Figuring Henry:
Thoreau's Autobiographical Accounts in Walden

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> If I am not I—
> who will be?
> -Journal, *Aug. 9, 1841* (1: 323)

What sort of book is *Walden*? Its author left no lasting generic marker with which to guide the reader. The original subtitle, *Life in the Woods*, was dropped on Thoreau's own instruction pending the second edition, and no other signs then remained that would indicate genre or mode from the vantage of authorial intent. This said, one might well consider a number of classic literary modes, if only to indicate the spread of the work. The epic, georgic, and bucolic (*stilus gravis*, *mediocris*, and *humilis*) modeled after Virgil are all valid classical "styles" at play in *Walden*, together comprising the spectrum of classicist literature. Beyond this literary precedent one might cite various coeval popular writings and official pamphlets as simultaneously engaged: agricultural reports, house pattern books, young man's guides, utopian tracts, topographical maps, cost/balance sheets, and natural history writings. And from a more formal vantage—emphasizing *Walden*'s episodic character—the sketch, excursion, homily, exemplum, dialogue, lecture, and prosimetrum would all warrant mention as identifiable ingredients.

However if an encompassing descriptive term is sought, an earlier critic is surely right in arguing that *Walden* is "most accurately defined as an autobiography" (Johnson 216). One ought perhaps to add the prefix "factual" to other common ancillary designations, such as "spiritual" or "transcendental." For, although discursive, *Walden* mainly expounds a crucial portion of its author's physical and intellectual life, as amply documented elsewhere.[1] Thoreau's textual "I" asks the reader to accept it as speaking for the historical man and frequently phrases its statements in such a way as to invite comparison with verifiable facts. That this approach does not preclude mythologizing, masking, and various reorderings of events is obvious to anyone browsing a random Thoreau biography or

consulting relevant background materials (such as Thoreau's Journals or successive manuscript versions of *Walden*).

Yet my initial concern here is not with an evaluation of Thoreau's truthfulness in any putatively objective sense, nor with a precise dissection of his narrative feints and obfuscations, but rather with his introductory declaration in *Walden* that he has felt prompted to write for a precise reason: "I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers," he states, "if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life, which some would call impertinent, though they do not appear to me at all impertinent" (3). While this declaration opens the possibility of a discrepancy between readers and townsfolk, the writer's purpose seems clear enough: to construct a prolonged speech of self-defense.[2] Why such defensiveness? To properly address this question, it is helpful first to consider the broader American tradition of autobiographical writing Thoreau engages in *Walden*.

Contextualizing Antebellum American Autobiography

Mid-nineteenth-century American autobiography frequently strikes as a narrative of tension, poised between demands of the private and idiosyncratic as against the representative and ideal. On the one hand a model pertained that emphasized the epiphanies of the "self-made" individual and his or her supposedly unique outlook as a prime vehicle of truth. On the other, the writer was urged to stress his or her life as an ideal example to society by its confirmation of a preordained order, preferably Christian in tenor.[3] One might rephrase this tension as a dilemma of situatedness and authority: should the writer properly address the reading audience as a recognizable community member, or better from the vantage of a certain distance? From the church pulpit or office of a local charity, or perhaps from a suburban woodlot?

In antebellum America each potential perspective, if retained exclusively, is seen to harbor risk. As an earlier scholar points out in stressing a "corresponding conflict in the national life," one identified hazard is political (Fendelman 11). Tocqueville's summation of burgeoning American democracy illustrates this perceived danger well. On the one hand democracy throws the individual "back forever upon himself alone"; on the other it submits him to the leveling influence of the "tyranny of the majority" (106).

What might regrettably often result, then, are portraits of eccentric hermits or merely conformist naïfs.[4] Behind Tocqueville's stated concerns, one senses his worry over a perceived American dearth of real political dialogue and debate. Will radical social thinkers merely retreat into the wilderness, while the populace becomes deaf or inoculated to their critical voices?

These discrete choices between alterity and conformity would seem equally disturbing from a religious viewpoint, however, with regard both to an older Puritan tradition of confession narratives and to newfangled concerns among the American Transcendentalists. Puritan influence remained strong in nineteenth-century America, and its legacy with regard to spiritual autobiography was divided if not tormented. Ambivalence about the self resulted particularly from the typological interpretation of history that the Puritan movement propounded. According to this intricate notion,

> temporal events had a triple significance: they existed in their own right; they fulfilled prophecies made in the past; and they prefigured events that were to come in the future. The immanence of God presupposed by the theory made attention to the details of existence necessary for understanding the Divine will. The simultaneous presupposition of God's transcendence, however, made history inconceivable apart from Providence. Since the reconciliation of these different frames of reference was possible only in the mind of God, all accounts of the past, including autobiography, appeared divided and polarized. (Fendelman 12-3)

Nevertheless the goal of the Puritan autobiographer, as one literary historian maintains, was to make "Providence the chief character of his narrative, his own life merely the setting for its actions" (Shea 272). But a structural problem immediately arose. How to uphold ideal form against everyday formlessness; clarity among ever-amassing details; coherent interpretation over and against chaotic plurality?

As a prerequisite for making sense of experience, the religious diary or journal was seen as indispensable to the Puritan mind. But its necessarily conflicted and inchoate character would stem from its self-imposed pressure of at once writing and reading

experience, noting a mass of mundane events while maintaining a recognizable self's contours.[5] Converting "historia into allegoria," to employ Sacvan Bercovitch's terms, might work for a limited material, but for the Puritan a whole life's experiences, down to the minutest of details, were to be involved (8). And the explicit but paradoxical goal of this joint textual and spiritual activity was ultimately to suppress a wrongful individuality, bending the more or less errant motions of the stochastic life into a recognizable and common redemptive curve.

That this convoluted ambition did not work out very well is evident. The militancy with which the Puritans hoped to "abase the self" instead released all of its energies, "constructive and destructive" (18-9). The fervent activity of affirming identity by turning against the power of self-affirmation yielded a significant bind, however unintentional, as both activities inevitably confirmed "aspects of involvement" in the self (20). The tension between a representative versus a merely private identity was thus reenacted at almost every turn of religious autobiography.[6]

Some of the rigors of Puritanism had of course abated during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Its remaining influence on the Transcendentalists was funneled mainly through Unitarianism, which itself constituted a revolt of sorts against Puritan conceptions of human depravity and God's sovereignty. As a twice-removed cousin, Transcendentalism furthered the critique of received religion by embracing historical criticism of the Bible (so rejecting the dogma of miracles) and supplanting revelation by intuition, soul by self, and God by the Over-Soul or Nature. In so doing, it transformed the motivations for keeping individual journals and diaries—activities that, it is important to stress, were nevertheless still seen as invaluable to the spiritually aspiring Transcendentalist.

What had changed was the rationale for such writing. The earlier emphasis on self-judgment had been transformed into a more positive concept of self-culture. Lawrence Buell has aptly summarized the effects of this change in outlook: "one might say that the shift in spiritual orientation made the element of self-consciousness in Transcendentalist writing more complex, more literary, and less intimate than in traditional spiritual autobiography." In that the proponents' orientation moved from "an I-Thou relationship with Spirit to an I-Nature relationship…their inner lives became more diffuse. Spiritual health now seem[ed] to consist in

perceiving the divinity in as many different shapes as possible, not in regular encounters in one's prayer closet" (277).[7] So one could at length reverse the structural dilemma the Puritan journal-keeper faced with a novel Transcendentalist one: while the former struggled to conform the elements of his own variform life to a sanctioned order, the latter could embrace personal complexity while instead facing difficulty in elucidating just what kind of order was being pursued.

Nevertheless, the Transcendentalist aesthetic retained its impulse toward encyclopedic mass and range, hoping to sift kernels of truth from the constant flow of experience. Rephrasing the process in the movement's own preferred terms, nurturing intuitive perceptiveness—variably called "genius" or "reason"—would allow the perceiver to transcend the quotidian aspects of reality navigated by the lower faculty of "understanding." Thus s/he would ultimately gain insight into the higher laws governing the tangible world.

Arguably one can identify the sources of this impulse as resulting from a conflation of interpretations of both contemporary and traditional phenomena as outlined above: a democratic focus on the importance of the debating and voting individual; a Puritan ethic of keeping a vigilant personal account of experience; and a Romantic notion of inner scrutiny as a prime vehicle of truth. These three factors have been described as pillars of Transcendentalist autobiography, as attempted by its practitioners (267). And in turn, two defining but incompatible characteristics of selfhood were widely accepted by the Transcendentalists. On the radical side, the individual was seen as potentially divine *qua* individual. Simultaneously, a restraining notion still held onto much of the traditional view that the singular self was ultimately valuable "only sub specie aeternalis, in his [or her] universal aspects" (269). Again and again, as we note, the tensions between the private and the representative, the quirkily idiosyncratic and the sanctioned ideal, reenact themselves.

Figures, Auditors, & Lacunæ: Reading Thoreau's Accounts

Thoreau's narrator makes clear with his opening remarks in *Walden* that "I, on my side, require of every writer, first or last, a simple and sincere account of his own life" (3). But an account, far from being unambiguous, per definition points to quite disparate phenomena. On the one hand it connotes a straightforward rendering or

explanation—forming, in the phrasing of *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, "a particular statement or narrative of an event or thing; a relation, report, or description"—while on the other hand also designating a precise list and enumeration of narrowly economic transactions—again from the OED, "counting, reckoning, enumeration, computation, calculation" (12). As it happens, *Walden* richly engages both of these basic connotations. There is in Thoreau's book a narrative of self-reliance and a set of tables detailing costs incurred and gains accrued from the protagonist's farming and day labor, his housebuilding outlays, as well as precise lists over his alimentation, clothing, and fuel expenditures.

While these economic figures have influentially been read as "parodies of America's methods of evaluation," it is interesting to note that they do add up (Cavell 30). From a strictly fiscal perspective, Thoreau walks away with a decent gain from his Walden experiment. It earns him almost 60% in farming profit already during the first year, based on a produce income of $23.44 while deducting the relevant outgoes of $14.72 ½—Thoreau's point about simple living thus effectively made (*Walden* 55).[8] And in light of his supposedly skeptical townsfolk, these accounts of his work would function as indices of a venerated Yankee pragmatism, thus quieting detractors.[9]

Here is how Thoreau comments on his given tables: "These statistics, however accidental and therefore uninstructive they may appear, as they have a certain completeness, have a certain value also. Nothing was given me of which I have not rendered some account" (60). After proudly listing the main elements of his frugal diet—beyond the staples of "rye and Indian meal without yeast, potatoes, rice, a very little salt pork, molasses, and salt, and my drink water"—Thoreau however sums up on a defensive note. "To meet the objections of some inveterate cavillers," he writes,

> I may as well state, that if I dined out occasionally, as I always had done, and I trust shall have opportunities to do again, it was frequently to the detriment of my domestic arrangements. But the dining out, being, as I have said, a constant element, does not in the least affect a comparative statement like this. (61)

This summation is remarkable in a number of ways, though perhaps not in the sense some critics have proposed. First of all, Thoreau's alimentary supplements from his rural, field-and-woodlot surroundings (one hesitates to call them wild) must be seen as sufficiently accounted for elsewhere in his narrative. The reader quickly learns that Thoreau would not hesitate to stoop or stretch for sweet corn, peas, turnips, groundnuts, purslane, wild apples, grapes, or any number of berries encountered on his daily rambles. S/he also learns that he fished for perch, pout, pickerel, and shiner in Walden Pond and other nearby waters, once even challenging his palate with a woodchuck caught ravaging his bean-field. Equally, Thoreau's concession of dining out must reasonably be taken at face value, regardless of its guarded opacity.

What rather does become a problem is Thoreau's insistence that his account nevertheless remains relevant as a "comparative statement." Strictly speaking, it remains valid only as a relative one—relative, that is, to similarly rough estimates of other modes of gaining one's nutrition (whether the reader's mode or Thoreau's own prior to, or after, his Walden living experiment proper). The writer's summation demonstrably amounts to an idealized estimate, despite its minute detailings of items and their respective costs.

It seems inconceivable that Thoreau did not realize this state of affairs himself. And so it arguably remains for us to consider what a purposely incomplete set of tables could hope to achieve. Beyond highlighting the irony surrounding the by-now legion of contemporary and latter-day critics who criticized Thoreau for his lack of forthrightness regarding his nutrition—the lacunæ, as we have seen, are after all conceded to within Thoreau's own text—there are other salient aspects to consider. Are not the venerated contemporary notions of representation and veracity in (auto)biographical discourse—as influenced beyond the patriarchal exemplars of Plutarch, Augustine, Rousseau, and Goethe by James Field Stanfield's *Essays on the Study and Composition of Biography*, Isaac D'Israeli's *Literary Character of Men of Genius*, and, perhaps nearest at hand, by Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Representative Men*—somewhat undermined by the given figures, detailing as they do a skeletal straw-man's diet rather than anything approaching a living, healthy individual's? And, by the same token, does not the straw-man thus configured in a sense glare back at the reader, as if to mock all vain hopes of devising and devouring fully fleshed-out life writing? Does he not resonate behind Thoreau's joke, early in his "Economy"

chapter, on the common propensity of his contemporaries to acknowledge ideal figures rather than naked truths: "Dress a scarecrow in your last shift, you standing shiftless by, who would not soonest salute the scarecrow" (22)?

Let us return to examine more closely the straw-man of Thoreau's figures. Should we still doubt the premise of nutritional insufficiency in the present case and hence see the element of the author's dining out as modest and/or infrequent—amounting to a disqualification of the straw-man critique—there is a valuable, modern dietetic study of three tentative Thoreauvian diets at Walden that merits attention.[10] The analysts in question base their figures on available documentation regarding Thoreau's physique and eating habits beyond perusing his own testimony in *Walden*. The trio of hypothetical diets is described as follows:

> (1) a strict one following as closely as possible Thoreau's idealized account in *Walden* of his spare, simplified meals; (2) the same diet items in quantities sufficient to meet estimated energy requirements to maintain the 127-pound weight of a twenty-eight-year-old, five foot seven inch tall man with low to moderate physical activity; and (3) the first diet supplemented by foods that he lists in the book (again caloric intake was computed to maintain Thoreau's weight). (Adams and Adams 252)

The results are striking. The first diet proves seriously inadequate, not least, as the analysts point out, for a man who was "historically at least six pounds under the lowest desirable weight for his height (he should have weighed around 148, with a minimum healthy weight of 133); in two years [at Walden Pond] on the first diet," they conclude, "he would probably have lost a dangerous amount of weight." The second diet, in turn, "seems unlikely because of the large portions it requires"—almost five cups of rice per first daily meal, flavored with nearly ten slices of salt pork; and for the other regular meal more than six hefty potatoes per serving. Although the increased qualitative allowances of the third diet would not have prevented some long-term deficiencies—notably of vitamin A and zinc, which work to reinforce the immune system against infections (in Thoreau's case latent tubercular ones)—it is clearly the diet the

analysts see as realistic, "perhaps the closest to what he actually followed" (255).

Tentatively, the study's authors propose Thoreau's often drastic pronouncements regarding his own eating habits and his strong opinions regarding "clean" and "filthy" foods in *Walden* as symptomatic of what in modern-day medical terminology would be called latent anorexia:

> Researchers and theorists point to traits held in common by medieval and contemporary anorectics (mostly women) that also seem Thoreauvian: stubbornness, self-righteousness, perfectionism, repressed sexuality, rebelliousness, ambition to stand out, euphoria, attempts to subdue the flesh and elevate the spirit. Most of all, anorexia seems to be a perverted quest for autonomy and control over one's life and environment in the face of perceived opposition from family and culture. *Walden* is, of course, primarily about taking control of life. (244-5)

However the caveats should rightly be several here, beyond the obvious ones we might raise of Thoreau's habitual rhetorical extravagance and spirited hyperbole, as well as the tuberculosis endemic to his family. While several Thoreauvian traits do seem related to anorexia, certain crucial symptoms seem missing: "obsession with food, distorted body image, exaggerated physical activity, etc." to quote the analysts' own cautions (258, n. 7). Regarding physical activity we should also recall the strong emphasis Thoreau puts on qualitative leisure throughout *Walden*, despite its several depictions of manual labor and exercise on the narrator's part—building, digging, planting, weeding, hoeing, swimming, rowing, sounding, and walking. "I love a broad margin to my life," Thoreau declares, making it his initial project in *Walden* to ascertain how little conventional work he needs to complete in order to pursue his real interests; for, as he puts it, "the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day" (111; 6). His conclusion is that roughly six weeks of conventional work are necessary to sustain himself, with the rest of the year left to pursue his passions of nature study, walking, thinking, reading, and writing.

Derived quantitative analysis such as the above may seem a crude instrument with which to approach a narrative like *Walden*'s, or

indeed that of any narrative, but it has the virtue of dispelling merely random personal opinions about the author's project.[11] To the matter of Thoreau's described work in his book, which some would say still blurs the real energy costs involved, one may add to the above an interesting computation of his physical effort in digging his house cellar. Here is how Thoreau presents the occasion: "I dug my cellar…six feet square by seven deep, to a fine sand where potatoes would not freeze in any winter." And he continues: "It was but two hours' work. I took particular pleasure in this breaking of ground, for in almost all latitudes men dig into the earth for an equable temperature" (44).

A critic who doubted that Thoreau would take pleasure in anything at all during the short time he had to dig such an "awfully big hole" actually took the trouble of approximating his energy requirement. Both a careful estimate of the total soil weight involved, adjusted for its probable moisture content in the Walden Pond vicinity, and the average height Thoreau would have to lift his loads were factored into the equation. And the ensuing calculation proves to exonerate the writer. "Translated into horsepower," the newly converted skeptic concludes, Thoreau was "working at the rate of about .03 horsepower for the two hours. Since the average human worker is able to sustain a power output of from .033 to .05 horsepower, Thoreau was not only capable of digging his cellar in the time he said he did, but probably of allowing a 'margin' to his work and taking 'particular pleasure' in it as well" (Williams 21).

In sum Thoreau's figures come across as at once confirmed and destabilized—confirmed arguably in their narrow truthfulness, while destabilized by what they leave out, cannot account for, whether by sheer necessity or the author's own volition. The reader faces a figured ideal, one might say, which to date has tended to generate responses spanning rejection, recognition, and emulation. While one must ever keep the larger context of Thoreau's related figures in mind—the writer's addressing one's securing of what he considers the four bodily necessities of shelter, heating, clothing, and food in the simplest possible manner, thence to concentrate more fully on what he regards as higher human pursuits—the very fact that the listed items are to be kept to a minimum doubly underscores their rudimentary, inferior status in the context of the larger quest, which Thoreau prefers to evoke as a quest for true living.

In microeconomic terms, Thoreau's endeavor subverts common capitalist logic on the level of the cost sheet by striving for

as little pecuniary profit as possible, and his philosophy of the balance sheet is equally subversive. His latter stance can be summarized as promoting "owning less allows more," and while the potential spiritual gains of this knapsack philosophy are said to be boundless, it nevertheless remains true that a reduction in any factors governing physical health, driven far enough, will inevitably lead to bodily degeneration and eventual collapse.

This latter caveat regardless, reduction of physical wants is seen as such a virtue with Thoreau that it at times imbues his narrative with near phantasmal rhetoric. Consider the following quotes from "Higher Laws": "I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind" (214-5). So far the admonition is relative rather than absolute, but Thoreau soon goes on to indict his contemporaries for groveling: "The gross feeder is a man in the larva state; and there are whole nations in that condition, nations without fancy or imagination, whose vast abdomens betray them" (215). The thrust of the rhetoric would have it that Thoreau's "larva men" had rather become butterflies, undergoing a fundamental bodily metamorphosis toward lightness and aerial life, etherealized (one supposes) to live exclusively on ambrosial nectar.[12]

Here indeed Thoreau approaches Plato's contempt for the physical as expressed in the latter's *Phaedo*, where we are told that "the soul reasons best when none of [the] senses [trouble] it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure, but when it is most by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it in its search for reality" (57). And with this Platonic context in mind, we might wish to re-read Thoreau's declaration of intent with his Walden Pond sojourn as outlined in the "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" chapter of *Walden*:

> I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (91)

The somewhat contradictory argument here gravitates toward the ascetic—"driving into a corner" and "reducing"—while the sucking out of marrow connotes a peeling away of flesh, from bones as well as cavities, to expose a clean-picked skeleton. Were such a fasting Buddha program adhered to in earnest, of course, Thoreau would indeed have to put trust in his "next excursion"—an afterlife, no less—to give "account of it," yet he insists on its validity, reiterating in his "Conclusion" chapter that "it is life near the bone where it is sweetest" (329).[13]

This plural and convoluted negating of the body brings us to a third way of understanding Thoreau in his self-exultant-cum-self-sacrificing mode. Importantly there are indications that his submitted accounts might ultimately have another intended addressee than the audiences so far discussed. In his concluding chapter, Thoreau laments that "in this part of the world it is considered a ground for complaint if a man's writings admit of more than one interpretation" (325). The statement can be taken at face value as a strictly human hermeneutic problem but further as a hint that one may write also for a reader above and beyond this, as it were, common quandary. Earlier in "Economy," Thoreau impresses that "faithfully minding [his] business" regardless, it "became more and more evident that my townsmen would not after all admit me into the list of town officers, nor make my place a sinecure with a moderate allowance." To this he adds a statement vowing both juridical and spiritual honesty: "My accounts, which I can swear to have kept faithfully, I have, indeed, never got audited, still less accepted, still less paid and settled" (18). This latter rejoinder would appear absurd with regard to his local audience and other readers (at least beyond the simple heuristic point that the figures follow later in the same chapter) but not from an eschatological point of view. What seems addressed here beyond the mundane is a divine auditor.[14] The claim prefigures Thoreau's comment later in the same chapter that "if your trade is with the Celestial Empire, then some small counting house on the coast, in some Salem harbor, will be fixture enough" (20). Walden Pond, it turns out, is to the present narrator just such "a good port and a good foundation" (21). And we will properly recall in this context one of the many corollary connotations of account, namely—again in *The Shorter OED*'s phrasing—"the final account at the judgment-seat of God, on the 'great day of accounts'" (13).

Thoreau's *Liber* and the Limits of Autobiographical Writing

But is Thoreau's reader at length to be contented with what amounts to such a trickster metaphysical correlation? To see *Walden* as the worldly remnants of one particular Transcendentalist's record of spiritual refinement into ever greater purity and receptiveness, with the reader merely functioning as a witness—rather than potential participant on his or her own terms? At most, then, a text amounting to a narrative of a receiver picking up ever more elusive truths, in turn striving to convert the redemptive potential of the chosen mode of life to the armchair reader? Thoreau's narrator seems himself to concede that such variable readerly skepticism is warranted, whether we find ourselves to be outdoor enthusiasts or bookish stay-at-homes, whether none of the above or a combination of both. Occasioned by his failure to bring the full bloom and taste of huckleberries to market—a passage highly metaphorical in its own right—Thoreau remarks, "I have since learned that trade curses every thing it handles; and though you trade in messages from heaven, the whole curse of trade attaches to the business" (70).

This curse of contamination—handling, dealing, and thus debasing—exposes a metacritical undercurrent that imbues significant portions of *Walden*, involving beyond an obvious swing at fashionable capitalist faith in the merits of "value-adding" (fruit jam purportedly being worth more than the fresh berries necessary to make it) the very potential of writing as such. There is an intriguing tangency between the theme of an obfuscating language and the limits of accounting early in *Walden* that deserves mention in this connection. Thoreau is ostensibly discussing clothing in terms of botanical-cum-human life, remarking:

> We don garment after garment, as if we grew like exogenous plants by addition without. Our outside and often thin and fanciful clothes are our epidermis or false skin, which partakes not of our life, and may be stripped off here and there without fatal injury; our thicker garments, constantly worn, are our cellular integument, or cortex; but our shirts are our liber or true bark, which cannot be removed without girdling and so destroying the man. (24)

Thoreau's metaphorical striptease deftly maintains its propriety by conflating two plant stem layers usually differentiated: the so-called *cellular integument* and the *cortex*. Thus he stops at the level of the inner shirt (*liber*) rather than that of exposed skin, after the thin outer coat (*epidermis*) and thicker sweater (*cellular integument-cum-cortex*) have supposedly been shed.

The Latin *liber* connotes bark, which in turn links the word to paper and writing.[15] By way of related metonym, *liber* also describes a book, such as an accounting book, commonly in the plural *libri lintei* or *libri magistratuum*.[16] But before pursuing this etymology further, which will lead toward larger questions regarding autobiographical writing as such, we must ask what it can mean to conflate a shirt with skin as Thoreau does, in effect blurring their distinction to render them inseparable. *Liber* understood on the metaphorical level made manifest as "true bark" makes sense, for girdling a tree down to the vital level of its inner bark will indeed destroy it, just as by implication a flaying of the skin will kill a person. What Thoreau seems to suggest here is that he has now brought accounting to bear upon something so intimate (bodily bound, one might venture to say, while incorporating mental as well as physical phenomena) that severing it from its corporeal interface—as *Walden* inevitably does—will result in a kind of death. What kind of death is the crucial question. Is it that of the writer's biological self, as the girdling/skinning alluded to would seem to suggest? Surely not. To arrive at a more plausible answer, we should note how Thoreau eventually describes his decision to quit his life at Walden, famously abrupt and taciturn as that remark is: "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one" (323).

Invariably one notes the jarringly distanced designation of "that one" for a life wrought with such passion and commitment over the preceding 322 pages, with only ten more to follow. Yet the drastic phrase makes sense read with the *liber*-as-nascent-bark distinction directed outwards, toward an external audience: namely implying that the protagonist's life as rendered in *Walden*, despite all the care that has gone into the writing process, is necessarily other (retroactive, one might say) to that of its actual writer in any number of respects. The resulting text—a living thing whilst being written—has indeed "destroy[ed] the man" it purports to render, simply by being fixed and decided. The published book can be seen

metaphorically as liminal *liber* solidified into outer bark, having at length lost its integration with its inner fiber and sap—as dead residue, as it were, rather than living tissue. In a less drastic vein, *Walden*'s writing could perhaps be seen as a husk outlining, in more or less faithful language, the cast of an earlier state of a writer whose intention it has always been to grow with ever more rings in arboreal terms—hopefully having, as he says, "several more lives to live." Yet this will convey at most specters of the man lurking amongst the words in the minds of *Walden*'s readers; variegated and multiform according to their powers of imagination as inspired, dulled, or provoked by Thoreau's writing, its strengths and limitations, disclosures and evasions.[17]

It is arguably in this spirit that Thoreau's *liber* should be understood. It forms a clue early in the book that its following narrative account of the writer's two years and more spent at the pond should be seen as bark severed from a tree and thus by extrapolation as once living skin severed from the pulsing blood and tissue (again in the widest sense) that formerly nourished and shaped it. Once more, then, Thoreau's tropology impresses how writing—its many wondrous, creative, inspirational aspects regardless—also destroys by exposure, in this case in a process akin to flaying a human body of its skin (or perhaps, less violently, shedding it by everyday, gradual attrition).

Recalling Thoreau's scarecrow once again, we may add that writing cannot reverse what it has once robbed and given to another: readers of the published work will inevitably salute the figure beside the shirtless author, since it is the only figure they have access to *qua* readers—clothed as this figure is by the author's words. The autobiographical narrative can therefore be seen as a medicinal pharmakon insofar as it brings a portrait "to life," as the saying goes, but inevitably it will at length also poison the prospect of such "life" by disallowing it change, modification, and adaptation. In this sense every narrative of a life lived brings closure. It denies the said life further agency on its own terms while somewhat fantastically granting it potentially endless and shifting interpretation by its readers.

Thoreau's perhaps most forthright and moving passage on the contrast between the life lived and the life written appropriately ensues in the "Solitude" chapter of *Walden*. He here describes himself with acute self-awareness as at once a sensuous human entity, an active and intent participant in the flow of experience,

whilst trailed by an insistent spectator "taking note" of the life lived from the sidelines. This latter conduit is the writer: Thoreau in the role of writing himself—appropriately "no more I than [he] is you"—and his product will, as against the wealth and complexity of individual experience, ultimately seem a fiction by comparison:

> I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. (135)

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Only a few years after the publication of *Walden*, Walt Whitman would note how American books printed during the Civil War years at times included recycled textiles from battlefield casualties. This ensured that traces of the soldiers' blood remained in the paper as mingled with the pulp. Yet the soldiers themselves were gone, occasional hues and stains bearing mute witness to their fates. It would take a superhuman auditor and reader to decipher them fully, but then again—as Whitman would surely agree—their relative truth should be provocative enough. And this relative truth is properly, returning to Thoreau, a truth in the reader's now. The reader should take stock of the rendered past by internalizing it into, and thus informing, the present—most germanely as a springboard to self-redemptive action. "Time hides no treasures—we want not its then—but its now," Thoreau writes in his Journal of 1841, adding that

> it is the province of the historian to find out not what was, but what is. When a battle has been fought you will find nothing but the bones of men and beasts—where a battle is being fought there are

> hearts beating. We will sit on a mound and muse, and not try to make these skeletons stand on their legs again. Does nature remember, think you, that they were men, or not rather that they are bones? Ancient history has an air of antiquity—it should be more modern. It is written as if the spectator should be thinking of the back side of the picture on the wall—as if the author expected the dead would be his readers, and wished to detail to them their own experience. Men seem anxious to accomplish an orderly retreat through the centuries—earnestly rebuilding the works behind as they are battered down by the incroachments of time—but while they loiter—they and their works both fall a prey to the enemy. Biography is liable to the same objection—it should be autobiography. Let us not leave ourselves empty that so vexing our bowels— we may go abroad and be somebody else to explain him— If I am not I—who will be? (1: 318-9, 22-3)

By the time of publishing *Walden* in 1854, Thoreau's last experiences at the pond lay some seven years behind him. Having wrestled with the manuscript for nearly a decade, he was seasoned enough to realize that an autobiography such as his own would necessarily also be belated. While not yet "ancient history" it still had to grapple with and organize thoughts and events that were necessarily receding—hopefully, then, into an "orderly retreat" after all, rather than to chaos and forgetfulness. Thoreau's diligent Journal notes throughout the period aided his writing process, in turn contingent upon the latent cultural-religious prompting (Puritan, Unitarian, and Transcendentalist alike in this general respect) to make account of oneself at every turn. However, Thoreau's resulting *Walden* text forms less of a plea to a conventional deity—despite, as we have seen, a brief gesture toward a divine auditor—than to a neighboring, inquisitive, curious reader.

The leaks and lacunae in Thoreau's accounting, highlighted in the present essay primarily via Thoreau's given alimentary figures and ruminations on *liber*, arguably serve a dual purpose in this regard. First of all they collectively form a warning that no autobiographical account can be exhaustive, all-aware, and hence perfectly *true* by anything approaching absolute standards (in Thoreau's case this state

of affairs pertains not only to necessary limitations of craft but also to considerations of due privacy; in other words he is not only compelled to economize with information but also chooses to do so by turns[18]). Secondly, *Walden*'s gaps so discerned paradoxically come to serve the narrative's explicit outward address and thrust, namely in asking its readers to fill in the holes themselves, as it were by the incidentals as well as profounder aspects of *their own lives*. *Walden*'s text will not in and of itself redeem the reader, as Stanley Cavell has so memorably pointed out (30). Yet even if it fails in its heroic attempt to write an alternative scripture in Cavellian light, its force nevertheless remains provocative, prodding its readers to action: "We need to be provoked," as Thoreau puts it in his "Reading" chapter, "goaded like oxen, as we are, into a trot" (108).[19] And so he enjoins his audience with a deft about-face, as if to say: "If you are not you—who will be?"

NOTES

1. That is, in Thoreau's correspondence and Journals as well as those of several of his friends, acquaintances, and family. As will become evident, I provisionally accept Philip Lejeune's prime generic criterion for autobiography in significant portions of my running text—namely "identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*" (193)—alternately invoking "Thoreau" or *Walden*'s "narrator" or "protagonist." I am aware of the justified critique Lejeune's criterion has provoked, but I trust the drift of my general argument will explain my use of his convention. It seems to me appropriate to approach *Walden* as a narrative rhetorically claiming to contain the three mentioned roles in one, while ultimately supplying ample evidence in its subtexts and metacritical junctures of the impossibility of such sustained control. See Lejeune's "The Autobiographical Contract." Furthermore, in here pursuing what I identify as critical and metacritical traits of *Walden* construed as an autobiography *tout court*, I purposely refrain from the complex topic of its gender (in)sensitivity and/or misogyny. In this context I believe Sidonie Smith is correct in describing Western, nineteenth-century male autobiographies in general as imbued with a sense of "universal selfhood" with the "self so understood [as] both prelinguistic and extralinguistic. Constituted neither in nor by language, it

exists prior to and independent of language." However in Thoreau's specific case Smith's following remark that language in the relevant context is "conceived as transparent and mimetic" becomes a more problematic statement (17). While there is little or no evidence that Thoreau harbored doubts as to the self's integrity (especially his own), how and to what extent to express it in language became a delicate matter. Thoreau surely benefitted from a sense of authorial entitlement as a male writer to some extent, while evidently less assured of his authority to speak as an *unconventional* male writer and thinker in other respects.

2. Cf. Eva Hættner Aurelius's work on the relations between women's autobiography and various concepts of guilt, *Inför lagen. Kvinnliga svenska självbiografier från Agneta Horn till Fredrika Bremer.* Following the critical debate on identity as a function of guilt within a Christian context, and hence secularization as a possible source of fragmentation, Hættner Aurelius cites the interesting protest that modern identity might just as well be characterized as having come from ashes into the fire. In a situation where God's verdict of condemnation or clemency is no longer available, the individual would have to turn to others for apology or appeal. And the judgments of such a public court—to which for example Rousseau turns in his *Confessions*—would potentially be just as capricious and merciless as those emanating from a previously feared God (65). A slight risk with Hættner Aurelius's approach, however, is her emphasis on autobiographical guilt as preordained. It would surely be more adequate to say that guilt *may* ensue from a trial—but there are also many (female and male) autobiographies which present combative defenses of their respective cases; *Walden* in this sense presents itself as a classical apologia, denying culpability by turning tables on the arguments of the prosecution. James Goodwin, in his *Autobiography: The Self Made Text*, pointedly argues that autobiography should not be seen as prostrate in facing a perceived court, wishing to see it rather as an extension of an ancient form of justification: "With his *Essays* Montaigne renews for literature the *apology*, a form in classical rhetoric for philosophical explanation and the justification of one's beliefs. Socrates' *Apology*, delivered at his trial by the Athenian state in 399 B.C. and related by Plato, is the most eminent example from antiquity. In an apology, or *apologia* (the Latin term often used in English), the guiding intention is to

vindicate one's own beliefs and actions, often in the face of official censure or public controversy. In contrast to the confession, the apology as a literary form implies no admission of guilt on the part of its author. The essential rationale of an apology is that the writer, in explaining the origin of ideas and opinions behind actions, will rectify inaccurate and unfair judgement over his or her conduct" (5).

3. It is well to remember that the goals of Platonic reason and Romantic vision were not necessarily all that different—rather, the methods varied. "It is a caricature to present the Romantics as only concerned with self-expression," as Charles Taylor warns, adding that the "Romantic order, in contrast [to a Platonic one], was not organized on principles which could be grasped by disengaged reason. Its principle of order was not exoterically available. Rather it was itself an enigma, and one could only understand it fully by participating in it" (429, 380).
4. Laura Marcus has identified a trait of critical discourse on autobiography throughout the nineteenth century as involving "the relationship between private and public selves and places, the tension between 'exemplary' and 'counter-exemplary' individuals" (12-3). See her *Auto/Biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice.*
5. Cf. Janet Varner Gunn's phenomenological analysis of what she calls the proper "autobiographical situation," where "the autobiographer serves, by his habitation, as the paradigmatic reader; and the autobiographical text, embodying this reading, becomes, in turn, a model of the possibilities and problems of all interpretive activity" (22). "Reading," in this light, is seen as a "cultural act" locating the self in a world, whereas "writing" the self entails "only the certitude of one's private sensations," resulting in an isolated soliloquy (8, 22).
6. The problem can of course be rephrased as generic with regard to all confessional autobiography: its "avowed plan," to Georges Gusdorf, "is simply to retrace the history of a life," whereas "its deepest intentions...are directed toward a kind of apologetics of theodicy of the individual being. This gap explains the puzzlement and the ambivalence of the literary genre" (40).
7. Some debate has arisen over the status of the Transcendentalist self in the face of this complexity. Thus Thomas Cooley argues that Thoreau still "believed that character...could not be altered in any primary way" (13), whereas Phillip Abbott counters that

the essential "Thoreauvian fear is loss of control and the subsequent dissipation of the self" (80). A middle ground has also been staked out, as evinced by Mutlu Konuk Blasing's opining that Thoreau's *Walden* should be seen as autobiographical precisely because "it presents a multifaceted self" that realizes an "identity in difference" (4). My own position lies nearest to Blasing's, though I would emphasize processuality and intratextual debate as central to Thoreau's sense of self as expressed in his writings.

8. Having started with a capital of $25, Thoreau very nearly broke even during his first year, incurring total outgoes of $61.99 ¾ (including housebuilding outlays of $28.12 ½ as well as costs of fuel, clothing, and food) while his stated income from farming and various day labor amounted to $36.78. In terms of running costs, then (i.e. discounting the housebuilding outlays), Thoreau managed to support himself according to his own calculations, finally bringing into the equation the intangibles of "the leisure and independence and health thus secured" (60).
9. As will have become clear already, I do not consider Thoreau's plea as directed only at his local, supposedly skeptical or antagonistic audience. Stephen Railton opts for such a view in studying how "*Walden* was built around Thoreau's sense of himself as beleaguered by his audience, at his need to justify his ways to men" (57). With a somewhat broader perspective, Steven G. Kellman has interestingly characterized *Walden*'s dominant tone as "combatively apologetic" and "fiercely polemical, as if the narrator is resentfully conscious of a second-person pronoun who is somewhat resistant and perhaps even obtuse" (815). What results, Kellman concludes, is "a curious dialectic of solitude and communion" (818).
10. There is an earlier dietary assessment in Daniel Wesolowski's short note entitled "Thoreau's Nutrition" in the *Thoreau Society Bulletin* #145 that concludes, "although it may have reflected aesthetic and fiscal frugality, Thoreau's Walden diet did not imply *nutritional* frugality" (7). However as Wesolowski considers neither carbohydrates nor calories relevant to the context, his summation must be seen as fragmentary.
11. Franco Moretti and his colleagues at the Stanford Literary Lab have reinvigorated quantitative analysis within the realm of literary sociology. A principle in their aggregate analysis is to base findings on extant sources: "since we are all eager to find

what we are looking for, using the evidence gathered by other scholars, with completely different research programmes, is always a good corrective to one's own desires" (18). Equally important, Moretti holds, is to emphasize the processual nature of quantitatively based analysis: "quantitative data are useful because they are independent of interpretation;...they are [also] challenging because they often demand an interpretation that transcends the quantitative realm" (30). In the present case the quantitative data are of course Thoreau's own, whereas I choose to interrogate them as forming a partial (in both senses of the word) account in light of an independent dietetic study.

12. Or indeed on "board nails" when challenged about their diet, as Thoreau maintains of himself in the same chapter (65). It may be added here that Thoreau's sole drink in *Walden* is water. Consumption of caffeine-harboring and/or more calorie-rich beverages such as coffee, tea, or milk are explicitly ruled out (205), while malts, ciders, light beers, or stronger brews of any kind are implicitly out of the question (Thoreau evidently abstained from alcohol completely during his lifetime). Commenting on his given alimentary statistics in the "Economy" chapter and itemizing his chosen foods, Thoreau's narrator consequently lists water as their only complement and later adds that this was the only drink he offered his guests at the pond (61, 150). Further on in the "Higher Laws" chapter, Thoreau reflects on his teetotalism: "I am glad to have drunk water so long, for the same reason that I prefer the natural sky to an opium-eater's heaven. I would fain keep sober always; and there are infinite degrees of drunkenness. I believe that water is the only drink for a wise man; wine is not so noble a liquor; and think of dashing the hopes of a morning with a cup of warm coffee, or of an evening with a dish of tea! Ah, how low I fall when I am tempted by them!" (217).
13. On this score, Paul John Eakin has emphasized how a literal reading of this and related *Walden* passages may become injurious. Citing the fate of the young adventurer Christopher McCandless (who apparently died of starvation in an abandoned bus in the Alaskan wilderness in 1992, notably with a coverless edition of *Walden* amongst his remains), Eakin registers a reader who "had carried the Thoreauvian injunction 'simplify, simplify!' to a radical reduction" under the sway of a "dangerous underside of transcendentalist self-reliance" (44-5). As the journalist Chip

Brown had made clear in an earlier assessment of McCandless in the February 8, 1993, issue of *The New Yorker*, there were telling annotations in the copy of *Walden* found with the body: beside the "Higher Laws" passage reading "I found myself ranging the woods, like a half-starved hound...and no morsel could have been too savage to me" (210), for example, McCandless had added "YES" in the margin; a little later, where Thoreau writes that "our whole life is startlingly moral" (218), McCandless added "EVERY ACT." The standard biography on McCandless remains Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, which also frequently dresses McCandless's project of jettisoning civilization and its mores in Thoreauvian terms.

14. The evangelical drift of this passage has been noted by G. Thomas Couser (66).
15. My evocation of what might seem a fanciful cluster of associations pertinent to *liber* (bark and book; woven cloth and writing) has an interesting precedent, to my knowledge not noted in the secondary literature. It concerns a now-forgotten botanical treatise, superseded already in Thoreau's day by Asa Gray's successive editions of *[A] Manual of the Botany of the Northern United States*, both of whose earliest editions of 1848 and 1856 Thoreau procured personally, and the first of which he also annotated profusely. Yet Gray is not the source of the *liber* extrapolation; it is rather L[oring] D[udley] Chapin in his *The Vegetable Kingdom; or Hand-Book of Plants & Fruits*. Thoreau owned a copy also of Chapin's treatise, autographed it on its title page, and—judging from available sources—annotated it throughout, akin to his personally commenting in the margins of his first Gray volume. According to Ray Angelo, longstanding botanist of Concord and author of the *Botanical Index to the Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, Thoreau sought to expand his botanical expertise pertaining to Concord's flora during the first few years of the 1850's (cf. 18) and during this period bought several of the few books extant which bore on the more or less localized subject. [Indeed, the "We don garment after garment"-cum-*liber* passage quoted above is not in evidence until the so-called "D" (or 4th of 7) version of *Walden* of 1852, cf. Ronald Earl Clapper's *The Development of Walden: A Genetic Text* (109), which circumstance would dovetail with Angelo's chronology.] As it is, Chapin's *The Vegetable Kingdom* not only sanctions Thoreau's mentioned *liber* associations but also suggests them

outright, and in so doing deserves to be quoted at some length. In his section on exogenous plants, applicable to "outside growers, such as the oak" (102; cf. 9), Chapin introduces the thick stem as a multilayered structure: "*The epidermis, cellular integument and cortex* constitute the *bark*." He then proceeds to describe the respective layers thus: "The *epidermis*...is also called the *cuticle*, as the scarf or outer skin of animals is called. It varies in thickness in plants, from the delicate rose-leaf to the ragged bark of the oak or walnut.... It peels off in the birch, etc., as with animals, not possessing, as with them, vitality" (65-6). In turn, "the *cellular integument* or texture is next beneath the *epidermis*, or *cuticle*. It is the 'true skin' and the depository of color as in animals and man, alike in the white Caucasian and black African" (66). And further into the layer, Chapin explains, "the *cortex* [ensues] directly beneath the cellular structure.... The inner part [of the *cortex*], called the *liber*, is the seat of the principle and vital functions of the plant. The name is from a book, the leaves of which it resembles in its annual layers deposited by the descending sap. It is a kind of net work resembling cloth. As a new layer is formed, the old one of bark is pushed outward which readily loses its vital principle and forms an inert crust. It is of *liber* that cloth is made, as with flax, the paper-mulberry, etc. This being the vital part of the plant, it cannot be destroyed with impunity. The most recently formed part of the *liber*, between the wood and the bark, remains inactive during the repose of vegetation. After affecting the development of buds and the formation of new wood and bark it hardens, as in previous years, and loses its power" (66). (It would be gratifying to be able to consult Thoreau's copy of Chapin regarding possible annotations at the relevant junctures, but the volume passed into private hands in 1963, as made clear by Walter Harding in his annex article "A New Checklist of the Books in Henry David Thoreau's Library" in *Studies in the American Renaissance* [158].)

16. I am indebted to Robert Pogue Harrison for his suggestion that Thoreau's "*liber*" be read specifically as an accounting book of classical origin. Harrison's gloss of the passage sees it as geared toward "our possession of language and memory in their futural projections," whereas I am more inclined to see it in retrospective terms (40-1).
17. Linda Anderson, in an astute assessment of Paul de Man's late 1970's deconstruction of autobiography, discusses his view of

the mode as one of inadvertent "de-facement." De Man in Anderson's apt words "identifies autobiography with a linguistic dilemma which is liable to be repeated every time an author makes himself the subject of his own understanding. The author reads himself in the text, but what he is seeing in this self-reflexive or specular moment is a figure of a face called into being by the substitutive trope of prosopopeia, literally, the giving of a face, or personification. [Thus autobiography] reveals something which is in fact much more generally the case: that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language or tropes. Autobiographies thus produce fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek. What the author of an autobiography does is try to endow his inscription within the text with all the attributes of a face in order to mask or conceal his own fictionalization or displacement by writing" (12-3). Lest it be feared that I have attempted to convey Thoreau's narrator of *Walden* as a poststructuralist *avant la lettre*, some important contrasts with de Man's outlook are worth pointing out. First, while Thoreau clearly evinces a metacritical awareness of the limits of the writing craft in *Walden*, he does not try to conceal this state of affairs: rather, as I have striven to show, open admissions vie with more subtle clues throughout the book, the various aspects of *accounting* and of *liber* in the "Economy" chapter being two examples. Secondly, insofar as a "de-facement" process pertains to *Walden*, this is not shamefully deflecting, as de Man would have it, but enthusiastically provocative: the larger narrative thrust of Thoreau's work prompts the reader to look beyond the protagonist's visage at *his or her own face in the mirror, to take account of his or her own life.*

18. Whilst generally both forthright and humorous about scatological topics in *Walden*, for example, Thoreau neglects to mention how and where he built a privy or arranged a toilet facility for himself during his stay at the pond. See West's "Scatology and Eschatology."
19. Recently, Jonathan Ellsworth has skillfully unwrapped the book's Socratic tendencies of prompting its audience to reassessments of cherished truths, maintaining that "*Walden* is designed to serve as a catalyst for self-examination, and it employs a number of authorial strategies to assist the reader in this task" (144). My only argument with Ellsworth's essay in the present context is his evaluation of Thoreau's given accounts in the "Economy"

chapter as complete and hence as furnishing the reader with a directly comparative rather than relative statement (cf. 147).

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