“The life excited”:
Faces of Thoreau in Walden

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My work is writing, and I do not hesitate, though I know that no subject is too trivial for me, tried by ordinary standards; for, ye fools, the theme is nothing, the life is everything. All that interests the reader is the depth and intensity of the life excited. —Thoreau, Journal, 18 October 1856 (J 9: 121)¹

At the end of Walden the Thoreau persona speculates on his reasons for choosing to leave the woods at the end of the Walden experiment: “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” (W 323). It seems unlikely somehow that the writer who penned these lines could have imagined at the time just how many lives he would live, and continues to live, not as a universally understood historical or literary figure, but as an enormously variable icon in the culture that has both inherited and shaped him. From a life less than ordinary yet by no means dramatic we have inherited a figure in Thoreau who is variously heroic (and sometimes villainous), an archetype of the environmental hermit, the conscientious objector, the alienated misanthrope, the nature-mystic and the political subversive, among many other roles—this metaconstruct is more hydra-headed, in fact, than it is Janus-faced. This essay focuses not so much on any one (or few) of these particular faces as on the range of ways through which Thoreau makes his own mutability a pronounced feature in Walden, the book which has served more than any other of his principal works to influence Thoreau’s evolving public image.

A brief taxonomy of Thoreau’s faces in Walden may suggest the scope and complexity of the author’s literary representations of himself. Already in the very first paragraph of the work Thoreau represents himself in a variety of capacities.
He appears to us as a member of society and also as someone outside its pale: “At present I am a sojourner in civilized life again” (W3, emphases added) (the italicized adverbials can only imply that he was not a sojourner in civilized life during his two years at Walden Pond). He assumes the form of a narrating character who is rooted in factual history but who nevertheless exhibits some fictional traits: “I…earned my living by the labor of my hands only” (W3) (a perfunctory knowledge of the historical Thoreau’s life during this period is enough to throw this claim into doubt). Moreover, this narrator is not only the figure undertaking the experiment in self-sufficiency in the narrative about to unfold but a distinct editorial speaker looking back at his former self after this event: “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts” (W3). This last sentence sets up another duality in Thoreau’s textual persona: namely, he is both the biographical subject portrayed in Walden and the implied author behind this portrait. This is in fact the very first line in the text of Walden. Its temporal frames of reference are striking, for they situate Thoreau simultaneously at the time of the Walden experiment, at the time of the book’s composition (both during and after the experiment if we are to take the speaker at his word) and, finally, at a moment which postdates virtually all of the Walden text except the present utterance. In other words, the editorial comment in the book’s first sentence creates the impression that Walden’s opening line of narrative may also have been one of the last lines its author composed.

It hardly seems necessary to belabor the point. Thoreau’s complex self-representation in the opening passage of Walden seems too savvy to be the haphazard product of chance. For the subtle ways in which it manipulates characterization, perspective, voice modulation and psychic distance, it may not be a unique specimen in our literature, but it is a particularly fine one. The opening paragraph itself includes only sixty-nine words in three sentences, but its brevity and apparent straightforwardness mask a playfulness at work in Thoreau’s rhetoric. In effect, the author destabilizes readers’ most basic preconceptions about who is speaking, from which vantage point and in what form, only to turn this instability to his own advantage. Thoreau does this by sneaking a variety of identities (or categories of identity) into a single hypostatic figure—his textual self. Or it might be just as correct to say that he superimposes multiple layers of identity over his narrating persona.

An unusual imaginative space opens up in Walden where many varied and even contrary faces find room to exist in a single indispensable figure. That many readers (both sympathetic and resisting) manage to take this persona seriously as a unified, credible consciousness, even when they may have great difficulty reconciling some of his self-negating attitudes or views, seems a good measure of Thoreau’s success in pulling off his textual con, a phrase not intended to be disparaging in any way, but suggesting nevertheless the necessity of a certain guileless cooperation on the part of Thoreau’s readers.
The author is an essential component of Thoreau’s textual persona in *Walden*. This is explicit in the text itself. In the opening pages of the book, Thoreau continually reminds his audience (whom he identifies, ideally, as poor students) that they are in fact reading a book and that he is its architect. Even this authorial component of Thoreau’s textual persona has several distinct faces, including (at various points) the lecturer, the preacher, the critic, the philosopher, the historian, and the poet-dramatist. In the pages that follow *Walden*’s opening paragraphs Thoreau extends and expands upon the guises under which he initially appears to include a whole gallery of distinct types.

A look at the ways in which Thoreau characterizes or accounts for himself at an explicit level in *Walden* may provide a useful starting point for an examination of more subtle forms of self-representation in the work.\(^4\) We can begin by looking solely at the classes of occupation to which Thoreau admits he belongs. In “Economy” Thoreau describes how he supplemented his income during his stay at Walden Pond by working as a surveyor, a carpenter and a day-laborer, noting that he has “as many trades as fingers” (*W* 58).

This turns out to be something of an understatement. If we are to take the narrator at his word elsewhere in the work, he either is or has been a student (52), a plowman (55), a teacher (69), a (retail) tradesman (69), a gardener (83 *et passim*), a builder (85 *et passim*), a homesteader (157), a hunter (210 *et passim*), a fisherman (211 *et passim*) and a lecturer (271), among other things.

To this list we can easily add another catalogue of explicit self-classifications based not on Thoreau’s various occupations but on his *pre*occupations, habits, customs, proclivities, self-judgments or simply his situation. Like those of the first group, the categories of identity in this grouping tend to be signaled by Thoreau in the form of virtual equations, as in “I am by nature a Pythagorean” (162) or in a manner not far removed from such formulations. He informs us that he is a friend of flora and fauna (42 *et passim*), a traveler (53), a squatter (49 *et passim*), a (failed) philanthropist (73), the worst man he has ever known (78), a worshipper of the sunrise (88), a citizen of the world (119), a heathen (266), a hermit (270) and, my favorite, a human insect (332). The numerous faces that coalesce in this expanding figure of Thoreau are further augmented by the many descriptors he applies to himself, not as transient characterizations relevant to specific situations or circumstances, but as relatively stable or constant traits. In turn he informs us that he is callous (29), (full of) shortcomings (49), inconsistent (49), hypocritical (49), guilty of some excesses (59), abstemious (61), serene (129), more favored by the gods than other men (131), frugal (142), repulsed by the eating of flesh (which is unclean) (214), coarse and indifferent (217), unconcerned about the obscenity of his words (as opposed apparently to his deeds) (221), impure (221), stiff-necked (241), and *extra-*vagant (324).

This catalogue of curious epithets is drawn entirely from Thoreau’s explicit self-equations and characterizations. If we were to open this list up to include additional qualities that are not explicit but strongly implied or otherwise manifest in the Thoreau narrator’s various postures, it would include a whole other range of
descriptors, such as earthy, wild, curious, observant, opinionated, intolerant, sympathetic, hopeful, scornful, impudent and restless.

Many of Thoreau’s self-characterizations are mildly ironic, but beneath their wry gloss most of them are still largely credible at face value in the context of *Walden*’s narrative. None of the preceding lists is comprehensive, nor do they need to be. There is no need, in fact, for us to read especially deeply into any of these specific categories of identity. Their significance lies not in their individuation, such as it is, but in their subtle insinuation of Thoreau’s slippery, mutable identity as a theme in its own right. *Walden* bears this preoccupation out more profoundly in other ways, some of which are bound to affect how we regard and make sense of Thoreau. The following sustained passage from very early in the *Walden* text playfully foregrounds the narrator’s protean or composite identity:

> For a long time I was reporter to a journal, of no very wide circulation, whose editor has never yet seen fit to print the bulk of my contributions….

> For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms, and did my duty faithfully; surveyor, if not of highways, then of forest paths and all across-lot routes, keeping them open….

> I have looked after the wild stock of the town, which give a faithful herdsman a good deal of trouble by leaping fences; and I have had an eye to the unfrequented nooks and corners of the farm….I have watered the red huckleberry, the sand cherry and the nettle tree, the red pine and the black ash, the white grape and the yellow violet, which might have withered else in dry seasons. (W 18)

In this lightly satiric passage Thoreau’s taxonomy of identities—as husbandman, shepherd, surveyor, steward of public byways, rustic haunts and spaces wild, self-appointed meteorologist, journalist and editor⁵—may seem little more than a digression. Yet because the passage focuses almost exclusively on the narrator’s many self-styled roles it foreshadows *Walden*’s preoccupation with this very theme. At this point in the work Thoreau’s narrator has only just begun to establish himself as a textual entity, so the mutability of his identity is not likely to strike the reader as an especially salient feature of *Walden*. Yet as the work progresses the theme becomes more and more prominent as the narrator’s roles expand in range and number. In turn the reader is obliged to define and redefine Thoreau throughout the work.

The faces of Thoreau which emerge in *Walden* are not limited to the roles his persona assumes in the work at the level of explicit self-identification—we also find these roles evinced in the narrator’s sentiments, stances, gestures, attitudes or manner. The Thoreau that we have inherited, being in large measure an extension of the *Walden* persona, is much more than the sum total of what the narrator claims
to be. In fact, many of his other faces—the uncompromising individualist, the
esthete, the lover of purity, the spiritualist, the close observer and eulogist of nature—
are established in the work through largely indirect means, though this makes them
no less palpable.

A number of these faces are merely extensions of various speaker personae in the lecture materials around which he fashioned his narrative. Others are equally stylized extensions of traditional literary genres and forms: for instance, the Socratic dialogue of “Brute Neighbors,” which introduces two faces—the hermit and the poet; the rant of “The Ponds,” which unleashes a Jeremiah; or the work’s many elements of pastoral, which give us a shepherd inhabiting a liminal borderland between civilization and the wild. Substituting one bucolic setting for another, Thoreau transforms his shepherd self into a husbandman and turns the conventional flock into a beanfield: “Mine was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields; as some states are civilized, and others half-civilized, and others savage or barbarous, so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field” (W 158).

Not without reason does Leo Marx see this pastoral element as the controlling model of the work as a whole (Marx 243-45), though he does so virtually to the exclusion of other equally important literary modes that coalesce in Walden, which is actually something of a generic Swiss army knife. One of the faces which emerges unexpectedly in Thoreau’s narrative is that of the modified epic hero. The very same chapter that gives us the most obvious adaptation of the pastoral mode (“The Bean Field”) is also rife with mock-heroic elements. Obviously these are included for light comic relief, but that does not disqualify them as important indicators of the heroic framework Thoreau constructs piece by piece throughout the work. Perhaps more important are the many references Thoreau makes throughout Walden to heroic literature, especially in its third chapter, “Reading,” which Stanley Cavell interprets as something of a user’s manual positioned early in the book so that readers will understand how the author expects them to read it (Cavell 3-35). There are, of course, other important indicators, such as Thoreau’s symbolic act of withdrawing to Walden Pond, of declaring independence, on July 4th—a gesture meant to recall the defining moment in American history. As an individual reenactment of this event, Thoreau’s own declaration of independence sets him up as a typological representative of the American people. Thus Thoreau invites us to view his actions in sweeping symbolic terms, as epic expressions of the culture’s (latent) potential for virtuous accomplishment.

In Walden Thoreau seeks to define the American ethos, both as it is and as it could be. An amalgam of the poet, the hero, and the cultural historian, his narrator speaks out as a dissenting member of the polis to an essentially flawed civilization, while also presuming to speak for that civilization in a variety of capacities. In the guise of the cultural historian he tries, like Emerson, to expose the runaway materialism and spiritual blight of his own age. Yet in the role of the poet-dramatist he also seeks to extol the virtues latent in this same crass civilization, to uncover
the potential for enlightenment its members possess should they learn to recognize and observe the all-important differences between ends and means. “If I seem to boast more than is becoming,” Thoreau admits in the first chapter of Walden, “my excuse is that I brag for humanity rather than for myself; and my shortcomings and inconsistencies do not affect the truth of my statement” (W 49). This last aim is epic in design and scope, but to accomplish it Thoreau needs a dramatic embodiment of those latent virtues, an enlightened hero whose idealized words and actions can capture archetypically the moral essence of a people.

Only days after taking up full-time residence at Walden Pond Thoreau had contemplated America’s need for such a native hero in his journal:

I am glad to remember tonight as I sit by my door that I too am at least a remote descendant of that heroic race of men of whom there is tradition. I too sit here on the shore of my Ithaca, a fellow-wanderer and survivor of Ulysses. How Symbolical, significant of I know not what the pitch pine stands here before my door unlike any glyph I have seen sculptured or painted yet—One of Nature’s later designs. Yet perfect as her Grecian art. There it is, a done tree. Who can mend it? And now where is the generation of heroes whose lives are to pass amid these our northern pines? Whose exploits shall appear to posterity pictured amid these strong and shaggy forms? (PJ 2: 156-57)

We are not likely to encounter questions more obviously rhetorical than this last one. The answer is already evident in the comparisons Thoreau courts with Ulysses, in his advertised pedigree as a “descendent of that heroic race of men of whom there is tradition” (156). On the very first page of Walden the author persona asks those readers who are not particularly interested in him personally to pardon his self-absorption. He highlights his dual role as both the architect of the book and the true subject of its discussion. “In most books, the I, or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained; that, in respect to egotism, is the main difference. We commonly do not remember that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking. I should not talk so much about myself if there were any body else whom I knew as well” (W 3).

As discourse subject Thoreau is also a thematic and figurative vehicle, a quirky self-styled “Everyman” or Bunyanesque “Pilgrim” constructed for an age in which allegory is no longer a viable form, its conventions functionally obsolescent. Indeed, Thoreau’s earnest allegorical designs would be fairly ludicrous if they were not concealed within a largely realistic narrative filtered through the perspective of his own manifestly flawed literary persona. This figure inspires admiration, nervousness, consternation, antipathy, ridicule and even pity. Reviews of Walden when the book first appeared were quite favorable on the whole, but many of these positive assessments also had a sort of nervous chuckle about them,
a quality of barely suppressed bewilderment. *Walden*’s author, wrote one reviewer, is “absolutely haunted by the singular desire of placing himself before the reader’s eyes in the most unfavorable light possible” (Scharnhorst 33). While many contemporary reviewers enjoyed and were willing to recommend *Walden*, they did not know entirely what to make of its unusual tenor. The intervening years have not neutralized the book’s (especially its narrator’s) capacity to generate conflicting reactions in its readers, some of them wantonly starry-eyed, others resistant, even vitriolic. Certainly this extraordinary spread of responses, as Lawrence Buell describes it (Buell 314), owes much to our express desire to explain the figure’s unorthodox qualities in conventional terms. But it owes just as much to the sleight of hand by which Thoreau tricks us into thinking in conventional terms to begin with. Thoreau constructs the gallery of faces for his textual self not by over-identifying formally with any specific literary antecedents, but by raiding as many of them as he profitably can and suffusing what he manages to come away with in his own text, his own textual persona, which is a hybrid of conventional character types. If *Walden* is indeed a literary Swiss army knife, then each of its generic components, while indispensable to the integrity of the whole, cannot on its own define that whole. This is no less true of its mutable narrator.

“The struggle in me,” Thoreau wrote in the *Journal* during his first spring at Walden Pond, “is between a love of contemplation and a love of action—the life of a philosopher & of a hero. The poetic & philosophic have my constant vote—the practic hinders & unfits me for the former” (*PJ* 2: 240). In a number of contexts Thoreau seems to assume that the poetic and the heroic represent different, possibly even antipodal, ways of engaging the world. The assumption is not strange, nor is his express desire to reconcile these aspirations in himself. At a purely textual level this desire becomes realized in his narrative persona, an amalgam of both forms of engagement. Through his many metaphors of dawn, his ubiquitous imagery of rebirth, Thoreau casts himself time and again in the role of an ideal poet-hero.

The preeminence of the auroral hour is emphasized in the *Journal* and in *Walden*; in both works Thoreau applies auroral metaphors to himself frequently. Dawn is when Thoreau bathes, undergoing a ritual of rebirth, and the day is at its best because his life is beginning anew, continually anew, with endless possibility ahead for knowing more, being more, seeing more and doing more. Whether in the form of spring, dawn, awakening or rebirth, the auroral hour is the ideal state or season toward which Thoreau is constantly inclined: “I have been as sincere a worshipper of Aurora as the Greeks. I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did….Morning brings back the heroic ages” (*W* 88).

This ideal state, moreover, is explicitly identified with an ongoing process of self-reform. “Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me. Moral reform is the effort to throw off sleep” (*W* 90). In *Walden* Thoreau tends to address his culture’s (latent) potential for improvement through self-reform in the form of
positive exhortations and parables. A number of these, like the previous example, make use of auroral imagery. His culture’s shortcomings, on the other hand, are exposed through the narrator’s frequently caustic criticism of his close-minded neighbors, whose domestic lives are often associated with morbidity and death.

These are the rhetorical counterweights of Thoreau’s discussions throughout Walden and, to some degree, “Resistance to Civil Government.” The rhetoric of advocacy implies its opposite: the rhetoric of denunciation. Thoreau’s use of inclusive pronouns (we, us and our) often signals the former technique. “Any prospect of awakening or coming to life to a dead man makes indifferent all times and places. The place where that may occur is always the same, and indescribably pleasant to all our senses” (W 134, emphasis added). In contrast, denunciations are most often signaled by a particular use of the third-person through which Thoreau effectively distances himself and us as readers from a corresponding gallery of deficient types: the farmer, the merchant and the villager, to name but a few. Each of these types is subsumed under one of his favorite dismissive labels, the ever-handly “mass of men” (W 8 et passim; RP 66 et passim). If the parables in which these straw figures appear do not make their deficiency of virtue abundantly clear, then Thoreau is not above throwing in the odd heavy descriptor, such as “unclean and stupid” (W 195) or “clumsy” (W 6), to drive the point home.

At the level of heroic dramatization, Walden’s author-narrator effectively denies a complicity in the wayward tendencies of his neighbors through his symbolic withdrawal from their sphere of influence and affairs, an act which is not only the premise but one of the culminating effects of Walden’s narrative. Though to all appearances it is thrust upon him, Thoreau’s occupation of very much the same space in “Resistance to Civil Government” occurs when he is placed in jail. “I saw that, if there was a wall of stone between me and my townsmen, there was a still more difficult one to climb or break through, before they could get to be as free as I was. I did not for a moment feel confined, and the walls seemed a great waste of stone and mortar. I felt as if I alone of all my townsmen had paid my tax” (RP 80). Of course, the appearance of his forced imprisonment is just that—the incarceration is precipitated by his own calculated refusal to meet his civic obligations as defined by the community. His imprisonment, then, is as much a voluntary act of withdrawal as his relocation to Walden Pond. In both cases he chooses to break his compact with society on his own terms. His adopted position of exteriority is not compromised by the literal interiority of the prison cell in “Resistance.” As Thoreau’s descriptions make clear in the essay, the usual senses of “freedom” (69 et passim) and “imprisonment” (77) do not apply. These terms should be read in an inverted sense, as should each of the conceptual oppositions (such as exteriority/interiority) based on the dichotomy of liberty and captivity. His townsmen/jailers, remarks the Thoreau narrator, “thought that my chief desire was to stand the other side of that stone wall. I could not but smile to see how industriously they locked the door on my meditations, which followed them out again without let or hindrance, and they were really all that was dangerous” (80).
By taking up residence in this exterior space (whether in his jail cell or at Walden Pond), Thoreau lays claim to a moral high ground where he can stand and dress down the ubiquitous mass of (straw) men without being implicated in their follies, whether they merely “labor under a mistake” (W 5), “lead lives of quiet desperation” (W 8), “discontented[ly]…and idly complain” (W 16) or “serve the state…not as men mainly, but as machines” (RP 66). Another way of putting this is to say that (with a few notable exceptions) Thoreau represents the antipode of almost all that he condemns in his objectified neighbors. Following this logic, one of the most important effects of his frequent denunciations is an implied construction of his own virtue.

Thoreau’s literary persona in Walden is an unstable textual entity insofar as his evident characteristics undergo a constant realignment throughout the work. It would probably be much more accurate to refer to this persona in the plural. The Thoreaus of Walden and “Resistance” are certainly not the same personae, though they have much in common with one another—the two works are, after all, cross-referential—and each has furnished the metaconstruct that shares the author’s name with some of its most salient faces. The operative word is faces, for each of these personae is in fact a plurality of characters, and without question Walden’s narrator shelters the broadest and most diverse constituency of Thoreau identities.

“Walden, presented as memoir,” writes Joyce Carol Oates, “is a work of artful self-invention.” Thoreau’s “subtle and ambiguous…appropriation of the journal genre” in his masterwork is “an artfully composed and semi-fictionalized portrait of ‘Henry David Thoreau’ as a hero free of all personal history and identity” (Oates 32). It is an intriguing proposition, to think of Thoreau’s reinvention of himself as an effect of generic innovation. Yet there is more to Thoreau’s “artful self-invention” than his savvy manipulation of established literary forms and their conventions, and it would probably be unwise to think of Walden’s protean narrator as somehow just a by-product of Thoreau’s attempt to reinvent himself on the printed page. Either possibility may help to account for any number of interesting decisions Thoreau made in the process of composing Walden, as well as many features that readers continue to find interesting in the work for entirely different reasons. But the very conceptual framework from which Thoreau draws his meaningful sense of purpose as an artist may help to explain these choices and features equally well, not least his protean self-representation in Walden.

In the early pages of Walden Thoreau meditates on the stars as “the apexes of what wonderful triangles! What distant and different beings in the various mansions of the universe are contemplating the same one at the same moment!.... Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant? We should live in all the ages of the world in an hour; ay, in all the worlds of the ages. History, Poetry, Mythology!—I know of no reading of another’s experience so startling and informing as this would be” (W 10).
This idealized view of the human potential for self-realization informs *Walden* at a number of levels. It is not uncommon for such a view to find expression in Thoreau’s writings in combination with tropes emphasizing the timelessness of poetry (or art)—a fairly conventional notion if timelessness is taken to mean *permanence*. Yet as the preceding passage implies, Thoreau’s timeless poetry is something else. A correlative of mythology and history, it is timeless because it exists somehow out of time.

Not that Thoreau is entirely clear about how this works. “That time which we really improve, or which is improvable,” he states matter-of-factly in *Walden*’s third chapter, “is neither past, present, nor future” (*W* 99). We could well ask just where (or when) that improvable time is to be found. But we will not get a ready answer in this particular passage. Like so many of Thoreau’s enigmatic utterances, the statement is offered at face value, with no explanation or elaboration in context, and his narrative moves on without looking back.

Thoreau often speaks of poetry, history and mythology as timeless in a sense equally unconventional, not to mention more than ordinarily abstract. He aligns them with one another as virtually inexhaustible banks of epistemological wealth insofar as they store, accrue and make available to the culture the most essential human knowledge. They represent, in other words, the ultimate repositories of our evolving knowledge, as well as the most significant means by which this knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next. In Thoreau’s scheme, poetry, history and mythology tend to transcend the ephemeral media with which they are typically associated. “The true poem is not that which the public read,” Thoreau writes in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. “There is always a poem not printed on paper, coincident with the production of this, stereotyped in the poet’s life. It is what he has become through his work. Not how is the idea expressed in stone, or on canvas or paper, is the question, but how far it has obtained form and expression in the life of the artist. His true work will not stand in any prince’s gallery” (*A Week* 343).

Of course, Thoreau is speaking here about something much more involved than mere lines arranged, however successfully, on a page. The artist’s “life” and “work” are inseparably bound up in his conception of poetry, and this may be essential to our understanding of Thoreau’s literary projects *in toto*; it certainly sheds some interesting light on the variety of creative biography advanced in a work like *Walden*.

The questions that most disturb, puzzle and confound us, Thoreau (over)states in *Walden*, “have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life” (*W* 108). As thus conceived, poetry comprises both the “words” and the “life” of the artist. Though it may well find expression in verse, *true poetry* (*A Week* 343) is by no means limited to that medium. Similar notions attach to the rubrics of *mythology* and *history* as Thoreau uses them, for the three are clearly
interrelated in his system of operative abstractions and metaphors. Yet the exact nature of their correlation is somewhat trickier to pin down. Is it one of equivalency, complementarity, symbiosis? Or of hierarchy, dependency, causality? Depending on where we look in Thoreau’s writings, we are apt to find more than one possibility confirmed.

In one journal entry Thoreau speaks of poetry as “exaggerated history” (PJ 2: 204). Elsewhere mythology is defined as “ancient history or biography,” the “oldest history still memorable” (PJ 2: 381). Together these definitions seem to suggest a specific implicational order in which one epistemological bank implies the existence of the next in a chain (mythology ➔ history ➔ poetry). In other contexts, however, Thoreau seems to invert or otherwise shake up this order, and we needn’t look further than this last journal entry to find an example: “Mythology . . . is the fruit which history at last bears—The fable so far from being false contains only the essential parts of the history” (381). In a lengthy aside in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers Thoreau claims that the hidden significance of fables—identified as “the ethics running parallel to...poetry and history”—is far less remarkable than the readiness with which fables “may be made to express a variety of truths . . . still older and more universal . . . than any whose flesh and blood they are for the time made to wear” (A Week 61). As if anticipating his readers’ doubts, or possibly their confusion, Thoreau then asks: “But what signifies it?” A fitting question, to which he offers the following hyperbolic answer:

In the mythus a superhuman intelligence uses the unconscious thoughts and dreams of men as its hieroglyphics to address men unborn. In the history of the human mind, these glowing and ruddy fables precede the noonday thoughts of men, as Aurora the sun’s rays. The matutine intellect of the poet, keeping in advance of the glare of philosophy, always dwells in this auroral atmosphere (61).

Thoreau’s preoccupation with history, mythology and poetry is not in itself unusually significant. These subjects are, after all, standard fare in Western literature. Far more significant are Thoreau’s repeated attempts to explicate the dynamics among or between these banks of knowledge in the process of working out his own role as a poet. As we have begun to see, his various articulations of this problem disclose, in the aggregate, anything but an airtight logic. If mythology is the oldest history still memorable, and poetry is exaggerated history, what then are we to make of Thoreau’s claim that the poet’s intellect precedes philosophy and the “noonday thoughts of men” (61), dwelling instead in the same “auroral atmosphere” (61) from which myth flowers? Perhaps Thoreau’s meditations on this subject are so apparently circular because he is attempting to articulate what is in some measure inexpressible in perfectly rational terms, a notion that he entertains himself in the “Conclusion” of Walden:
I desire to speak somewhere without bounds; like a man in a waking moment, to men in their waking moments; for I am convinced that I cannot exaggerate enough even to lay the foundation of a true expression....The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly translated; its literal monument alone remains. The words that express our faith and piety are not definite (W 324-25).

Enigmatic words. The words of a writer grasping after the unattainable in a poetic idiom sonorous but far from definite indeed, except that in this case it seems to illustrate what Thoreau emphasizes at the start—his “desire to speak…without bounds.”

Thoreau’s poetic exaggeration is rooted in his often idiosyncratic use of otherwise semantically stable terms and concepts. Thoreau often bends language to serve a variety of purposes, some of them highly unusual and many of them problematic. It is worth remarking the presence of certain prominent metaphors and abstractions in the preceding passage: the auroral “waking moment” as incipient artistic or philosophical awareness, the “literal monument” as an imperfect measure of artistic production, and “truth” as an ideal constant against which art’s ephemeral forms are found wanting (truth, of course, is yet another staple item in Thoreau’s poetic and rhetorical vocabularies, an umbrella value for the wisdom that history, poetry and mythology presumably convey). Many of these very elements appear with remarkable frequency in Thoreau’s writings, especially Walden and the Journal, becoming virtual leitmotifs.

Statuary imagery (“the literal monument”) is often employed emblematically when Thoreau seeks to distinguish between an essential or timeless art and its concrete correspondent in the world of here and now—other emblems representing a variation on the same concept include the canvas, the painting (or picture) and, of course, the book. Yet Thoreau is never entirely consistent even in his use of fine-arts tropes. In the following passage from the opening chapter of Walden the artistic literal monument in the form of a painting or a bust stands emblematically not for art’s material shadow but for its higher or undistilled essence:

We have adopted Christianity merely as an improved method of agri-culture. We have built for this world a family mansion, and for the next a family tomb. The best works of art are the expression of man’s struggle to free himself from this condition, but the effect of our art is merely to make this low state comfortable and that higher state to be forgotten. There is actually no place in this village for a work of fine art, if any had come down to us, to stand, for our lives, our houses and streets, furnish
no proper pedestal for it. There is not a nail to hang a picture on, nor a shelf to receive the bust of a hero or a saint (W, 37-38).

In more than one sense we can look at a work like *Walden* as Thoreau’s most fully actualized attempt to “furnish [a] proper pedestal” for “the bust of [such] a hero or a saint.” This heroic, sainted figure, molded as a potential archetype, is a stylized projection of himself. Thoreau fashions this idealized literary self from the raw materials of his own life. Yet as he conceives of it, and frequently speaks of it, *life* is only partly what the biographical record is capable of revealing or confirming about a historic figure; it is at least as much a product of the imagination. In Thoreau’s expanded sense of these concepts, *imagination*—no less than *life*—is readily identifiable with “a superhuman intelligence” (*A Week*, 61) comprising both writers and their audiences and involving the imaginative acts in which each engages collaboratively—*creative writing* and *creative reading*, in other words, in senses extending even beyond what Emerson had envisioned in “The American Scholar” (94).

As we find this conception applied in his own case, Thoreau’s *life* becomes fully realized only in or through his writings. This requires the active participation of readers who must negotiate, in Lawrence Buell’s words, “the actual or supposed events” of Thoreau’s significant history as well as the attendant “myths of authorial stance and voice” (Buell 312) to which they give rise. In its most wide-open sense Thoreau’s *life* becomes inseparable from the traditions of reader response by which his works are interpreted and through which authorial myths are shaped, reinforced, validated and reshaped. When these myths become well enough established they in turn exert a renewed influence on subsequent readings of his works, and the process continues full-circle.

There is, of course, an inevitable and perturbing circularity to the logic of this idea, especially insofar as both the myths and the interpretations are doubtlessly based to some degree on preconceptions about Thoreau’s *life* at the same time that they are credited with helping to shape this life. Yet Thoreau himself helps to sanction this interpretive paradox in numerous ways. For instance, in one journal entry containing an extended meditation on the Persian poet Saadi,9 Thoreau underscores the “insignificant” difference between the “personal” (or *individual*) *life* of a poet and the more enduring “historical” *life* of that figure as “embowelled” by posterity:

Sadi entertained once identically the same thought that I do—and thereafter I can find no essential difference between Sadi and myself. He is not Persian—he is not ancient—he is not strange to me. By the identity of his thought with mine he still survives. It makes no odds what atoms serve us. Sadi possessed no greater privacy or individuality than is thrown open to me. He had no more interior & essential & sacred self than can come naked into my thought this moment. Truth and a true man is
something essentially public not private. If Sadi were to come back to claim a *personal* identity with the historical Sadi he would find there were too many of us—he could not get a skin that would contain us all….By living the life of a man is made common property. By sympathy with Sadi I have embowelled him. In his thoughts I have a sample of *him* a slice from his core…but I could not have got this without being equally entitled to it with himself. The difference between any man and that posterity amid whom he is famous is too insignificant to sanction that he should be set up again in any world as distinct from them (*PJ* 5: 289-90).

Written while *Walden* was still undergoing significant revisions, Thoreau’s meditation on Saadi plays upon some interesting oppositions: the notion of individual selfhood and intellectual property versus that of a collectively animated self which is “common property”; the notion of experiential selfhood versus that of textually constructed selfhood; and finally the notion of literary meaning as stable as opposed to fluid. This last dichotomy pits a reductive conception of meaning as immutable—fossilized as it were at a specific historical moment when the writer composes his or her work or authorizes it for publication—against a very different sense that can only be seen as supertemporal and non-finite. The product of a dynamic relation among authors, texts and their readers, literary meaning in this last sense continually evolves, building upon preexisting constellations of meaning that have become, in effect, inseparable from the text. In this last particular Thoreau would seem to be anticipating the reception-theory school of reader-response criticism by well more than a century.

The entity that emerges in Thoreau’s description of the “historical Sadi” is “embowelled” vis-à-vis the active, mediating influence of imaginative readers, and this of course suggests any number of ready parallels with our own posthumously animated Thoreau. This connection is scarcely less than explicit in Thoreau’s own discussion, for his ostensible meditation on Saadi turns out to be a *de facto* meditation on himself, as the next extended paragraph in the entry makes clear:

I only know myself as a human entity—the scene, so to speak, of thoughts & 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 & 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—is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction—a work of the imagination—so far as he was concerned.
A man may be affected by a theatrical exhibition; On the other hand he may not be affected by an actual event which appears to concern him never so much (PJ 5: 290).

Just as he finds “no essential difference between Sadi and [him]self” (289) Thoreau acknowledges that his own readers have an equal stake in his “identity” (289). In fact, the metaphors equating his “experience” (290) with dramatic and fictional forms readily suggest a notion of public spectacle wholly consistent with the imaginative life showcased in a work like Walden. The “theatrical exhibition” (290) functions as an elaborate metaphor for Thoreau’s literary production, performance and reception. The most peculiar and revealing feature of Thoreau’s rhetoric in this entry is his functional attempt to confuse or admix the three ordinarily distinct categories of identity upon which his theatrical conceit depends. These identities are those of the author (or playwright), the audience (or spectator) and the actor (or character). Through some rather complex associative wordplay each of these roles is projected on his readers and assumed by Thoreau himself. Thoreau’s role as author is implicit, just as the existence of “the play—it may be the tragedy” (290)—implies a playwright. He speaks of himself synecdochically as both the actor and the stage—”the scene…of thoughts and affections” (290)—yet he also acknowledges that he is the spectator observing this scene. Far from being merely a representation of Thoreau’s detached critical faculty, his “spectator” (290), or second self, is an entity capable of standing entirely aloof from the figure on that stage, “sharing no experience, but taking note of it” (290).

This is precisely the point at which Thoreau brings his own audience into the mix. His second self, he says, “is no more I than it is you” (290). By directly addressing his posthumous readers in the form of the second-person you, Thoreau implicates them in the metaconstruct of his own identity, which involves not one but each of the roles—author, spectator and dramatic persona—indispensable to his theatrical conceit. In all of its playful ingenuity, this conceit merely reinforces the thesis of Thoreau’s earlier meditation on Saadi: “The difference between any man and that posterity amid whom he is famous is too insignificant to sanction that he should be set up again in any world as distinct from them” (290). Likewise, Thoreau’s description of his own complex doubleness elicits a self that is bounded neither by time nor by space, defying the natural limitations of any life as conventionally conceived.

“Here I am 34 years old,” Thoreau admits in the Journal three years before Walden’s publication, “and yet my life is almost wholly unexpanded. How much is in the germ! There is such an interval between my ideal and the actual in many instances that I may say I am unborn….Life is not long enough for one success. Within another 34 years that miracle can hardly take place.” (PJ 3: 313) A similar doubt over what he can reasonably expect to accomplish in the allotted years of his lifetime is evident in another journal entry from eight months earlier:
I have no more distinctness and pointedness in my yearnings than an expanding bud—which does indeed point to flower & fruit to summer & autumn—but is aware of the warm sun & spring influence only. I feel ripe for something yet do nothing—can’t discover what that thing is. I feel fertile merely. It is seed time with me— I have lain fallow long enough. (PJ 3: 143-44)

Despite the note of impatience discernable in both of these passages, language in each of the entries strongly suggests Thoreau’s belief that a reckoning will inevitably occur (“How much is in the germ!”; “I feel ripe for something”). The key to this reckoning, as Thoreau imagines it, can be found in his greatly expanded conception of his own life.

To a certain extent Thoreau’s expanded conception of his life can be seen as a reflection of the very broad semantic range “life” exhibits as a lexical item in his operative poetic vocabulary. In Thoreau’s writings terms like life, self and even work often categorically express ways or modes of being. They are not exactly interchangeable as linguistic signs, yet they are to some degree inseparably bound up in one another, for each approximates a superordinate value that is expressible only through the imperfect aid of metaphor in an ideal context, “somewhere without bounds” (W 324). These terms approximate this value less on their own than in combination with one another and in this respect they have much in common with history, poetry and mythology as we find Thoreau invoking these abstractions. In one of Thoreau’s most far-reaching senses life or a life might be defined as a personified configuration of attitudes, values, beliefs and accomplishments (whether real or reputed) which endures and even thrives so long as others identify with it, legitimate it, enshrine it, and actively use it. Of course, nowhere in Thoreau’s writings will we find life defined in exactly these terms, but in the aggregate his many idiosyncratic applications of the term point strongly to such a comprehensive definition.

Such a sense of the term is compatible with an observation Thoreau made in his journal during his first year in residence at Walden Pond, wherein he notes that he has at least one advantage over his neighbors who must look to theaters and society for amusement: “my life itself is my amusement and never ceases to be novel—the commencement of an experiment—or a drama which will never end” (PJ 2: 243). In approaching Thoreau’s writings we cannot get around scrutinizing some of his favored metaphors, images and tropes—the lexicon of what we might call his poetic idiolect. Evident patterns in his modes of metaphoric expression reveal a great deal about his habits of thought, just as incongruencies in these patterns may help to reveal limitations or even innovations in his thinking. “It is the faculty of the poet to see present things as if, in this sense, also past and future, as if distant or universally significant. We do not know poets, heroes, and saints for our contemporaries, but we locate them in some far-off vale, and, the greater and better, the further off we [are] accustomed to consider them” (J 13: 17).
The grand abstractions of mythology, poetry and history find embodiment in Thoreau’s idealized figures of the hero, the poet and the saint. In turn he continually superimposes these figures on his own literary persona. Their timeless universality, a defining feature, is self-applied time and again, as is their quality of virtue. If the poet speaks for civilization, then the hero acts archetypically on behalf of it: “All poets and heroes,” Thoreau asserts in Walden’s second chapter, “are the children of Aurora, and emit their music at sunrise” (W 89). Thoreau’s virtual identification of poets and heroes represents an admixture of the deviser and the device that is omnipresent in Walden in the form of the narrator himself, the poet-creator and hero-persona of the work. If Walden draws heavily on the resources of poetry, mythology and history, then it also represents Thoreau’s most coherent and self-contained literary effort to feed back into these timeless banks of knowledge. By projecting so many faces onto his textual persona Thoreau attempts to be Homer, Achilles and Herodotus all in one, while also setting himself up as something of a philosophical “counter-friction to stop the machine” (RP 74) of prevalent systems of thought (Paley’s doctrine of political expediency, for instance, or Adam Smith’s materialistic economic philosophy) whose implications he clearly views as harmful.

These, of course, are a great many robes for any one figure to wear simultaneously, yet Thoreau attempts to don some or all of them at once throughout his writings. Nowhere do so many faces coalesce as completely or successfully in a single figure than in Walden’s narrator. “In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment” (W 17). This eternal present is the setting for Thoreau’s “drama which will never end” (PJ 2: 243), the myth enacted and reenacted in perpetuity—or as long as new generations of readers willingly partake in it. Emerson may not have been far from the truth when he wrote of the “sleepless insight” by which Thoreau perceived the material world as a means and a symbol (“Thoreau,” 433). Thoreau’s extraction of “a larger meaning than common use permits” (W 100) from the transient material world extends in the end to include his own life. Becoming “the life excited” (J 9: 121), it is a life animated (embowelled, Thoreau might say) only in and through his writings. In fact, with Walden firmly at their center, Thoreau’s literary projects constitute the essence of his life as we have inherited it. In their totality these works attempt to construct a story not just of Thoreau’s life but of the entire human race—a story that is progressive yet out of time, because like all myths it is always happening. “No truth was ever expressed but with this sort of emphasis—so that for the time there was no other truth . . . . We give importance to this hour over all other hours” (PJ 2: 204).
Notes

1 The Princeton edition of Thoreau’s Journal (PJ) is cited in this article, with the exception of materials dated after 3 September 1854, which are drawn from the 1906 edition of the Journal (J).

2 We should not necessarily equate this implied author with the editorial voice of the “sojourner in civilized life” after the two years at Walden Pond, nor even with the circumstantial Thoreau implied on the title page’s attribution of authorship. While this last authorial Thoreau is certainly implicated in the literary artifact of Walden, his very existence does not depend upon its existence. The same cannot be said of the conventional authorial figure evoked within the literary construct of Walden, who is but one of many coexisting identities subsumed within Thoreau’s protean narrator.

3 By populating Walden with so many different representations of himself, Thoreau reinforces a more comprehensive strategy for literary meaning formation. The resulting meaning is tied to a totalizing vision of Thoreau and of his works constructed through the dissolution of expected boundaries: an erasure of absolute lines between fact and fiction, between author and character, between texts based on life and a life made out of texts. Such focuses exceed the scope of the present discussion considerably, but they are addressed in greater detail in Hartman (see especially 61-65, 82-103 & 140-173).

4 The sorts of explicit references I mean usually take unambiguous forms at the most superficial level of expression, though this does not rule out ironic or metaphoric utterance. In a few cases the characterizations are scarcely less than explicit, as in Thoreau’s description of himself as a gardener/husbandman: “I have always cultivated a garden” (W 83.). The statement may not equate “Thoreau” with “gardener” as a subject complement, but readers are hardly apt to interpret it otherwise.

5 The “journal, of no very wide circulation” may well be an oblique reference to The Dial under Margaret Fuller’s editorship, but it may just as likely be an ironic allusion to Thoreau’s own Journal. The Dial had already been defunct for a decade by the time Walden went to print, and this fact is not exactly consistent with Thoreau’s use of the present perfect and the adverbial “yet” (“whose editor has never yet seen fit to print the bulk of my contributions”—emphasis added). The ambiguity concerning the journal and its editorship is almost certainly ironic. More noteworthy in the present discussion is Thoreau’s projection of himself in the first person and third person simultaneously. As both the dutiful reporter and the reluctant editor he assumes two distinct semantic and grammatical roles that cannot logically refer to the same entity in this particular phrase, except through the aid of irony. The maneuver reveals something of Thoreau’s tendency to regard himself at a certain remove, not as a coherent single identity but as a metaconstruct containing numerous identities.
A single persona should not be assumed for these materials.

While based in part on Marx’s treatment of Walden in The Machine in the Garden, this observation rests at least equally on his assertive defense of Walden as a defining work of American pastoral in his 1999 dispute with Lawrence Buell in the New York Review of Books. (See Marx, “Struggle” and “Full Thoreau” as well as Buell and Marx, “Exchange.”) No recent public exchange on Thoreau more clearly demonstrates Walden’s undiminished potential to inspire not only conflicting readings, but serious ideological struggles (to use Marx’s own term) where much more is at stake than a loss of face for the contending critics.

As a rhetorical foil Thoreau’s objectified mass of men appears in Walden and “Resistance to Civil Government” not less than twenty times in either this exact phrasing or in nearly identical form (as “masses of men” or “most men”): see W 6, 8, 16, 17, 35, 46, 91, 104 (twice), 106, 150, 165, 210, 213 and 215; see RP 66, 68, 70, 81 and 86. Far too numerous to cite individually, the most common variation on this foil is undoubtedly the word “men,” appearing either on its own (as in “But lo! men have become the tools of their tools,” W 37) or as a constituent of a compound (as in “townsmen,” W 5 et passim). Predictably, this word also appears in many contexts where no deficiency of character is hinted at and where consequently it signals no such foil. The great majority of the twenty variations on mass of men just cited, on the other hand, clearly signal negative examples.

Muslih-ud-Din (Saadi), thirteenth-century author of The Gulistan, or Rose Garden—Thoreau spells his name “Sadi.”

For clarification of this term (metaconstruct of his own identity), see note 5. Identifying the “you” of this passage not simply with Thoreau’s readers but with his posthumous readers may seem anything but self-evident, but textual markers elsewhere strongly suggest a more specific audience than the general postulated reader of rhetorical convention when Thoreau directly addresses readers by using the second-person pronoun. For a fuller discussion of this feature in Thoreau’s rhetoric, see Hartman (152-59).

This life is unquestionably a literary construct; it is “All that interests the reader” (J 9: 121).

In this last instance, life has a semantic range that extends far beyond even the metaphorical sense in “the life excited”; Thoreau’s life in this superordinate sense of the term is inseparable not just from the figure projected in his writings but from the writings themselves.
Works Cited


Pencil drawing by May Alcott of Thoreau’s cabin at Walden Pond
From the Walter Harding Collection of The Thoreau Society
at the Thoreau Institute at Walden woods