Literary Transcendentalism

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Published by Cornell University Press

Buell, Lawrence.
Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance.

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II Emerson and Thoreau:
Soul versus Self

When comparing Emerson and Thoreau one inevitably wants to see the two men as representing the complementary sides of Transcendental individualism. Thoreau was self-reliant; Emerson was God-reliant. Emerson was diffident, Thoreau pugnacious. Emerson’s essays seem comparatively diaphanous and impersonal; Thoreau’s are concrete and crotchety. Roughly speaking, Thoreau seems to epitomize the colorful, abrasive, renegade side of the movement, along with Parker, Brownson, Ellery Channing, and perhaps Margaret Fuller; Emerson seems rather to speak for the more genteel, refined, contemplative side, along with most of the Transcendentalist ministers and Bronson Alcott.

Since the main basis for these stereotypical images of Thoreau and Emerson is their literary presence, a comparative study of the use of the speaking voice in their prose would seem to be the most direct way of getting beyond the usual generalizations to a fuller sense of what “Emerson” and “Thoreau” really are like, as literary figures.

Almost nothing has been written about the persona in Emerson’s essays, because it has been almost universally assumed that there is none. Emerson’s abstractness, his frequent ex cathedra disparagements of egoism, and his reputation for personal reticence and aloofness have led his readers to accept without cavil the verdict of his son: that autobiographical “incidents are gen-

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eralized and personality merged in a type" (W, XII, 470–471n). To be sure, it has been shown that Emerson's literary style is sufficiently idiosyncratic to give a personal stamp to all he wrote. Both originality with language is not the same thing as individuality of character. However strongly one responds to Emerson the writer as a subtle intellect or original artist, it is quite another thing to think of his writings as personal disclosures. I suspect that we tend to question his individualism in life so much more quickly than Thoreau's partly because we assume that with respect to his literary persona Emerson is a generalized abstraction and wished to be taken as such. He may give us idealized self-portraits, like the Scholar or the Poet, but not direct self-revelation; he may allude to personal experience, but only for the sake of illustration.¹

But is the traditional view wholly faithful to the facts? Perhaps the best way to begin the inquiry is to consider Emerson's method of transposing thoughts and experiences from life to diary to lecture to essay. Among the thousands upon thousands of instances, the majority do seem to follow his declared purpose of winnowing away the circumstantial from the universal, to

¹ Very little has been written about any aspect of the Emersonian persona. Among Emerson's contemporaries, Brownson was alone in feeling that his essays "often remind us of Montaigne, especially in the little personal allusions, which the author introduces with inimitable grace, delicacy, and effect" ("Emerson's Essays," Boston Quarterly Review, 4 [1841], 308). The only sustained modern discussion of the speaker in the essays, so far as I know, is Jonathan Bishop's provocative chapter on "Tone," in Emerson on the Soul (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 128–143, though even it is devoted to exploring Emerson's tonal richness and variety rather than the persona itself. Another part of Bishop's study which stimulated my discussion, again in a different direction, is his reading of the first chapter of Nature (pp. 10–15). For an interesting study using quantitative methods to identify personality traits of Emerson and Thoreau through their work, see Albert Gilman and Roger Brown, "Personality and Style in Concord," Transcendentalism and Its Legacy, ed. Myron Simon and Thornton H. Parsons (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), pp. 87–122.
the point that one often cannot tell without the aid of the Journals that the passage derives from an actual experience. Take for example this sentence from Nature: “In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature” (W, I, 10). This could be a purely cerebral improvisation, especially the figure of the horizon as symbolic of the circumference of the soul. As it happens, the sentence derives from a particular experience. The journal for August 12, 1836, reads: “I went to Walden Pond this evening a little before sunset, and in the tranquil landscape I behold somewhat as beautiful as my own nature” (JMN, V, 189). But in revising, Emerson eliminates local detail, adds intellectual complexity (the horizon metaphor), and turns a personal experience into a general proposition. Indeed the result is even more abstract than it needs to be—the rest of the paragraph in which it is placed is first-person. Altogether it would seem that in transposing Emerson’s mind was not on the experience itself but on the subtle formulation into which he was able to convert it. And so the passage gains in literary charm but at the cost of some immediacy.

But if we look at the rest of the paragraph to which the sentence serves as the conclusion, we get a different impression. Its high points are two instances of inspiration through nature, both reported by a persona: the metamorphosis into transparent eyeball, and the sensation of joy upon crossing the common. The second experience is more generalized, taking place merely “in the woods,” anytime, anywhere; Emerson tries to recreate the sense of the infinite mainly through rhetorical flourish. The first is localized—on “a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky”—and relies more upon the imagery for its impact. Both passages happen to be reworkings of journal antecedents; and interestingly, in the journal versions there is no appreciable difference between the two, in rhetorical level. For purposes of publication, Emerson inflated the second and made the first more homely. Passage two originated with a feeling “as I walked in the woods” on March 19, 1835 (JMN, V, 18);
in revising, Emerson softened the sense of specificity and added such ornamentation as the symbolic eyeball, which is not in the Journal. But the original version of the other passage reads simply "I rejoice in Time. I do not cross the common without a wild poetic delight notwithstanding the prose of my demeanour" (JMN, IV, 355). This is less personal, less anecdotal than the corresponding sentence in Nature. Contrary to what one might expect from Emerson's strictures about the use of the subjective in art, he revised this passage so as to increase the illusion of autobiography.

Indeed, the whole chapter seems designed to do the same thing. Richard Francis observes that it functions in the structure of Nature as a counterweight to Emerson's preliminary definitions, as "a highly personal statement about how we perceive what has just been defined." 2 The message it seems to convey is: reader, whatever we conclude from the formal analysis of nature that will follow, the original relation to the universe exists, for I have experienced it. Perhaps the chapter is called "Nature" for that reason: because the experiences there described epitomize the philosophy of the whole book.

Emerson does not make this point overbearingly. On the contrary, he takes some pains to make his speaker represent our experiences too. For instance, the chapter begins:

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. [W, I, 7]

By alternating here between "I" and "a man," and by making "I" the subject of a proposition we can easily accept, Emerson

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persuades us that his first person is universal. The "I" could easily be changed to "one." In this sense, Emerson is quite within the limits of his theory of subjectivity. But the part that the theory leaves out, or underplays, is that the first person adds a special tone to the context. Not autobiography, exactly, but still the sense of a personal witness. The fact that the "I" represents himself here as a solitary writer adds to the impression that the author is speaking in his own person. And when we catch Emerson occasionally transposing from journal to essay circumstantial facts which are completely extrinsic to his message—"The charming landscape which I saw this morning" (W, I, 8); "Not less excellent . . . was the charm, last evening, of a January sunset" (W, I, 17) it becomes clear that he must have consciously striven for such coloring. This impression is reinforced as one notes, now and then, additional cases where an essay passage is made more personal than its original. For instance, the "reminiscences" of the devil's child in "Self-Reliance" (W, II, 50), the Orthodox preacher in "Compensation" (W, II, 94–95), and the "certain poet" in "The Poet" (W, III, 22) all seem to be fabrications.

The chapter just discussed, then, is not an isolated case. The personal element recurs throughout Emerson's prose, on the average of about eight to ten passages an essay, but sometimes much more often. In addition to Nature, perhaps the most significant instances are "Self-Reliance," "Friendship," "Experience," "New England Reformers," "Montaigne," "Worship," "Illusions," English Traits, and Emerson's contribution to the Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli. In all these works, the personal element is exploited far more than Emerson's reputation for impersonality would suggest.

This element, however, is not a single entity but a composite

3 For the first two examples, cf. JMN, 48–49, and JMN, VII, 182–183, respectively. That the encounter reported in "The Poet" is a fabrication is clear from the previous draft of the passage in the unpublished lecture, "Genius," Houghton Library, Harvard University.
of two rather different first-person forms, each of which has its own effect, though they appear side by side. We have seen them both in action already. One is the voice of private feeling or opinion, as in “What right have I to write on Prudence, whereof I have little?” (W, II, 221); “I confess to an extreme tenderness of nature on this point” (W, II, 195); “I do not find the religions of men at this moment very creditable to them” (W, VI, 207). The speaker in all these cases is aware of himself as separate from his audience, aware of possible disagreements or misunderstandings, which make it necessary for him to confess or pontificate.

The other persona lacks this self-consciousness. It is exemplary or representative; it asks you to take what is said not as opinion but as axiom: for instance, “I am not solitary whilst I read and write”; “I am made immortal by apprehending my possession of incorruptible goods” (W, IV, 22); “I am always environed by myself” (W, III, 98). This is the “I” which in its more ambitious moments we think of as “transcendental,” as in “I can even with a mountainous aspiring say, I am God” (JMN, V, 336). Its pervasiveness in Emerson's writing, that is, has a partly doctrinal basis, in the idea that the individual can speak for the universal. Emerson himself clarifies the strategy in a rare bit of self-exegesis: “A great man is coming to eat at my house. I do not wish to please him; I wish that he should wish to please me. I will stand here for humanity, and though I would make it kind, I would make it true” (W, II, 60). As in the journal passage just quoted, here we have the two voices side by side—the private voice explaining what the exemplary voice proclaims. The latter is the Emersonian counterpart to Whitman's speaker in “Song of Myself.” In each case, the author’s defense against the charge of egoism is that he is speaking according to the informing spirit, rather than as an individual.

Doubtless it was the exemplary persona for which Emerson was really contending, in his criticism, as the proper use of the subjective. And his preference for what was universal in a man's
work, as against what was merely personal, increased as he aged. In *Nature* the poet is pictured as a hero who subdues the world to the service of his imagination (*W*, I, 51–54); in “The Poet” he has become a mere medium (though a glorious one) for recording the poetry which “was all written before time was” (*W*, III, 8). Upon turning from Emerson’s criticism to his own style, however, one finds a precisely opposite trend. The voice of private opinion is used more and more; the essays become more anecdotal; the speaker seems increasingly ready to speak off the top of his head; one sees more and more fillers like “Here is a lesson which I brought along with me in boyhood from the Latin School” (*W*, VI, 195).

Perhaps *Representative Men* marks the beginning of this trend, to the extent that it could be subtitled “my favorite people”—though Emerson is still a long way from the cozy, crotchety old scholar that one finds in “Books.” One step closer is his contribution to the Ossoli *Memoirs*. Here Emerson goes into a surprising amount of detail about how Margaret affected him—how she impressed him upon first acquaintance, how she reacted to him, and how their friendship developed. Finally, in *English Traits*, the man Emerson emerges for the first time as a unifying figure in his own writing. The main subject is of course the people and things Emerson saw, but we also learn in detail how he fared on his voyage (*W*, V, 25–33), how he got one-up on his English friends (287–288), and how “I made the acquaintance of DeQuincey, of Lord Jeffrey,” and a host of other notables (294). On the whole, *English Traits* contains far less personal trivia than most travel books, but for Emerson it is

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4 This is not to imply that the difference between the two positions is absolute (v. Stephen Whicher, *Freedom and Fate* [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961], pp. 136–140).

5 Helen McMaster notes perceptively of the *Memoirs* that “the part contributed by Emerson is valuable as a study in self-revelation, scarcely to be matched in his private *Journals*” (“Margaret Fuller as a Literary Critic,” *University of Buffalo Studies*, 7 [1928], 38).
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quite gossipy. The essays are never quite the same again. His later works mark a return to the general-idea essay format, but with a shade of difference which is well illustrated by the following passages on the same theme, from “Manners” and “Behavior,” respectively.

I dislike a low sympathy of each with his neighbor’s needs. Must we have a good understanding with one another’s palates? as foolish people who have lived long together know when each wants salt or sugar. I pray my companion, if he wishes for bread, to ask me for bread, and if he wishes for sassafras or arsenic, to ask me for them, and not to hold out his plate as if I knew already. [W, III, 137–138]

Every hour will show a duty as paramount as that of my whim just now, and yet I will write it,—that there is one topic peremptorily forbidden to all well-bred, to all rational mortals, namely, their distempers. If you have not slept, or if you have slept, or if you have headache, or sciatica, or leprosy, or thunderstroke, I beseech you by all angels to hold your peace, and not pollute the morning, to which all the housemates bring serene and pleasant thoughts, by corruption and groans. [W, VI, 196]

In both passages the private voice is speaking; and the burden is much the same—the speaker is requesting us, with some impatience and sarcasm, to maintain a little decorum. But the second tirade exposes the speaker more. The persona in “Manners” knows where he is going; he is confident of his authority over the reader; his language is crisp and peremptory. The other man is a bit fuddled. He is not sure, in the first sentence, whether his thought is worth saying. In the second, he becomes long-winded—the comic hyperbole takes much longer to unwind than in the last sentence of the first excerpt—so that the “beseeching” suggests impotence, where the “I pray” in the other passage comes as a command. Altogether, the Emerson of “Behavior” seems rather like a garrulous, scolding grandfather, who runs on even as he is aware that he may be ignored. Thus the posture is more revealing: in “Manners” we are being given orders by someone
whom we don’t quite know; in “Behavior” the speaker exposes more than he intended.

Of equal importance with this development is what happens to the exemplary persona during the course of Emerson’s career. It is used frequently and to good effect through Essays, Second Series, but after that it largely disappears. “In my daily work I incline to repeat my old steps. . . . But some Petrarch or Ariosto, filled with the new wine of his imagination . . . smites and arouses me with his shrill tones, breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities” (W, II, 312–313). So Emerson writes in “Circles.” In “Illusions,” a similar thought becomes, “I, who have all my life heard any number of orations and debates, read poems and miscellaneous books, conversed with many geniuses, am still the victim of any new page” (W, VI, 316). The intent of both passages is precisely the same—to illustrate the power of the poet. But in the second, the “I” is given a biography, so that the statement comes out less like testimonial than soliloquy. Equally common is for the exemplary persona to give way to an impersonal construction. “I can see my own vices without heat in the distant persons of Solomon, Alcibiades, and Catiline” (W, II, 5) becomes “every man in moments of deeper thought is apprised that he is repeating the experiences of the people in the streets of Thebes or Byzantium” (W, VII, 174).

Neither of these examples should be too surprising. It is understandable that the exemplary persona should wane as the private one increases, since there is an inverse relation between the particular and the cosmic. Again, the more conscious one is of himself as a limited, private person, the less likely he will be to identify with Alcibiades. Both of these shifts, furthermore, are consistent with Emerson’s general drift towards conservatism. Just as it became progressively harder for him to affirm the soul’s ability to conquer the Not-me, so, in his rhetoric, it became harder for him to represent his persona as universal and more normal for him to take the position of observer.
It would seem, then, that the basis of Emerson's repudiation of false subjectivity in his criticism, namely his sense of individual limitation, was the very thing which led him increasingly into it in his later writing. "Experience," for example, has a more confessional air than "Self-Reliance," even as it takes a lower estate of man, because the speaker admits to a greater disparity between self and Self than he had supposed. The self-revealingness in his memoir of Margaret Fuller, likewise, stems also from his deliberately standing at one remove from the mystery of her character and taking it a tone of benevolent perplexity:

Our moods were very different; and I remember, that, at the very time when I, slow and cold, had come fully to admire her genius, and was congratulating myself on the solid good understanding that subsisted between us, I was surprised with hearing it taxed by her with superficiality and halfness. She stigmatized our friendship as commercial. It seemed, her magnanimity was not met, but I prized her only for the thoughts and pictures she brought me. . . . But as I did not understand the discontent then,—of course, I cannot now. [Ossoli, I, 288]

As this excerpt shows, the later Emerson has a talent for turning his own admissions of "inadequacy" to his own advantage, and with good comic-ironic effect. The unmistakable impression created here is that Margaret's overtures were gauche, while the author was infinitely forbearing. Emerson is even capable of the same urbanity in speaking about so tender a subject as the failure of inspiration: "I envy the abstraction of some scholars I have known, who could sit on a curbstone in State Street, put up their back, and solve their problem. I have more womanly eyes. All the conditions must be right for my success, slight as that is. What untunes is as bad as what cripples or stuns me" (W, VIII, 288–289). Here again the apparent claims of envy and self-deprecation in some measure give way to the impression that the scholars in State Street are rather crude and hasty, whereas Emerson is exquisitely sensitive.
The persona in Emerson's later prose—modest but knowing, comparatively anecdotal, witty, and even droll—would seem to some extent to answer the complaint that the man hid himself behind his ideas. At the same time, admirers of the early Emerson will find the later version comparatively tame and evasive. The factors which account for this reaction range far beyond the one under consideration here, but the use of the personal element does, I think, enter in. First, the exemplary persona, despite its generalized nature, does have a distinctive character of its own, and a far more vigorous one than the dominant voice of the later essays. It believes in its own universality; it has a tremendous imaginative reach, as in "I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall" (W, II, 307), or "I am always insincere, as always knowing there are other moods" (W, III, 247). It is a hard-headed and uncompromising character. When it appears it often gives the sense of great emotional stake and commitment, as in this passage from "Friendship": "I ought to be equal to every relation. It makes no difference how many friends I have and what content I can find in conversing with each, if there be one to whom I am not equal. If I have shrunk unequal from one contest, the joy I find in all the rest becomes mean and cowardly" (W, II, 200). This would sound impressive even if Emerson took it all back in the next paragraph (as he partly does). In substance, the passage is only one half of a rather nebulous equivocation about what to expect from friendship, but the mode of statement here gives it the force of a personal credo.

Secondly, the private voice, in early Emerson, reinforces this tone, and gives it more concreteness. As we saw in comparing "Manners" and "Behavior," the private voice changes not just in frequency but in character too. Several times in the early essays, for example, it appears in the form of what might be called "disclaimers"—points when Emerson steps unexpectedly outside his train of thought and makes, momentarily, as if to throw it all aside. As in Nature: "But I own there is something
ungrateful in expanding too curiously the particulars of . . . idealism” (W, I, 59). Or in “History”: “Is there somewhat overweening in this claim? Then I reject all I have written.” (W, II, 39). Or—best known—in “Circles”: “Let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter . . . , an endless seeker with no Past at my back” (W, II, 318). I find no such audacity in the later essays. But it is quite characteristic of early Emerson, and it adds to the impression of a flesh-and-blood author who is prepared to back up with actions his most intransigent words about self-reliance.

Thinking partly of passages like the one last quoted, Jonathan Bishop calls the Emersonian speaker an “experimental self.” 6 That seems to me admirably precise, provided that we recognize an ambivalence in the word “experimental.” The usual speaker in the early essays is experimental chiefly in the nineteenth-century usage of the word as a religious term, meaning “experiential,” having to do with religious experience. For in the early essays, the speaker is primarily an experiencer of the holy, ready to take on the protean manifestations of the soul in nature: to make himself equal to every relation, and to deny them all too, if the spirit demands. The later speaker, by contrast, is eminently an observer, experimental in the sense of testing out all possibilities but embracing none. The distinction is not hard and fast—nothing is in Emerson—but the shift of emphasis is clear enough. Perhaps it is symbolized by the difference between the first chapter of Nature and the introduction to “Illusions,” a rather long-winded account of an expedition to Mammoth Cave. In the first, nature is expressed as possibility by one who invites us to participate in his experience; in the second, possibility is shown as frustration by a talkative raconteur. Each tone has its own appeal, but the first is truer to the original notion of self-reliance, which stresses the potential authoritativeness of intuition, as opposed to its potential inaccuracy.

6 Bishop, p. 130.
Altogether, then Emerson's attitude toward subjectivity in writing was fundamentally sound according to his own doctrine. The Emersonian speaker is most himself when his pronouncements come cross also as universal laws. But Emerson might also have noted in his criticism that the enunciation of these laws depends, for full effect, upon the sense of an experiencer. "Though I prize my friends, I cannot afford to talk with them and study their visions, lest I lose my own" (W, II, 215). How much more telling this is in the first person than in the third, or the second. Emerson must have known that also, or he would not have used a persona as often as he did, or retained as much circumstantial detail, or fabricated an occasional anecdote. Why then did his criticism short-shrift these devices? Probably for the same reason that he disparaged talent, as opposed to genius, notwithstanding his own attention to craftsmanship and his dislike of its neglect in others: he took the matter for granted. In his method of composition, the private experience was a given; it is where he started; the universal dimension was what he sought to attain. Just as he saw the danger of structural eccentricity in composing by collation of journal snippets, he saw that to base his essays on his daily experience might betray him into solipsism. And on both counts he grew more sensitive as he aged, because on both counts his fears were borne out.

If Thoreau is today considered the most memorable character among the Transcendentalists, it is because his writings evoke most strongly the sense of a man behind the book. Whereas Emerson's impulse was to convert his private perceptions into general maxims, Thoreau remained conscious, even if only as a limitation, "that it is, after all, always the first person that is speaking" (Wa, p. 3). Partly, no doubt, because of his less certain position in both social and literary circles, Thoreau was from the start more aware than Emerson of living in a land remote from other men, and more likely to exploit this sense
of his separateness in his writing. He establishes himself as a more distinct character in his own books, telling far more about himself and almost never using an exemplary "I."

Given the amount of critical attention Thoreau's writing has recently attracted, one might suppose that his use of the persona had been thoroughly discussed, but in fact it falls in between the two main concerns of modern scholarship. Biographical researchers have primarily been concerned with the man behind the style, not with Thoreau as he appears in his books but as he "really was." Such readers have generally tended to look for significant discrepancies between literary and biographical fact and to create a portrait of Thoreau which will seem different or more complicated from the one his verbal image suggests. Thus we have the "hidden Thoreau," Thoreau the nature mystic, Thoreau the sensitive aesthete, Thoreau the frustrated provincial, and—not to be neglected—Thoreau the (relatively) normal person. Literary analysis of Thoreau's work, on the other hand, have shown but a limited interest in his use of the persona. From Matthiessen to Anderson the main theme of this body of criticism has been Thoreau's literary use of nature, and particularly the symbolism of *Walden.*

To the extent that Thoreau's works are designed to replicate a universe in miniature, this approach is certainly a fruitful one, but it tends to distract attention too much from the hero of

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the story. To most readers, I suspect, the metaphorical unity of *Walden* is really less interesting than the succession of exploits of its crusty, resourceful, unpredictable narrator: Thoreau hoeing beans, Thoreau nearly devouring a woodchuck, Thoreau throwing his limestone paperweight out the window, and so forth.\(^8\) To take a more direct look than usual at this memorable literary character may help to give perspective both to the impressive body of formalist criticism on Thoreau and to the provocative portraits of recent Thoreau biography.

For a basic sense of Thoreau's literary presence, a good place to start, as in Emerson's case, is the level of cliché. The Lowell-Holmes caricature of Thoreau as a cranky social dropout who nibbled his asparagus at the wrong end would not have persisted as it did had it not been suggested beforehand by his friends and himself to boot. "There was somewhat military in his nature," Emerson noted in his "eulogy" of Thoreau, "as if he did not feel himself except in opposition. He wanted a fallacy to expose, a blunder to pillory, I may say required a little sense of victory, a roll of the drum, to call his powers into full exercise. . . . It seemed as if his first instinct on hearing a proposition was to convert it" (*W*, *X*, 455–456). Throughout Emerson's address, Thoreau is portrayed as a "born protestant," "hermit and stoic" (452, 456), albeit with an admixture of humane qualities. Emerson's journal shows that he did not start to view his friend in such formidable terms until their falling out in the 1850s,\(^9\) but even in the early years of their relationship he shows a certain wariness about "my brave Henry" (*JMN*, VII, 201);\(^10\) and what is more, Thoreau himself, both in his journals and his public prose and verse, continually talks about himself and the experiment of life in general in

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\(^8\) One of the most charming evidences of this response is E. B. White's homage/parody of Thoreau, "Walden," in *One Man's Meat* (New York: Harper & Row, 1939).

\(^9\) E.g., *JE*, VIII, 375, 397, 415, 467; IX, 15–16, 34, 45.

\(^10\) E.g., *JMN*, VII, 144, VIII, 118, 375.
terms of battle, heroics, discipline, denial, and a cluster of loosely related terms. Writing is like fighting: "The writer must direct his sentences as carefully and leisurely as the marksman his rifle" (JT, III, 231). Friendship is opposition; Alice Ford's unwelcome proposal of marriage comes as an attack: "I really had anticipated no such foe as this," he writes Emerson.\(^{11}\)

It is interesting that this note of militancy sounds especially strong at the beginning and end of Thoreau's literary career, in his earliest attempts at literary self-description, in the early journals and "The Service," and in his three speeches in behalf of John Brown. As a young man, he constantly depicts life in a romanticized version of the metaphor of Christian warfare, or spiritual struggle: "we do all stand in the front ranks of the battle every moment of our lives" (JT, I, 96). The good man is the brave man. His bravery, however, "deals not so much in resolute action, as healthy and assured rest"; his armor is his virtue; his enemy is falsehood; his bravest deed is a perfect life; the music to which he marches is the measure of the soul.\(^{12}\) In John Brown, Thoreau thought he saw, for the first and only time in his life, a man who embodied those ideals engaging in a literally heroic act, a man who also happened to be a New England farmer, a Puritan in the true sense, an ex-surveyor, a man of "Spartan habits," and "above all" a "Transcendentalist" (Wr, IV, 413). If we view Thoreau's career from a sufficient distance, it becomes very tempting to sum it up as a quest for the heroic life realized vicariously in the person of John Brown.\(^{13}\)

To reduce the Concord saunterer to such a formula would of


\(^{13}\) Other figures and situations also inspired Thoreau to military romanticizing. The motif appears in "Wendell Phillips before the Concord Lyceum" and A Yankee in Canada, among other instances.
course be simplistic. After all, his youthful tone of "operatic heroism," as Perry Miller calls it,\(^\text{14}\) dwindles into a leitmotif after the early 1840s, and the John Brown speeches, along with several other homilies in the same vein, contrast rather sharply in tone with his travelogues. Thoreau seems to show himself more truly when he leaves the Concord jailhouse to go huckleberrying, or when he ends his diatribe against "Slavery in Massachusetts" with the hopeful emblem of the water lily, purity springing from slime. He did indeed aspire to heroism, but not of the militant sort, for the most part. His precise brand of virtù is suggested by a second platitude, the idea that Thoreau acted out Emerson's theories. Neither half of this proposition is strictly true. Emerson actually did more of the acting; he was more of a public figure, much more of a genuine threat to the establishment (in, say, the Divinity School Address) than Thoreau ever was. Thoreau was more of a contemplative than a man of action, and in his philosophy he was much more than Emerson's disciple. But the basic relationship is undeniable: as both men realized, Thoreau's main ambition was to realize the ideal of self-reliance at all levels, in the context of nature.

What is more to the point of his literary practice, Thoreau liked to dramatize his experiences as adventures on a grand scale, as we have seen. Sauntering was like going to the Holy Land; Fairhaven was his Lake of the Woods, St. Anne's his Ultima Thule (\textit{JT}, II, 374). Such comparisons, which abound in Thoreau's writing, are sometimes made tongue-in-cheek and sometimes not; but Thoreau was always dead serious about the significance of the quest, if not the quester: "Though man's life is trivial and handselled, Nature is holy and heroic" (\textit{JT}, II, 384). This basic reverence for nature and the pursuit of nature, combined with the compulsion to render an account of that pursuit, gives Thoreau's writing an epic (sometimes mock-epic) quality.\(^\text{15}\) \textit{Walden} in particular can be read as the hero's


\(^{15}\) As to Thoreau's compulsion to render account, Ellery Channing reports how "on his return from one of his Maine journeys, he told the story
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attempt to realize a heroic life-style. More than in Thoreau's other books, where the persona plays a relatively passive role of mediator and reporter for the most part, the speaker in Walden becomes the main character in an action of his own making. Thoreau's masterpiece is thus the closest the Transcendentalists came to creating a major work of prose fiction.

Some of these fictive devices have been pointed out in detail by previous commentators. Thoreau compresses the events of two years into one, using the cycle of the seasons as a plot line. The principle of complementary chapters is another organizing principle. Thoreau ends deliberately on a note of qualified optimism, adding the somewhat ambiguous "Conclusion" to the triumphant "Spring" ending of the first version of the book, but without including such journal passages as:

But why I changed? why I left the woods? I do not think that I can tell. I have often wished myself back. I do not know any better how I ever came to go there. [JT, III, 214]

In addition to recounting what he himself did, Thoreau also created a series of dramatic encounters, between "himself" and the railroad, Alec Therien, John Field, "The Poet," and sundry other people and animals—all of which, one might say, also serve to reflect and exemplify the book-long dialogue between speaker and audience.

at great length (though it was already written in his note-book) with the important details, not only to his family, but to his friends, with the utmost alacrity and pleasure,—yet as if he were discharging a sacred duty, —then wrote it out carefully in his Journal, and next as carefully corrected it for its issue to the public" (Thoreau the Poet-Naturalist, ed. F. B. Sanborn [Boston: Goodspeed, 1902], pp. 9-10). A provocative study of Thoreau's epic qualities is Raymond Adams, "Thoreau's Mock-Heroics and the American Natural History Writers," Studies in Philology, 52 (1955), 86-97. Adams concentrates on epic analogies in Walden and A Week; for a representative discussion of similar tactics in Thoreau's shorter works, see James Morse Marshall, "The Heroic Adventure in 'A Winter Walk,' " Emerson Society Quarterly, No. 56 (1968), 16-23.

16 See note 7 and Chapter 7, note 27, above.
Then there is the characterization of the speaker himself. Thoreau here follows the practice, also used in *Cape Cod, A Yankee in Canada*, "Life without Principle," and other works, of placing the persona solidly before the reader at the outset, insisting in effect that what follows is a personal experience rather than an objective report. In fact it is not quite either, inasmuch as the narrator is "a deliberately created verbal personality" and certain facts are altered to suit Thoreau's conception of his role. The hero of *Walden* could "send home each nail with a single blow of the hammer" (*Wa*, p. 245) when lathing; the real Thoreau left hundreds of bent nails in his cellar hole. The real Thoreau left his cabin for three weeks the first fall "on account of plastering" (*JT*, I, 387). Like Thoreau himself, the hero strolled to town "every day or two" (*Wa*, p. 167), but no mention is made of going home to his family; his habit is to "make an irruption into some houses" and "escape to the woods" again (169). The real Thoreau "bivouacked" at *Walden*, Ellery Channing said; the hero withdraws "within the great ocean of solitude" (144), with a "horizon bounded by woods all to myself," as isolated "as on the prairies" (130). The hero tells us with an air of vatic superiority, that "I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there" (323); the real Thoreau was unsure why.

It is not necessary to go on multiplying illustrations of a point which I am scarcely the first to notice: that the reader of *Walden* sees Thoreau as more resolute, competent, and pioneering than he actually was. The critics who have said the best things about this self-stylization, Joseph Moldenhauer and Charles Anderson, see it in terms of Frye's idea of the archetypal pattern of comic confrontation between the narrator as *eiron* and society at large (sometimes including the reader) as

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17 Moldenhauer, p. 356.
19 Channing, p. 24.
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alazon. As Anderson explains, the eiron is "the witty and virtuous character whose actions are directed ultimately toward the establishment of an ideal order; the alazons are the hecklers and imposters, those who stand in the way of this fulfilment." Throughout Walden, according to this view, the eiron seeks to overcome the alazon by using the resources of wit, invective, shape-shifting and, above all, paradox. The coincidence of his semivictory at the end with the coming of spring fulfils another of Frye's prerequisites for the comic mythos.

The foregoing interpretation is indeed an admirable way of describing the comic and satiric elements in Walden, in addition to being a most appealing portrait of Thoreau's persona in an age like ours, which is an age of irony. The interpretation has the limitations, however, of picturing the narrator too exclusively as conducting a rhetorical tour de force and of overemphasizing the comic side of his histrionics. A more satisfactory analogy in some respects, if one is to apply classical terminology to Thoreau, is the epic. Certainly this seems to have been closer to the spirit in which the venture was originally conceived. Ethel Seybold rightly calls it a "Homeric experiment." The published excerpts of the Walden journal, which contain the germ of the book, frequently describe the experience in Homeric terms. Thoreau's house reminds him of "the halls of Olympus" (JT, I, 361); it is "my Ithaca" and he himself is "a fellow-wanderer and survivor of Ulysses" (363); the pine tree before his door is "perfect as [Nature's] Grecian art" (363); he is visited by Paphlagonian and Lestrigonian men (365–366); he feels surrounded by Elysian fields (375).

20 Anderson, p. 54.
21 In fairness to Anderson and Moldenhauer: their interpretations range far beyond the one point in question, though when they discuss Thoreau's speaker per se they concentrate on the approach described.
In *Walden* itself, as in many of Thoreau's excursions, this larger dimension is continually introduced through a more eclectic network of allusions to travel, history, and myth, and through a variety of ritualistic patterns from the seasonal cycle to Thoreau's daily bath. The transfer of the shanty to the shore of Walden is like the removal of the gods of Troy (*Wa*, p. 44); Thoreau moves in on Independence Day (45); the mosquito's hum sounds like "Homer's requiem" (89); he gives his visitors the same welcome that Samoset gave the pilgrims (154); he cuts down his weeds as Achilles slew Hector (161-162). Though such comparisons are often made lightly, the prevailing tone is serious; as Thoreau says of economy, the subject admits of levity but cannot be so dispensed with. *Walden* bears out Emerson's praise of Thoreau's gift for referring "every minute fact to cosmical laws" (*W, X*, 479). That is indeed one of the primary attributes of the narrator. He wants to (1) grasp every fact within his ken and (2) see or sense its eternal significance. The culmination of this process of perception is of course the description of the sand bank in "Spring," which is shown both naturalistically and as it illustrates "the principle of all the operations of Nature" (*Wa*, p. 308).

Our sense of the narrator's "character," however, is perhaps established not so much by such remarkable passages as this, as by the habitual attention of his mind to small things and their implications: refusing the gift of a mat because "it is best to avoid the beginnings of evil" (67), perceiving as he cleans house how "much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors" (113), measuring the undulation of the ice and speculating about the possible undulation of the earth (293). These details, and many more like them, collectively establish the vitality and penetration of the narrator's inquiring mind.

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Some exception to my picture of Walden's hero as engaged in a search for the spiritual significance of natural fact might be taken by those readers who rightly point out that the ratio of observation to speculation increases during the latter part of the book, betokening (or so the argument runs) a spiritual advance on the speaker's part: he becomes somewhat de-intellectualized, more spontaneously immersed in nature. If this view is correct, it is ironic that the latter part of the book (from "House-Warming" on) was largely added after the writing of the journal account and the first version of the book, since both of these are more personal, spontaneous documents than Walden itself. The fact is that mere descriptiveness or natural detail in a writer like Thoreau has nothing to do with the depth or immediacy of his personal responses to nature. If anything the relationship is not proportional but inverse. It was precisely during those years when he perfected the art of natural description, the last decade of his life, that Thoreau became acutely conscious of a loss of poetic sensibility and rapport with nature. His inclusion of so much extra descriptive detail in the successive drafts of Walden is one sign of this. The reason why it does not seem to bore the majority of serious readers who are not naturalists, in contrast to some of Thoreau's other descriptive writings, is probably that one feels the latent presence of a larger dimension. In "The Pond in Winter," for example, one senses that eventually all Thoreau's soundings are going to produce some meaningful results. As it turns out, his discovery amounts to the fulfilment of the statement of purpose at the end of "Where I Lived and What I Lived for," where the narrator urges the reader to join him in a quest for the "hard bottom" of reality (98). "There is a solid bottom every where," he is able to reaffirm from personal experience in the "Conclusion" (330).

As this last example suggests, however, Walden undeniably

follows a pattern of initiation into nature. Though the narrator does not begin exactly as a tyro, having previously served in such capacities as "self-appointed inspector of snow storms and rain storms" (18), one gets the sense of his continually acquiring new expertise, as he passes through a succession of new enterprises—"ordeals," one critic calls them, again linking the process to epic— from house-building to bean-hoeing to surveying the geography of the area. The fact that he builds his house in two stages, improves his method of farming the second year, refines his description of the pond in his second chapter on the subject, and gives a comprehensive account of the animals and previous settlements in the vicinity after a series of casual references, all conspire to give the impression of a growing acquaintance with the territory. It would be a mistake to say that his character actually changes. Walden is not that kind of book; the narrative is encased in a rhetorical appeal to the reader. The narrative part is a validation of the speaker's claims to authority rather than a report of how a formerly desperate man found a new life through nature, although the latter interpretation may be inferred from Thoreau's biography. The hero of Walden is no less competent in the business of ground-breaking than in his perceptions of the coming of spring.

At the same time, the suggestion is planted by such clues as the memory of being taken to the pond as a four-year-old (Wa, p. 155) that the Walden experience is in some sense the proper culmination of the life of narrator and author. The journal version is most explicit; the childhood experience, says

25 Cook, pp. 94–95.

26 My thinking on the distinction between narrative and rhetorical approaches has been clarified by Sheldon Sacks, Fiction and the Shape of Belief (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 1–69. Sacks uses the term "apologue" to distinguish from predominantly plot-oriented prose fiction that type of narrative whose primary purpose is to demonstrate a theme, e.g., Johnson's Rasselas. Sacks categorizes too rigidly for my taste, but he supplies a useful way of distinguishing between fictions like Walden and the genre of the novel.
Thoreau, “for a long time made the drapery of my dreams. That sweet solitude my spirit seemed so early to require that I might have room to entertain my thronging guests, and that speaking silence that my ears might distinguish the significant sounds. Somehow or other it at once gave the preference to this recess among the pines . . . as if it had found its proper nursery” (JT, I, 380–381).

This passage may help explain Thoreau’s fondness for talking about his experience in mythological terms, and why his first set of allusions was classical. Walden was a return to his own spiritual origins, to the morning of his life, just as ancient Greece was the morning of his race. For Thoreau and his contemporaries, Greece and Homer meant Spartan, spontaneous, childlike, natural, heroic. “That is the glory of Greece,” he exclaims in his journal, “that we are reminded of her only when in our best estate, our elysian days, when our senses are young and healthy again” (JT, III, 319). Other ancient civilizations lacked this precise appeal. As he put it elsewhere: “The Greeks were boys in the sunshine, the Romans were men in the field, the Persians women in the house, the Egyptians old men in the dark” (JT, I, 165).

Thoreau’s feeling of personal attachment to Walden, in the book itself, is expressed obliquely for the most part. Passages like the speaker’s poetic identification with the pond in “The Ponds” are exceptional. Usually, his devotion is presented in the form of glowing descriptions and lingering attention to detail, as if his love for Walden were too pure to dwell upon what it meant to him. One particular way in which this love affair is dramatized is through personification. On the one hand, Thoreau tends to denigrate society at large as unfit to associate with; on the other, he peoples his natural solitude with imaginary companions. His one moment of loneliness, for example, is relieved by the sense of “sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the [rain] drops” (Wa, p. 132). A more important though less obtrusive way in
which the speaker points up his relation to nature is in his manipulations of the sense of time. He interweaves particular perceptions and events with habitual or generalized action, uses both the past and the present tense to describe Walden events, and shifts backwards and forwards chronologically to include events both before and after the fact.

The chapter on "Sounds" is an instructive example. It begins as if to discuss a present philosophical concern: "But while we are confined to books . . . we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor" (111). From here it proceeds to a summary of the speaker's routine at Walden:

I did not read books the first summer; I hoed beans. Nay, I often did better than this. There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands. . . . Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness. [111]

The action described here is habitual—not events which were done only once, but which were repeated over and over until they achieved a timeless quality, which is reinforced by the use of this passage as an exemplum illustrating the general remarks with which the chapter begins. The passage becomes somewhat more specific, though, as it proceeds. As Thoreau continues in this vein, it seems intermittently as if he were describing a particular action taking place now, as in his description of house-cleaning: "It was worth the while to see the sun shine on these things, and hear the free wind blow on them; so much more interesting most familiar objects look out of doors than in the house. A bird sits on the next bough, life-everlasting grows under the table, and blackberry vines run round its legs" (113). It is as if the general truth of what the speaker has observed through long practice entitles him to describe the action as if
it is taking place now and always. A paragraph later, he slips entirely into the present tense: "As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about my clearing; ... the sedge is bending under the weight of the reed-birds flitting hither and thither; and for the last half hour I have heard the rattle of railroad cars" (114). The next section of the chapter is written mainly in the present—with some significant exceptions which deserve a more extensive analysis than can be given here. After he has dispensed with the railroad, however, the speaker returns to description of habitual action for the rest of the chapter.

Through such manipulations as these, Thoreau manages to describe experience which has taken place in the past, to call attention to its regular or routine aspects, and yet to give the sense that it is simultaneously unique and present. One does not have to read the journal to see that Walden has been for Thoreau the object of a lifetime of contemplation; one is not asked to take the speaker’s declaration that he is now “a sojourner in civilized life again” to mean that he is no longer present at the pond. Walden is that which always has given and always will give body to the speaker’s thoughts and beliefs—the place he habitually turns for illustration of those thoughts, the place which in large part originally inspired those thoughts.

Knowing this, however, we must be wary of overemphasizing the role of the unifying consciousness on Walden. The book is a tribute to the pond rather than the memoirs of Thoreau per se. It is significant that Thoreau revised Walden in such a way as to make his own role somewhat less prominent than it is in the original version. Comparing the first and last stages of chapters 1 through 8, which are the most complete in the original, one sees that the most typical alterations are additions in allusions, literary anecdotes, illustrations, and general discussion. For example, ten of the eleven indented quotations from Thoreau’s reading were added, while he reduced the amount of his own verse; he greatly lengthened his discussions
of clothing and food, added to the ones on shelter and philanthropy, and devised a new one on furniture. These changes show the Transcendentalist propensity for universalizing one's own experience. The immediate and final reasons for writing the book, according to the speaker, are public and not private: to satisfy the curiosity of his neighbors and to say something which may speak to the condition of his audience, especially "poor students." Of course we know Thoreau's purposes were more complicated than that and included the desire to make his life into a poem, as well as more conventional literary ambitions; but it remains that his experiences at Walden are explicitly presented for whatever exemplary value they may contain. Though he does issue several disclaimers to the effect that no one should follow his example because everybody is different, when he warms to his subject his confessions turn into an apologia for his mode of life. A case in point is his remarks on philanthropy. Thoreau begins at least pseudo-modestly, by trusting that since there are so many do-gooders, "one at least may be spared to other and less humane pursuits" (73), but ends by admonishing his readers, unless they are very rich, to be free as the cypress (79). Thoreau surely is not trying to get everyone to build his own cabin in the woods, but he is using his example as a way of commending self-development and self-reliance, and particular views of reading, nature, society, solitude, work, and play.

To the extent that life at Walden becomes a test case of self-reliance, then, the speaker becomes an exemplar rather than a protagonist and the book as a whole an apologue rather than an epic, or comedy, or novel, or autobiography, or whatever other generic analogy one wants to adduce. But Thoreau still differs from Emerson in the way he represents the Transcendental self as a particular person. Emerson undermines himself when he makes his speaker more personal in his later essays, whereas Thoreau seems to succeed almost in proportion to the degree to which his writing becomes personal. Thoreau's per-
sona is more interesting as a man: he is an actor and doer as well as a seer; Emerson's "I" is more interesting as a consciousness or tone of voice.

The range of both speakers seems somewhat inhibited, however, by contrast to those of the personae of the writers we are about to consider. Very and Whitman combine the instinct for self-dramatization with an extreme mystical bent, which enables them to experiment more radically than either Emerson or Thoreau with the literary persona both as character and as cosmic symbol.