

An Artist's Approach to Grammar

the hypotenuse of a sentence

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Fascinated by Nicholas Knight's artistic renditions of grammatical structures, we asked him to explain his process in the hopes that teachers could translate his vision into an exercise that would help students overcome the age-old dread of sentence diagramming. —The Editors

For several years my work has been concerned with rule systems. Sentence diagrams interested me because they are governed by graphic conventions that visually embody the grammatical rules of English. There, branching across the page, are the relationships that transform words into meanings.

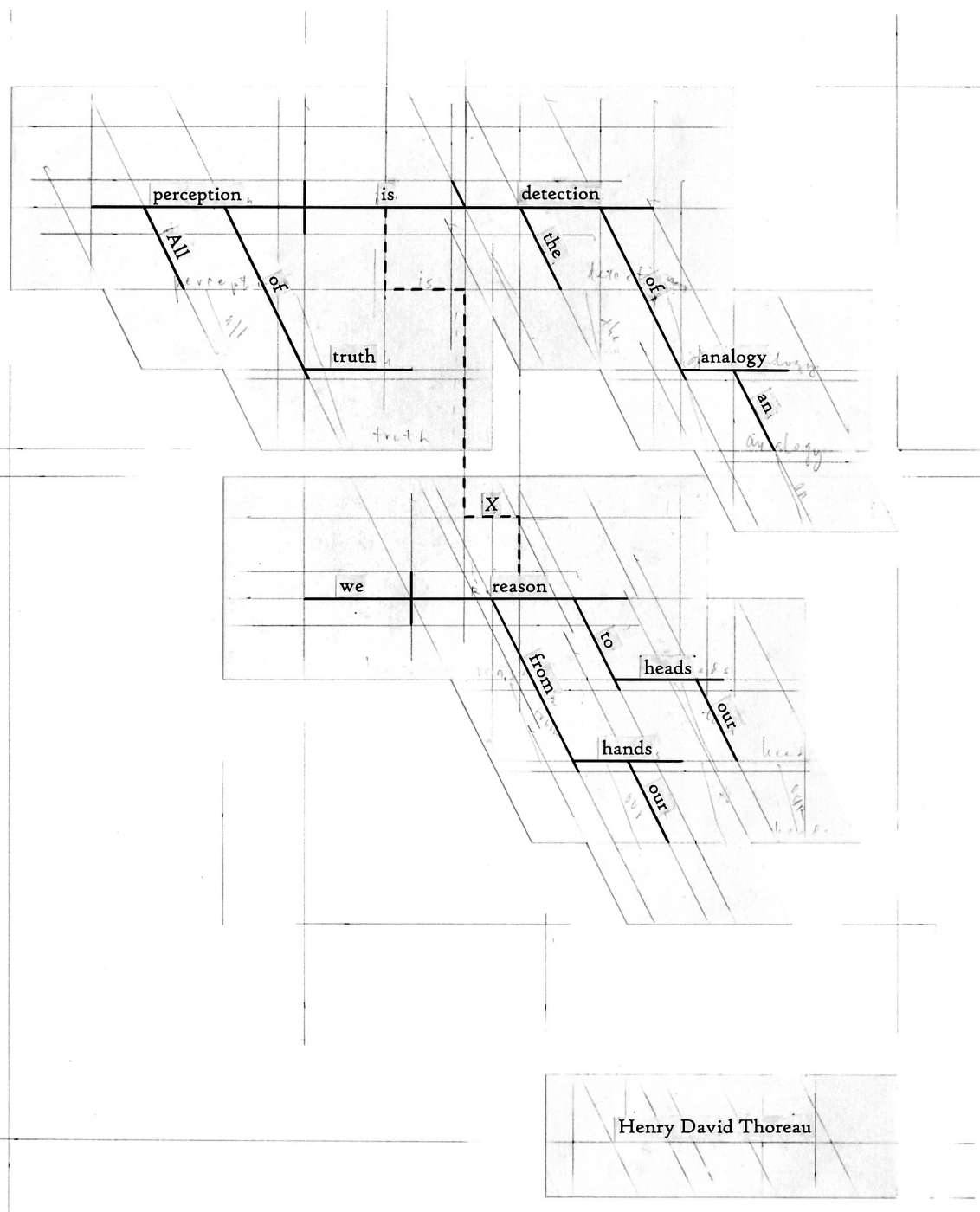
The primary place one encounters sentence diagrams is in grammar textbooks. Generally this encounter includes some example diagrams, explanations of a few pivotal parts of speech and their corresponding visual forms, and a list of sentences on which the student can practice. But because the analysis is meant to teach proper usage—it is a means to an end, not an end in itself—a disconnect exists between the activity of drawing and the intentions of the student. A diagram is constructed “as if” it depicted general rules of syntax itself, at the expense of the sentence at hand.

Once pieced together, however, the sentences I choose reflect the authors' sentiments and inflect them with a new meaning. The drawing is no longer a hypothetical demonstration, but an intervention, an act of drawing out: inky armatures exposing the entanglements of language.



Thinking is more interesting than knowing
but less interesting than looking.

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe



All perception of truth is the detection of an analogy;
we reason from our hands to our head.

—Henry David Thoreau