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WHERE'S WALDO?

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Laura Dassow Walls, *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017)

Kristen Case and K. P. Van Anglen, eds., *Thoreau at Two Hundred: Essays and Reassessments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)

James S. Finley, ed., *Henry David Thoreau in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

As a young man, Thoreau found the pencil of American manufacture a gross and greasy tool unfit for finer uses. In a breakthrough, then, for the family business, he discovered that by grinding the graphite to a near impalpable powder, then mixing it with clay just so, a pencil could be made that would write and sketch with such elegance and precision as to out-perform the standard Old World imports. It is hard to say whether Thoreau's technological fix was an application of the New England Transcendentalist imagination or, more prosaically, a shrewd colluding with the Industrial Revolution and the global market economy. But increasingly, and especially as we observe the bicentennial of Thoreau's birth, here is where we find him most: at the pivot point between this world and a world made better by intelligence, between raw nature and its sublimated refinement into meanings. We tend rightly to suppose that we can't have too many watchers posted at that gate.

As the three excellent books here under review attest, our appreciation of Thoreau is an advancing history, one that keeps pace with increasingly complex notions of his relevance. That Thoreau's value to his readers was slow to appear is suggested by his having had to store in his attic bedroom some seven hundred remaindered copies of his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849). *Walden* (1854), with twice as large a first printing, fared better, its sales helped along by its author's growing, if still modest, reputation as a lecturer. Notices of the latter book stressed the eccentricity of Thoreau's deliberate turn as a hermit and his vindication of the virtues of the simple life, having, in the

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words of one contemporary critic, "held out on little or nothing, longer than most men could have done."[1]

Readers coming fresh upon Thoreau today—that is to say, the "students" to whom at first *Walden* was addressed (transient occupiers of the morning as they were and are)—bring similarly uncomplicated expectations to the narrative and have typically predicated their fascination with Thoreau's project on precisely that first quality: the strange anchorite persistence of the clever man. What students tend to be dubious about is whether such a conduct of life as Thoreau laid out could be altogether feasible, given the modern world and its glittering promises, made on condition that those whom it means to benefit shall have nothing to do with nature during the whole of the standard work week. To replicate the experiment at Walden, as they often think they're being invited to do, is simply, in their view, to put themselves decisively off track in the scramble for preferment and a cushy life. Surely it must be a main occupation of the bicentennial to think about what Thoreau presently and practically offers to the student. What was Thoreau ever good for, and what is he good for now? One sees that the two collections of essays approach this issue somewhat obliquely at best, and in a way quite different from that adopted by Laura Walls in the biography. It may be helpful, in light of this, to consider the methods and assumptions belonging to these two celebratory genres, both scholarly in execution, but one designedly popular as well.

In an essay on "The Challenge of Thoreau's Biography," Ronald A. Bosco has observed that a fully satisfactory treatment of the man and his career—one that would, in Thoreau's words, capture a life "whole and entire"—remained still to be written (F, 292).[2] This proposition antedates by some months the appearance of Walls's book, which is certainly the comprehensive historico-critical performance that he calls for. Bosco's emphasis on the biographer's duty simultaneously to visualize the life in the work and the work in the life—especially for so autobiographical a writer as Thoreau—makes a special virtue of seamlessness. Even the best of the previous biographies—Robert D. Richardson's *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (1986)—had seemed somewhat to isolate Thoreau in his exemplary function as reader and thinker. And here we begin to feel the force of the several paradoxes of the commendatory or celebratory mode: that, for example, presuming value makes its demonstration more difficult, or that not much is ever made clear without making something else obscure—which is to say, in particular, that Thoreau cannot be brought forward (or be made a

[1] *Boston Daily Evening Traveller*, 9 Aug. 1854, 1; reprinted in Joel Myerson, ed., *Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews* (Cambridge, 1992), 372.

[2] In parenthetical citations the Finley collection will be identified as "F," the Case–Van Anglen collection as "C," and the Walls biography as "W."

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subject of) without putting something or someone else into the background. As it happens, Bosco illustrates this point by singling out for severe criticism (he is not the first to do this) Emerson's famous eulogy, published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August 1862, and by contending that it served authoritatively to constrict Thoreau's reputation—from which, according to a coinciding argument by Richard J. Schneider, he didn't recover until 1941 and the wholesale revision of the American literary canon engineered by F. O. Matthiessen (F, 307).

But a fair reading of the eulogy would show that Emerson was accurate in his fulsome praise as likewise in his measured criticisms, functioning in character as a kind of "resisting reader," of whose discriminations Thoreau would likely have approved. In fact Emerson greatly valued such rare and estimable traits in his friend as his uncompromising commitment to the truth, his consistent idealism, and, in consequence, the originality of his "protestant" persona, all in a world of near unanimous conformity. One of Thoreau's great distinctions as a writer was that he had accepted what so many others had agreed to ignore: the culture's standing invitation to sarcasm. It may seem ungrateful in Thoreau to feel himself most in opposition, as Emerson said he did,[3] and yet without the talent behind the fault we would have no "Civil Disobedience," no "Slavery in Massachusetts," and, perhaps, no broad public sympathy for John Brown. Emerson knew all this; he was aware of the personal cost to Thoreau of his being a free man in a slave society, as much embarrassed by influence and discomfited by connection as he was protective of his personal independence. Nor did the eulogist flinch from honestly expressing these costs in immediate relation to their corresponding virtues. And here in a nutshell lies the "problem of Emerson" in the portraiture of Thoreau: how fairly to figure the meaning of the older man's influence in the long, fraught conversation between mentor and protégé when neither was eager to acknowledge a relationship so defined. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a friend of both men, as Sandra Petrulionis notes (C, 95–6), thought the imbalance in their reputations unjust, yet he could not refrain from calling Emerson Thoreau's "teacher" (C, 93). It seems an almost inevitable effect of the bicentennial moment that celebrating Thoreau should require being a little closed-mouthed about Emerson, probably the most pertinent and pervasive context of all—as well as the most embarrassing.[4]

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3 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Thoreau" (1862), in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, vol. 10, Uncollected Prose Writings*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco (Cambridge, 2013), 413–31, at 415. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "Thoreau."

4 The subject of their relationship has, of course, received a good deal of attention elsewhere, as for example in Joel Porte, *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* (Middletown, 1966); Harmon L. Smith, *My Friend, My Friend: The Story of Thoreau's Relationship with Emerson* (Amherst, 1999); Sam McGuire Worley, *Emerson,*

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The fourteen-year difference in their ages was variously useful, problematic, and decisive. It no doubt in the end augmented the shock that Emerson felt on seeing Thoreau die at the age of forty-four, a point in his own life when Emerson was still being routinely denounced as a heretic and when he had not yet published *Representative Men*, *English Traits*, or *The Conduct of Life*. It was not Thoreau's fault, nor did Emerson suppose it was, that his career ended prematurely and before America could form a proper estimate of his worth and character. "The country knows not yet, or in the least part, how great a son it has lost" ("Thoreau," 431). Thoreau read Emerson's *Nature* in 1836, while still a student at Harvard. A suggestion from Emerson a year later impelled Thoreau to a distinguished career of journal writing (W, 4). His reading of Coleridge, Carlyle, Goethe, and other crucial writers trailed behind Emerson's by anywhere from eight to ten years. Thoreau's famous interest in Asian religious texts grew from books he literally slid "off Emerson's shelves" (F, 86, 210; W, 145, 274). It is even said that Emerson taught Thoreau how and where to walk. Thoreau "signed off" from the parish church—along with numbers of others—soon after Emerson himself stopped attending, both in the clear light of the Divinity School Address (C, 110, cf. 236–7; W, 49). Thoreau began to write poetry after studying Emerson's verse of the late 1830s, including what appeared in the *Dial*—and particularly "The Sphinx."[5] The younger man's Transcendentalism is reflected from its source through many allusive passages, and one, perhaps, most especially: Thoreau's famous description in *Walden*'s "Spring" chapter of the lively eroded sandbank on the Fitchburg line near the Pond. The passage is credibly described by Robert M. Thorson (F, 252) as the climactic moment in Thoreau's masterpiece.

Thoreau, and the Role of the Cultural Critic (Albany, 2001); and John T. Lysaker and William Rossi, eds., *Emerson and Thoreau: Figures of Friendship* (Bloomington, 2010). The main crisis in their personal relation dates to 1849, centering primarily on the debacle of *A Week*, as succinctly explained in W, 266–8. Emerson had urged Thoreau to publish with James Munroe, his own publisher since 1836; that Emerson deeply regretted this bad advice is suggested by the fact that in late 1849 he dropped Munroe and went with the more aggressive publisher Phillips, Sampson, who brought out *Representative Men* in 1850.

5 For Thoreau's extensive notes on Emerson's poem see *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau, Journal 1: 1837–1844*, vol. 1, ed. Elizabeth Hall Witherell, William L. Howarth, Robert Sattelmeyer, and Thomas Blanding (Princeton, 1981), 279–86; reprinted as "Appendix A" in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 9, *Poems: A Variorum Edition*, ed. Albert J. von Frank and Thomas Wortham (Cambridge, 2011), 677–82. For Coleridge and Emerson as interpreters of the Sphinx's riddle see the comments by Samantha C. Harvey and Rochelle L. Johnson (C, 155–6); and for Emerson's early encouragement of Thoreau as poet, even against the adverse opinion of Margaret Fuller, see W, 144.

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And it is taken from Emerson.[6] Even Thoreau's phenological studies, which Kristen Case helpfully discusses (F, 259–68) and which structure *Walden* and the later "Kalendar" project, might plausibly have had their origin, at least as a literary project, in a suggestion from Emerson.[7] One can only briefly sample the innumerable instances of this inevitably unequal give and take, of a sort that tempted numbers of nineteenth-century commentators to conclude that Thoreau was, in the words of Franklin Sanborn, a "pocket edition of Emerson" (W, 373). Not in such crude terms, of course, would Emerson make his own judgment, even as he had to acknowledge the flattering echoes in Thoreau's thought and expression. The older man's expectations for the younger man's success (surely making for an aggravated case of the anxiety of influence) were heightened beyond the possibility of fulfillment precisely by the degree of Emerson's genuine admiration. Here is the basis for Lawrence Buell's only slightly hyperbolic claim that Emerson was to Thoreau "as much a clog as a stimulus" (C, 202). And here, too, the basis for Robert Richardson's arresting concession that "[i]t began, in all likelihood, with Emerson" (C, 243).

The editor's "Preface" to *Henry David Thoreau in Context* is devoted to a sophisticated explanation (or theory) of "context" as functionally stipulated by

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6 See also C, 160, for the suggestion that the passage is likewise indebted to Coleridge. Walls (W, 355) connects the passage to Thoreau's coming to terms with death during his trip to Fire Island at the time of Margaret Fuller's shipwreck in 1850. The journal source in Emerson dates to March 1849; see *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 11, ed. A. W. Plumstead and William H. Gilman (Cambridge, 1975), 75–6.

7 On 28 March 1835, Emerson wrote in his journal, "If life were long enough among my thousand & one works should be a book of Nature whereof 'Howitt's Seasons' should be not so much the model as the parody. It should contain the Natural history of the woods around my shifting camp for every month of the year. It should tie their astronomy, botany, physiology, meteorology, picturesque, & poetry together. No bird, no bug, no bud should be forgotten on his day & hour." See *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 5, ed. Merton M. Sealts Jr (Cambridge, 1965), 25; and William Howitt, *The Book of the Seasons; or the Calendar of Nature* (London, 1831). In 1851, Thoreau proposed to undertake "a Book of the seasons—each page of which should be written in its own season & out of doors or in its own locality wherever it may be." Six years later he returned to this idea, expressed in language even more redolent of early Emerson: "These regular phenomena of the seasons get at last to be—they were *at first* of course—simply and plainly phenomena or phases of my life. The seasons and all their changes are in me … The perfect correspondence of Nature to man, so that he is at home in her!" (C, 260, original emphasis). Before he had read Emerson's *Nature*—which is to say before he was much touched by Romantic influences—Thoreau had read Howitt's *Seasons*, the latest contribution to a phenological tradition extending back, as Case points out, to the literature of classical Rome. See Robert Sattelmeyer, *Thoreau's Reading: A Study in Intellectual History with Bibliographical Catalogue* (Princeton, 1988), 10; and Robert D. Richardson Jr, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley, 1986), 308–10.

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Cambridge Press as publisher and as subsequently deployed by the contributors, and of what it might mean to pay attention to context in the particular subject's case. The argument is that "for Thoreau, individuality does not require separation from one's contexts but rather a vigilant attending to them" (F, xviii), which neatly removes the ground from under the secessionist caricature implied by "life in the woods." The implication is that because context has a directive power and operates outside and prior to Thoreau—that it is, in other words, circumstantial and invasive—it has to be understood also as an "in-fluence" opposite to an "extra-vagance," and therefore as a threat more or less significant to the contextualized or influenced self—a clog, perhaps, to go with the stimulus. One is accustomed to thinking of Thoreau as very much his own man, an epitome of independent self-construction, the auto-bio of the autobiography, the self-reliant possessor of "an original relation to the universe." But Thoreau had, first and last and most remarkably (as I have tried to suggest in the shorthand sketch of his connection to Emerson), a positive genius for being influenced—one thinks of Bronson Alcott's tax protest, Margaret Fuller's travel writing (W, 255), or the abolitionism of Phillips, Garrison, or N. P. Rodgers—which might in the end well and seriously qualify him as a model student, unique in his proficiency at learning. With that distinctive openness to influence he was bound to rejoice, as he famously admitted, in the fact that he lived just where and when he did and amid the particular men and women with whom he consorted (W, 18, 272, 396).[8]

It is true of the two essay collections that "context" calls the shots. The genre more or less demands that the contributor's aim be to connect Thoreau with some extracted slice of the ambient culture, leading to a stackable set of conjoined or binary analyses: Thoreau and Religion, Thoreau and Technology, Thoreau and Native America, and so forth, an arrangement more exactly developed in the Finley collection. Thus, mathematically, $T + X =$ an occasion to survey what is known on a topic, to supply a helpful bibliography, and to anticipate or prescribe the metes and bounds of further research. The formula, fitted to and supportive of an academic context, can be simplified so as to give us essay titles like "Walden Pond and Walden Woods" (Kent C. Ryden), "Maine" (Stan Tag), "Classics" (Albena Bakratcheva), "Print Culture" (Jonathan Senchyne), "The Religious Horizon" (Alan D. Hodder), "The Literature of Travel" (William W. Stowe), "Politics" (Daniel S. Malachuk), "Slavery and Abolition" (Sandra Harbert

[8] It would be hard to construct an independent clause more utterly wrongheaded than did Henry James in calling Thoreau "worse than provincial—he was parochial." Henry James, *Hawthorne* (New York, 1880), 94. Cf. Walls: "Thoreau had been instructed by the era's most deeply radical thinkers: Orestes Brownson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass" (W, 272). One might add Walt Whitman to the list and still not get to the end of it.

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Petrulionis), "Warrior Culture" (Larry J. Reynolds), "Racial Science" (Cristin Ellis), "Physical Science" (Robert M. Thorson) "Evolution" (William Rossi), "Contemporary Poetics" (Alexandra Manglis), and "Popular Culture" (Carl H. Sederholm)—among the total of thirty-four short essays. With a few exceptions, the chapters make no aggressive moves toward a revisionist interpretation, but offer an authoritative array of well-informed insights that will be welcome indeed to anyone engaged in research on Thoreau or to those (why do they seem fewer these days?) who teach him on college courses, often, it must be admitted, in and for the interest of the context rather than of the writer whom the context illuminates. But the academic genre of the bicentennial collection is in danger of becoming a cliché. Its seams and inconveniences begin to show. Emerson said a necessary thing in pointing out that Thoreau "was no pedant of a department" ("Thoreau," 425), but wanted to speak somewhere without bounds. Among the additional relevant paradoxes of biography is that to multiply the grounds of Thoreau's excellence, as celebration wants to do, is to multiply by the same factor the opportunities to misrepresent him. The degree of his extravagance depends entirely on how you yard him. Students these days will not be fascinated by a Chinese menu of contexts, but only by a coherent central argument about why he matters. The demonstration needs to be made now more than ever not that Thoreau means competently or even with distinction in thirty-four different enumerated directions, but that he means in one direction—towards you, impressionable reader, and with "sensational designs."

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The comparative advantage of biography is, of course, that it substitutes for the "cloud of witnesses" one organizing sensibility. The efficiency of this arrangement has to do with the fact that of these two genres only the biography is persistently transactional, making provision, as in this case it handsomely does, for delivering in every part, chapter, and sentence a similarity of conviction and promise of interest. The form and purpose of life-writing make it more amenable to the construction of a central, unifying recommendation. A consequence of this difference, it would seem, is that bicentennial collections have to sell for around a hundred dollars, while the biography, at two to three times the size, costs a third of that. The "takeaway" might be that publishers are not in the paper-selling business, or that academics are not typically in the book-selling business—but also, and more significantly, that the broader public can be met and conciliated through the art of narrative in its higher, more elaborate development. Division is a time-honored prelude to analysis, but poetry may turn out to be the more appealing as well as the more efficient recourse for its characteristic avoidance of the exploded view. As Emerson explained,

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> The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.[9]

The metaphor is especially apt in the way it sets a natural and organic perception against a fiction of boundaries made necessary by landownership and the division of the commons. The lapse of the land into farms, lots, and homesteads is, of course, the end of wildness, which concerned Thoreau not a little, as Walls so thoroughly knows. If the bicentennial essays are a kind of plat book, the biography paints the landscape: if one kind of survey maps Walden Pond as a shoreline merely, another kind puts the water, life, sound, and light, with their original purity, back in—and finds its subject's depth and meaning.

This, in various ways, is what Walls does with her own subject, and what allows her to identify and make attractive the pertinence of Thoreau for the student who today goes to the trouble of reading him, whether for the first time or the twentieth. In her preface she says that "Thoreau earned the devotion of friends who saw in him no saint, but something perhaps more rare: a humane being living a whole human life" (W, xix). A biography will want to convey what those "saw in him" who, like Emerson, established a relation of friendship during the subject's lifetime, because a version of that friendship will underwrite the subject's relation to readers who stand even now to derive benefit from contact. Like Emerson, who "saw in him no saint," we become convinced by the evidence (as for our part we find it in Walls's narrative) that Thoreau was indeed a "humane being living a whole human life." Precisely this is what Emerson claimed in his eulogy, which, to be sure, attends more to issues of character than to literary accomplishment, while nevertheless connecting the two; and it coincides gracefully with Ronald Bosco's call, previously noted, for a biography that records Thoreau's life "whole and entire." The more ambitious sense of that phrase would imply that the life that had long awaited its adequate record was not to be made whole in the telling but was already and before the fact a life of special fullness and completion. Even at forty-four years, it was not broken off at some ragged end, nor was it at any point short on significance or wanting denouement. It was, rather, "whole and entire" as he actually lived it through various locations in a total cosmos of beauty and wonder. Just how Thoreau pulled that off is the story of his career. Clever students can be brought to understand that in Thoreau's example, in his

[9] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature, in The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* vol. 1, *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, 1971), 7–45, at 9.

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writings as in his biography, is a kind of secular road-map pointing to riches of interest and away from the various Sloughs of Despond and Triviality and Waste that seem to proliferate with an encroaching tide of modernity. This is what he's good for. He should be a context for us, and not we and our history for him.

Over the last thirty years or so there has been an important move to rehistoricize Thoreau by finding for him a more relevant social utility, especially in the "green tradition" but also as a force in antislavery. This shift was prefigured in the mid-1980s, when notice was first taken of the critical effort to "de-transcendentalize" the Transcendentalists.[10] It is a little remarkable that Walls does not go all in on such a reassignment; rather she understands Thoreau's interest in nature study, for example, as emerging from, and remaining in touch with, idealist epistemologies in their several strengths and weaknesses. There is in Thoreau, as Walls notes, a feeling that an exclusively symbolist view of nature, of a kind she attributes to Emerson, shortchanges the possibility of gratitude for earth and earthiness as well as for human embodiment and the dependence of aesthetic response on the mediation of the senses. And yet, of course, he betrays his Transcendental bona fides when he asks, in *Walden*, "Why has man rooted himself thus firmly in the earth, but that he may rise in the same proportion into the heavens above?"[11] At no point in his career was Thoreau unmindful of the marriage of Nature and Spirit, and in fact he does a better job than Emerson in apprehending sensory experience as the ground of an idea or as an access point to

[10] See Lawrence Buell, "The Emerson Industry in the 1980's: A Survey of Trends and Achievements," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 30/2 (1984), 117–36, at 123–9; Michael Lopez, "De-Transcendentalizing Emerson," *ESQ: A Journal of the America Renaissance*, 34/1–2 (1988), 77–139; Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, 1995); and the culminating study of Thoreau and abolition, Sandra H. Petrulionis, *To Set This World Right: The Antislavery Movement in Thoreau's Concord* (Ithaca, 2006).

[11] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton, 1971), 15. One could argue that the de-Transcendentalizing gesture tends to relieve these artist–philosophers of their signature idealism (often enough a shibboleth in the American classroom), but of course it denies at the same time the very ground of their vision and poetry. This was effectively the issue in the complaint that Thoreau, at the turning point of his life, traded in his apprenticeship to Emerson for a magnifying glass and a butterfly net—and, later, an introduction to Darwin. Thus it is not surprising that Lance Newman discusses "Thoreau's materialism" (C, 17–30) and Susan Gallagher speaks for "Thoreau's antimaterialistic philosophy" (C, 46), though the writers—and Thoreau's philosophical allegiances—are not in fact offered in dialogue.

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meaning—a superiority on Thoreau's part that Emerson himself ungrudgingly acknowledged.[12]

Walls is never sharper or more interesting than when, more than halfway through the book, she connects Thoreau's capacity for "wonderful discoveries" (W, 275), to the wakefulness that secures them and the freedom that puts him in their way. He finds (on 7 November 1850) that a new way of seeing has led him immediately to a new way of writing, as his journal entries become suddenly detached from prospective public use in lectures or essays, to take their new place as the undeferred finished product of each day's private walk by streams and swamps or through woods and fields (W, 303–4). Thoreau's journals become thereafter his essential work and remain so, Walls points out, until his death some dozen years later. The rejection of an instrumentalist conception of his own art activity suddenly applies previously developed general principles about freedom and disinterestedness. Walls doesn't directly explain why this reorientation occurred at just this moment, but she convincingly associates it with the failure of *A Week* and the corresponding reassessment of the relation to Emerson. "He was," Walls remarks, "for the first time, really free: free of Emerson's expectations, free of the literary marketplace, free of all hopes for travel abroad" (W, 274). These were all simplifications of his life, of an even deeper kind than he had managed to realize in his cabin by the pond. These simplifications, Walls implies, revolutionized his perspective and conducted him to greatness and unobstructed originality as a writer.

In this climactic central section Walls's narrative pursues over many pages a crucial thematic interest in freedom, touching lightly and with great subtlety on aspects of Thoreau's independence that made him the great champion of freedom that he was and still remains, both in his moral protests and in his confident clear-sightedness. One has here a sense of closely approaching what his friends "saw in him" and what indispensable contribution he may be supposed to make now to the students whom his writings educate. A large part of the challenge that Thoreau's most celebrated writings pose is the implication of our own unfreedom, the extent of it, and the surprise of finding it out. As has already been remarked, students often regard Thoreau's Walden experiment as outlandishly impractical, a judgment that concedes how predictable their own

[12] The symbolic imagination, which, as Emerson admitted, was intermittent and ornamental in his own poetic practice, "was in [Thoreau] an unsleeping insight" ("Thoreau," 420). Because of this idiosyncratic wakefulness, "Every fact lay in glory in his mind, a type of the order and beauty of the whole" (ibid., 424). The long training in the double consciousness of the symbolic imagination (as the exquisite ambiguity of Emerson's syntax implies) installs order and beauty in the mind—which might be accounted a desirable end of the student's higher education.

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lives appear to them in prospect, how narrow the margin for choice and deviation, how much, indeed, they have become hostage to a future already known. In this regard Thoreau shows us that more freedom is equivalent to more life or, what is the same thing, greater access to meaning, and that liberation of this kind is always at hand should the captive will it. "Live in the present," he said (C, 247).[13] "Be native to the universe" (W, 295). Modern Americans have a hard time imagining a life so contextualized, which might be taken to imply that they as often do not rightly know when and where they live.

Thoreau's account of his neighbors' unconscious slavery comes early in *Walden* because it is so much the concern of the book to show that what appear to be the appurtenances of freedom are in fact the very snares of constraint: "I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune it is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools, for these are more easily acquired than got rid of ... Who made them serfs of the soil?" (*Walden*, 5). The point is not just that ownership is a pretext for arrogance (as Emerson noticed in "Hamatreya"), or that it creates time-consuming responsibilities (how much life is exchanged for the illusion of ownership?), or that it reduces nature to its commercial uses; the point is, rather, the positive converse of these negatives: that a certain kind of overcoming the world is the path to freedom. "Abandonment," as Emerson and Thoreau each said in his respective formulation, is the "wonderful" "way of life."[14] As early as 1837, the year of the Panic, Thoreau took the position in his Harvard commencement address that Americans were abusing their historically unprecedented "freedom of thought and action" by devoting it so exclusively to the pursuit of wealth. That abuse in turn created more or less rigid and traditionary channels of behavior that anticipated the future for those tainted by ownership, while likewise putting their present into mortgage.

"This curious world which we inhabit," Thoreau said in his college address, "is more wonderful than it is convenient, more beautiful than it is useful."[15] A deep-seated and long-held suspicion about the alleged virtues allegedly helpful in getting ahead (purposefulness, mastery, intentionality, force, and the ability to find things instrumentally useful) was key to Thoreau's new freedom in the growth between *A Week* and *Walden*, clearly, as Walls convinces us, the most interesting and transformative period of Thoreau's life. In addition to the simplifying losses that Walls enumerates are others that she doesn't offer

[13] This is the subject of Robert D. Richardson's especially fine essay, "The Rooster's Philosophy, or 'The Gospel According to This Moment'" (C, 243–50).

[14] See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles" (1841), in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2, *Essays: First Series*, ed. Joseph Slater, Alfred R. Ferguson, and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge, 1979), 179–90, at 190.

[15] See the discussion by Robert A. Gross (C, 114–15).

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as belonging to that category, among which the most potent was surely the confrontation with death in the wreck of the Irish famine ship *St. John* at Cohasset in October 1849, subject of the first chapter of *Cape Cod*, and the wreck of the *Elizabeth* on 19 July 1850, in which Margaret Fuller died. Thoreau was a personal witness in both cases, and in both cases he responded to the wanton extinction of life, the permanent dashing of hopes and intentions, by an optimistic struggle to see meaning not as obliterated or swept away, but as intensified by fragility, jeopardy, and forfeiture.[16] "Not till we are lost," Thoreau wrote, "not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations."[17]

Henry David Thoreau: A Life will be for many years to come the biography that readers will turn to in fruitful search of a life "whole and entire." It will supply good answers to the question of why Thoreau still matters, two hundred years after his birth. He will continue to be an emancipator, a smart recommender of freedom, and a comfort to students who demand, as in poetry, intenser meanings in life and in language. Because his seeing and saying are so finely adjusted, he teaches the connection and the conditions that encourage it, and in consequence we become more deeply aware of (and so more responsible toward) our surroundings. "Shall I not be a watchman henceforth?"[18]

[16] Stanley Cavell's discussion of Thoreau's "struggle for language" as a response to loss is discussed helpfully by David M. Robinson in "Thoreau, Stanley Cavell, and American Philosophy" (F, 313–20).

[17] *Walden*, 171; used as epigraph for Chapter 4 of the Walls biography (W, 124) in reference to the death of John Thoreau in 1842.

[18] From a journal entry of 7 Sept. 1851, quoted in the essay by Richardson to illustrate Thoreau's having come just then to understand "not only what his own religion was, but what he should be doing about it" (C, 246). See note 13 above.

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