Thoreau’s poetry is littered with moments of ambiguous meter. However, these moments are not examples of Thoreau’s last usage of meter, if such a thing exists. Rather, they are calculated bits of uncertainty, which reflect, inform and complicate the content of his lines. In the mid 19th century, Thoreau was well on the path toward the irregular and metrically indeterminate meter that would become popular in the 20th century. In Thoreau’s poem “Conscience,” ambiguous meter functions to undermine the speaker’s attempt to attain a more pious, simple life. As defined by the OED, “conscience” is “the inner sense of what is right or wrong in one’s conduct or motives, impelling one toward right action.” Throughout the poem, the speaker struggles toward what he perceives as God’s mandate for simplicity. However, his own internal compass of right action, his conscience, is at odds with this divine mandate, and incorrigibly leads him astray. “I love a life whose plot is simple,” he says, rather coyly (6). The poem that follows, however, is riddled by very un-simple lines and meter, presenting his quest for simplicity as vain and hopeless. In fact, lines that uphold the poem’s (barely) prevailing meter of iambic tetrameter are few and far between. Because these iambic-tetrameter lines are relatively few, and because they offer antithesis to the chaos of the rest of the lines, they mark moments of clarity for the speaker and merit discussion. By reveling in metrical complexity and discord, Thoreau mocks the prevailing wisdom that “Tis a joy to be simple,” to quote the old hymn, as well the notion that perfect meter is a goal for which to strive. By mocking the speaker’s blundering quest for a simple life—and simple meter—the author suggests that the pursuit of perfection is foolish and hinders
the pursuit of truth in humanity, which is, by nature, complex and flawed. As we shall see, the speaker’s “conscience” offers him moments of clarity in conjunction with his descent into metrical chaos, culminating in an impious revelation about the nature of self-fulfillment. However, immediately following this revelation, the speaker forbids it and returns to pining for God’s simplicity. Thus, in “Conscience,” Thoreau slyly suggests that the simple is the enemy of the good.

Because the poem counterweights the disorder and metrical ambiguity in the majority of its lines with a few, shining lines in unbroken iambic tetrameter, I will discuss their relevance in light of the ensuing chaos. Line 6 is the first of these moments, even if blemished slightly by a final, unstressed syllable:

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I love a life whose plot is simple, (line 6).
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Occurring at the end of a despairing preamble encouraging the readers to abandon their consciences, which the speaker identifies as the source of sin, line 6, with its jolly rhythm and clean simple face, is the speaker’s attempt to give his poem a fresh start. Beyond complying with iambic tetrameter, the line achieves its “simple” veneer by displaying a steady rhythm of alternating low stresses and high stresses. Intermediate stresses are entirely absent. The lack of subtlety usually provided by intermediate stresses suggests a kind of absolutism in this line, a pronouncement that one can reduce the world into dualities: weak/strong, black/white, wrong/right. Like marching, or head-bobbing, this kind of vigorous, heavy-handed rhythm implies submission to law, and rule-following. The line’s disjunctive feet simplify its sound even further; by keeping words un-cloven by metrical feet, they retain a sort of virginal naïveté, a lack of penetration. Another youthful affect comes from the line’s overwhelming majority of monosyllabic words—as though it were conceived by a child who could not yet formulate bigger,
multisyllabic words. Finally, the enjambment at the end of the line, though a relatively weak one, suggests that there is a quality of finality to the speaker’s declaration, as though he has made up his mind and does not want to continue this line of thought. His hesitation anticipates the impious perils warranted by critical thought. And yet, hapless, he continues. Before we follow his example, we must address the lone blemish of the line, the last unstressed syllable. This minute speck of dirt hanging onto the end of an otherwise oxy-clean line suggests that not all is well, even in this moment of blessed order and simplicity. The smallest imperfection spoils the rest, casting doubt upon the soundness of the line’s wisdom as well as foreshadowing the coming turmoil in the meter.

\[
1 \quad 2 \quad (3) \quad 3 \quad 1 \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad 1 \quad 2 \quad 1
\]

And does not thicken with every pimple, (line 7).

Line 7 already grows exponentially more complex and ambiguous than line 6. Here, the childish speaker of the last line is growing up, pimples and all. Metrical variation has flourished, as shown by the heavy usage of intermediate stresses. Metrical feet scamper, cleaving multisyllabic words.

Ambiguity in the meter falls mainly on “not,” because in a formal scansion, “not” would receive less stress in order to maintain the iambic foot of “not thick.” The natural scansion however, would most likely give the foot spondee status, given the emphasis and ferocity with which the speaker seems to reject thick, pimpled plots. Moreover, the natural reading does just what the speaker professes to abhor: it thickens the plot. No longer are we strictly iambic. The speaker’s burst of frustration against ambiguity betrays him; his natural emotions, which culminate on the emphasis of the word “not,” are what beckon complexity and ambiguity into the poem. Despite himself, his humanity remains unruly, complex, forever spoiling the ideal. The ambiguity between the formal and natural scansions gives rise to a dissonance between what is
and what should be, which the speaker wrestles with throughout the poem. The following anapest, “[thick]-en with eve-” offers its own delightful multilayered biblical allusion. Tenuous as the connection is, Adam’s fall from grace is pertinent to the poem’s subject. Adam’s original sin was to disobey God and to act upon his own understanding of right and wrong: to listen to his conscience, in other words. Though unspoken, the speaker is extrapolating from this “original sin” to inform his own crusade against “conscience.” Back to the line—even with the formal reading, this anapest refuses to go away. It proves that within both scansions, natural and formal, some break from the iambic is imperative. This anapestic departure suggests that not only was the speaker destined to fall from the grace of the iambic by his own volition, but that he had no choice, given the nature of the imperfect, non-iambic world.

Finally, the enjambment of the line reinforces the idea of the speaker’s trepidation to continue with the poem. The anapest shows him “dragging his feet”:

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3 3 1 2 1 3
“Large things, where one may doubt.” (23)
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If we move forward to line 23, we see the speaker begin to mature quickly. Here, he expresses his desire for “a conscience worth keeping,” which he defines as a conscience that is “…exercised about/ Large things, where one may doubt” (16). This moment of relatively concise meter demonstrates the speaker’s certainty in his doubt. He realizes that he is incapable of giving himself up to God or “simplicity” without doubting him, or it. However, also dawning on him is the idea that struggle is required to create any “Conscience worth keeping.” He finds struggle, then, on both sides of the coin. In order to become one of the “simple, laboring folk” he must work against self-fulfillment, and labor as they do—against one’s conscience. Conversely, in order to have a conscience worth keeping, to fulfill himself, he must work as well. Recognizing the struggle of self-fulfillment, and that it is separate from the struggle for God, he becomes aware
that his inability to submit to God may have the capacity to be redemptive rather than damning.

He is beginning to believe in himself.

\[
1 \quad 3 \quad 3 \quad 1 \quad 3 \quad 3
\]

“Its own joys and own cares;” (30)

Line 30 is simply gorgeous. In this portion of the poem, the speaker ponders how self-fulfilled humans ought to be true to themselves, rather than suffer for an unreachable ideal. And look what the meter does. It entirely bucks the iambic form. Instead the line gleefully revels in its bizarre uniqueness, employing a relatively rare metrical foot called “bacchius,” which is composed of one unstressed syllable followed by two stressed syllables. While not conforming in meter to the rest of the poem, the line demonstrates its own sense of simplicity and is comfortable in its skin. To this end, the line’s distinctive meter also illustrates the conscience for which the speaker yearns: “But true to the backbone/ Unto itself alone;” (26, 27). Similar to line 6, line 30 has no intermediate stresses, uses diaresis, and is composed of monosyllabic words. However, dissimilar to 30, the shape and meter of the creature is wholly unique “unto itself alone.” In another sense too, the meter of line 30 illustrates the conscience for which the speaker yearns.

“By whom the work of God begun / Is finished, and not undone; / Taken up where he left off,” (31, 32, 33). Given this context, the bacchius foot can be seen as an extended—or in this case, “finished” iamb. As before, in line 6 (and perhaps 31 as well), the iambic foot is equated to God’s holy nature and simplicity. By using the bacchius foot, the speaker is metrically finishing what “[God] left off,” and fulfilling his own expressive potential. Line 30’s meter brilliantly performs the poem’s argument.

Line 35 is so brimming with ambiguity, I fear that diving in I will sink. Formally, the line would likely be treated like this:
“If not good, why then evil,” (35)

Here, a pattern of rising and falling meter presents itself. If we assume initial truncation on the first foot, we are left with two iambic feet rising toward the caesura, followed by two trochaic feet falling away from it. The formal reading, then, might suggest that good is better than evil because “If not good,” though maimed, complies with poem’s prevailing iambic meter, and “why then evil” departs from it. Also, because of the “mountain” structure of the line, the first half can be read as rising upward to heaven, and the second half as falling toward hell, thereby corresponding to the content of the line.

However, there is another, natural scansion of the line, which practically contradicts the formal one. Arguably, there may be more than one natural reading of the line. However, the one (directly) above earns its victory over any other. This is first because the line’s major duality, “good” and “evil,” deserves stress, given the poem’s context of Christian morality. Second, the line is developing the argument of the one before it, “Whether to worship or to scoff;” (34), in which the speaker roguishly praises an individual’s right to critical thought, whether it leads them to “worship or scoff.” “If not good, why then evil,” then, becomes a vigorous and damning declaration of war against Christianity itself. To reflect the nature of its own argument, line 35 cannot be a question—as the formal reading would have it. It must be a statement with explosive enmity toward societal norms and any authority who dictates what constitutes “good” and “evil.” In the natural reading, then, in order to transform the line’s syntax from a question to a statement, the “why then” of “why then evil,” must become a trochee, and not an iamb, as it
would be formally. “Why then evil,” is the answer the speaker has been seeking from the start. Third, the following line, “If not good god, good devil.” (36), supports and crystallizes the speaker’s disillusionment with God—even going as far as to address him without capitalizing His name. Lastly, line 35’s natural reading loudly echoes line 30 by displaying two bacchius feet, thereby flying line 30’s flag of gleeful (or in this case, perhaps snarling) independence. The ambiguity between the formal and natural scansion of line thirty-five corresponds precisely with the speaker’s struggle with the dissonance between what he is told to be (simple) and what he naturally is (a complex, ambiguous, “conscientious” human). Although the speaker ends the poem by reaffirming his passion for simplicity, the reader knows that this will not last, and that his conscience will never be fully denied or overcome.

Thoreau’s metrical ambiguity is fascinating and subtle in its usage. He uses meter as though it were a second language, with which he comments on, teases and undoes his poem’s delusional speaker. By listening to the meter in concert with the content, we are given the keys to unlock the poem’s true beauty and meaning. By championing the virtues of conscience, Thoreau’s poem inverts the story of Adam’s original sin. Adam’s fall from grace becomes a triumph of the human conscience, and Christianity’s version of the story is dismissed. A pure-bred American (a facetious label), he praises the individualist, and urges his readers to trust, think for, and be themselves.
Conscience is instinct bred in the house,
Feeling and Thinking propagate the sin
By an unnatural breeding in and in.
I say, Turn it out doors,
Into the moors.
I love a life whose plot is simple,
And does not thicken with every pimple,
A soul so sound no sickly conscience binds it,
That makes the universe no worse than 't finds it.
I love an earnest soul,
Whose mighty joy and sorrow
Are not drowned in a bowl,
And brought to life to-morrow;
That lives one tragedy,
And not seventy;
A conscience worth keeping;
Laughing not weeping;
A conscience wise and steady,
And forever ready;
Not changing with events,
Dealing in compliments;
A conscience exercised about
Large things, where one may doubt.
I love a soul not all of wood,
Predestinated to be good,
But true to the backbone
Unto itself alone,
And false to none;
Born to its own affairs,
Its own joys and own cares;
By whom the work which God begun
Is finished, and not undone;
Taken up where he left off,
Whether to worship or to scoff;
If not good, why then evil,
If not good god, good devil.
Goodness! you hypocrite, come out of that,
Live your life, do your work, then take your hat.
I have no patience towards
Such conscientious cowards.
Give me simple laboring folk,
Who love their work,
Whose virtue is song
To cheer God along.