1978), 40-47. Also especially valuable is Donald Greiner's summary of work on the Thoreau-Frost relationship in *Robert Frost: The Poet and His Critics* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1974), pp. 169-81.

2. "A Drumlin Woodchuck" in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 281, lines 31-32. Future citations are to this edition; line numbers will be given parenthetically.

enlarges a woodchuck's burrow: "I dug my cellar in the side of a hill sloping to the south, where a woodchuck had formerly dug his burrow, down through sumach and blackberry roots, and the lowest stain of vegetation."³ Thoreau emphasizes moreover that the cellar, his burrow in the fundament, is the most important part of the house. Houses are most properly burrows, for where one lives, in the highest sense, is not simply where one passes time but where one makes vital connection with the landscape by digging down into the unchanging eternity of earth below the "stain" of the transient vegetation. Thus man's burrows are the most lasting marks he leaves upon the earth: "Under the most splendid house in the city is still to be found the cellar where they store their roots as of old, and long after the superstructure has disappeared posterity remark its dent in the earth. The house is still but a sort of porch at the entrance of a burrow" (44-45).

But burrowing is not simply an activity of the paws. At the end of "Where I Lived and What I Lived For," Thoreau extends the burrowing metaphor to suggest the intellect's ability to rift "its way into the secret of things" (98). Thoreau uses his paws to raise his burrow's superstructure, but his true work is not with his hands. Instead he uses his head to seek a rich vein of ore buried deep in the earth: "I do not wish to be any more busy with my hands than is necessary. My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creatures use their snout and fore paws, and with it I would mine and burrow my way through these hills" (98). What this intellectual woodchuck seeks is reality, the unchanging truth of nature obscured by the "shams and delusions" that men esteem "for soundest truths" (95). In order to find this reality, we must first "settle ourselves," establish a sense of place, a living connection with the landscape. Then we must "work and wedge our feet downward," in woodchuck fashion, "through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe" (97). At last we will come to "a hard bottom and rocks" that "we can call *reality*," the eternity that Thoreau also sees when he looks through time as but a stream to "go a-fishing in" (98).

If we settle ourselves we will find moreover that the sublime truth of nature is available to all and ever near at hand, though men paradoxically "esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man" (96-97). Part of the import of "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" depends on this paradox of the remote and the close at hand. To dig one's burrow at Walden is to be spiritually remote from other men and their concerns, to

3. *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 44. Future references will be given parenthetically.

live “as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers” (88). But digging in at Walden also leads Thoreau to a recognition that what is near can be as full of wonder and spiritual significance as what is most distant: “We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia’s Chair, far from noise and disturbance. I discovered that my house actually had its site in such a withdrawn, but forever new and unprofaned, part of the universe” (88). “To settle” at Walden is the same for Thoreau as settling “in those parts near to the Pleiades or the Hyades, to Aldebaran or Altair” (88), for in being remote from man’s “shams and delusions,” he learns of the immanence of divinity: “God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages” (97). The most valuable ore lies all about us: what we need is to settle and begin burrowing in. The digging metaphor provides the culmination of “Where I Lived and What I Lived For”: “I think that the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and thin rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine” (98).

Frost’s evocation of Thoreau at the end of “A Drumlin Woodchuck” adds several dimensions to the poem. First, it emphasizes the positive nature of the woodchuck’s “strategic retreat,” reminding us that a retreat, particularly a strategic one, is not a permanent withdrawal but a partial action in a larger plan of battle. Thoreau digs in at Walden to live, to front only the essential facts of life, not to avoid the world, and the same is true of Frost’s woodchuck. A common objection to Frost’s poetry, articulated best perhaps by Roy Harvey Pearce, has been that Frost is too unwilling to confront the full range of contemporary life, that he retreats from our “urban, industrialized, bureaucratized culture” to a less complex poetic world that is easier to control.⁴ A cursory reading of “A Drumlin Woodchuck” might seem to confirm Pearce’s contention, but I would argue that the poem’s invocation of Thoreau’s tutelary spirit suggests at least a pair of responses to Pearce.

First, Thoreau, Frost, and the Drumlin woodchuck would respond that most of Pearce’s “urban, industrialized, bureaucratized” reality is sham and delusion that obscures what is permanent and worthy in existence. The whole context provided by *Walden*, for instance, causes the metaphor of the hunt in Frost’s poem to emerge brilliantly as a figure for *vanitas* itself, the frantic and futile human chase after the illusory values of the world:

the hunt goes past
And the double-barreled blast
(Like war and pestilence
And the loss of common sense) (21–24)

4. Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), pp. 273–74. Several other critics, including Irving Howe and Malcolm Cowley, have raised objections to Frost that are very similar to Pearce’s. For an able discussion of the “case against” Frost (the phrase is Cowley’s), see Greiner, *Robert Frost: The Poet and His Critics*, pp. 109–38.

What is more, the allusion to *Walden* confirms another idea implicit in the contrast between the woodchuck's rootedness and the exaggerated motion of the chase. Being, not doing, to paraphrase Roethke's "The Abyss," is the first joy of both Thoreau and the Drumlin woodchuck.⁵ Thoreau digs in at Walden out of the faith that one place is as good as another for his enterprise. What matters is getting beneath the layers of ordinary reality and having the quiet patience to wait until the mind opens to wider views of the universe: "Wherever I sat, there I might live, and the landscape radiated from me accordingly. What is a house but a *sedes*, a seat?" (81). This statement of Thoreau's from "Where I Lived and What I Lived For" equates sitting still, living, and perception, and makes the house the seat of all three activities. "A Drumlin Woodchuck," subtitled significantly "Be Sure to Locate" in several editions, works out a similar equation.⁶ In his comments about his fellow creatures, for instance, the woodchuck identifies their work of providing houses for themselves with the perceptual act of organizing the universe, of managing the space that radiates from them:

One thing has a shelving bank,
Another a rotting plank,
To give it cozier skies
And make up for its lack of size. (1-4)

Frost's woodchuck asserts the resemblance between his own burrowing and the activity of these creatures, thus suggesting that his own house-building serves as a figure for the mind's act of organizing the universe around itself. "We are central still," Thoreau observes in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, punning perhaps on both the senses of "still" so brilliantly exploited by Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn."⁷ Frost's woodchuck would agree with Thoreau, and he would assert further that the drama of the mind's engagement with its world, the great epistemological theme at the heart of modernist poetics, is "central still" despite the current accumulation of "urban, industrialized, bureaucratized culture" that makes it more and more difficult to see man (or woodchucks) in the way that New England's greatest writers have typically seen him, *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Frost's evocation of Thoreau at the end of "A Drumlin Woodchuck" also adds to the poem's mood of sheer playfulness: if a writer can imagine himself as a woodchuck, a woodchuck can imagine himself as a writer (whether the woodchuck imagines devouring the writer is left for us to contemplate). Moreover, the play is of a specifically linguistic

5. Theodore Roethke, "The Abyss," in *The Far Field* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), p. 54. The line reads, "Being, not doing, is my first joy."

6. "A Drumlin Woodchuck" carried the subtitle, "or, Be Sure to Locate," in the table of contents in the 1939, 1949, 1955, and 1963 editions of *A Further Range*; in the 1955 edition the subtitle also appeared over the poem. See *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem, p. 558.

7. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed. Walter Harding (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), p. 280.

character. Through the linguistic manipulation of wordplay, the woodchuck relates himself to a writer who is, in *Walden*, in the process of turning his own life into art, into words. For the woodchuck to say he has been "Thoreau" about digging his burrow is to suggest that his burrowing is an act analogous to artistic creation. The poem, then, has a self-reflexive quality, as much modernist poetry does, for it is on one level about the making of poems. In this connection we should note the similarity between what we have earlier seen about the burrow as focal point around which the woodchuck's "skies" are organized and limited, and what Frost has said about poetry in one of his best known statements on the subject, the "Letter to *The Amherst Student*." There, in speaking about form, Frost said: "The background in hugeness and confusion shading away from where we stand into black and utter chaos; and against the background any small man-made figure of order and concentration. What pleasanter than that this should be so?"⁸ Frost's statement itself suggests a landscape in which mind stands in the center, establishing order outward from itself until at a certain point its influence is lost and all shades away toward chaos and old night. The motif of centering and radiation is particularly evident, too, in Frost's reference to poetic form as a figure of "concentration." Poetic form "con-centers"; it gives the same center to a number of events, experiences, or phenomena, dragging all of these into orbit around the ordering mind that is central still. In linking his burrowing to that of Thoreau, whose house-building was meant to establish himself at the center of things, Frost's woodchuck reveals his own concern with centering. His burrow is a "figure of concentration," one that makes it possible for him to live "though small / As measured against the All" (29-30). His burrow can be seen, in short, as a metaphor for the poem.

Further suggestion that the woodchuck be seen as a poet figure can be found in the somewhat submerged tension between the poem's playfulness and the seriousness of the matter at hand. The woodchuck's jocularity nearly causes us to forget that his survival is at stake. While the burrow provides him a wonderful possibility for fanciful comparison to his counterpart at Walden, it also serves the mundane but equally important purpose of saving him from the hunters. The woodchuck thus easily manages to do what the speaker of "Two Tramps in Mud Time," himself a figure for the artist, longs to do. He has united his avocation and his vocation, redeeming the commonplace through imaginative play as he entertains himself in the business of survival. It is in this sense perhaps that the Drumlin woodchuck is most "thorough" about his burrow, for it is one of Thoreau's central purposes in *Walden* to insist that work and play must be indistinguishable expressions of the psychologi-

8. "Letter to *The Amherst Student*," in *Selected Prose of Robert Frost*, ed. Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Collier, 1968), p. 107.

cally unified person, the whole man. Significantly, Thoreau's most direct comments on the need to remain a whole man are those in which he describes building his house. With one of his own brilliant puns, he argues that there is the same "fitness" about "a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest" (46) (the bird here, like Frost's woodchuck, being *instinctively* Thoreau). That fitness lies in Thoreau's sense that the house must bear an organic relationship to its indwelling spirit; it must be an expression of the life within. The spirit builds itself a home, an appropriate form, be it burrow, house, poem, or symbolic ritual of the year's turning. Such work is joy. "Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands," Thoreau wonders, "the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged?" (46). For both the Walden and the Drumlin woodchucks, then, to be "thorough" about one's burrow means above all to be one whose work, in the language of "Two Tramps in Mud Time," is "play for mortal stakes." For only where such is the case, Frost and Thoreau might respond to critics who insist that art deal with the partial man, "Is the deed ever really done / For Heaven and the future's sakes."⁹

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg

9. "Two Tramps in Mud Time," in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem, pp. 275-76. See lines 70-72.